

Baum Hedlund Attorneys Demand Transparency for California Fire Victim Trust Claimants

Wildfire attorneys support a Tubbs Fire survivor's motion seeking more transparency around the management of the Fire Victim Trust.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES, September 1, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [California wildfire attorneys](#) at Baum Hedlund Aristei & Goldman have put their support behind a California wildfire survivor's motion seeking more transparency around the management of the Fire Victim Trust.



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The Fire Victim Trust was established to compensate victims of the Butte, North Bay, and Camp fires that occurred between 2015 and 2018. Investigators concluded that these fires were caused by negligently maintained electrical equipment owned and operated by the utility company PG&E. PG&E filed for bankruptcy (Bankruptcy Case No. 19-30088 [DM]) under the weight of thousands of claims.

“

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Matthew P. French, Baum Hedlund Attorney

Created out of PG&E's bankruptcy in 2020, the Fire Victim Trust was created as a means of evaluating and paying claims to individuals and families affected by the fires and was initially promised to have a value of approximately \$13.5 billion. The current value is far lower because the bankruptcy settlement included 50% of that amount in

PG&E stock, which has since lost significant value. Further, Trust overhead continues to effectively drain funds that would otherwise go to survivors.

Will Abrams, who survived the 2017 Tubbs Fire (considered one of the North Bay wildfires), filed

motions (formal requests) seeking an order from the court requiring that the Trust provide more transparency concerning its administrative functions and its associated costs. After providing little detail in its annual report last year, Abrams is seeking a more detailed financial disclosure than what the Trust provided wildfire survivors.



Baum Hedlund Trial Lawyers

Baum Hedlund Aristei & Goldman has joined Mr. Abrams' call for more transparency to ensure the Fire Victim Trust is being managed appropriately and in the best interests of wildfire victims. The firm represents hundreds of victims of the 2018 Camp Fire, most of whom are still seeking full and fair compensation for their serious injuries and losses they incurred.

Attorneys [Matthew P. French](#) and Ronald L. M. Goldman filed a joinder last week in support of Mr. Abrams' motions for discovery and hearings. The attorneys are specifically interested in learning more about the relationships between the Trust and JAMS, a private alternative dispute resolution (ADR) company with deep ties to the Trust.

The Los Angeles Times recently published an investigative report on previous large settlement funds overseen by Retired Justice John Trotter, who recently resigned from two years of overseeing the Fire Victim Trust. Trotter, who helped grow JAMS into one of the largest private mediation companies in the world, was paid nearly \$3 million (\$125,000 per month) during his time as the Fire Victim Fund's Trustee.

But before he was appointed as the Trustee for the Fire Victim Trust, Trotter had previously overseen the distribution of two settlement funds worth over \$180 million combined. In both cases, Tom Girardi, a high-profile trial attorney who has since been disbarred, has been accused of using funds dedicated to victims for his own benefit.

"The recent reporting from the Times makes it pretty clear that the Trust no longer deserves the benefit of the doubt," French says. "The implications are serious and substantial enough to warrant further discovery of these JAMS relationships with the Trust, especially since most of the people in critical positions are connected to JAMS."

French notes that the Fire Victim Trust's current Trustee is Cathy Yanni, who has served as a JAMS mediator since 1998.

Earlier this month, a federal bankruptcy judge ordered the Fire Victim Trust to be more transparent about spending, hiring, and other practices. The order came at a time when reporting from the Santa Rosa Press Democrat highlighted the Trust's significant administrative

expenses and slow payments to victims.

The Fire Victim Trust's expenses, including legal fees, a public relations firm, and even a lobbyist pushing for a \$1.5 billion loan, totaled more than \$132 million by the end of 2021, according to reporting. The legal fees include Trotter's \$125,000 a month salary as the Trust's administrator.

As for fire survivors who are supposed to be made whole from the Trust, they are currently only receiving 45% of their claim's value. The recent media revelations and the low, slow payouts have rightfully worried thousands of wildfire survivors about how much they will ever get and when it will come.

Baum Hedlund attorney Matthew P. French called Trotter's salary "vulgar," and noted in an interview with the Press Democrat that the Fire Victim Trust, "is not set up in a way that inspires confidence."

"When you have \$13.5 billion and thousands of people's lives (on the line) why on earth would you set it up in a way that would leave those beneficiaries of the Trust doubting and questioning and worrying about what's going on?"

"I really hope that by shining a light on the Trust we will discover that it's fabulously managed because anything less would further victimize the fire victims," French says.

About Baum Hedlund Wildfire Lawyers

Baum Hedlund wildfire lawyers represent 191 Fire Victim Trust claimants from 81 households, all from the Camp Fire. Their lawyers also represented victims of the Woolsey, Thomas, and Bobcat fires. They are dedicated to helping fire survivors put their lives back together after tragedy strikes, helping to ensure clients are appropriately and fairly compensated for property damages, as well as physical, emotional, financial, and other damages stemming from wildfires, evacuation, and recovery.

Since opening its doors in 1973, Baum Hedlund has earned more than \$4 billion in verdicts and settlements on behalf of clients across a broad range of practice areas. The firm and its attorneys have received numerous awards and accolades, including:

- Best Lawyers in America®
- U.S. News - Best Lawyers® Best Law Firms, 2014-2022
- Martindale-Hubbell®, the highest AV® Preeminent Peer Review Rating available
- Top Ranked Law Firms™
- California Powerhouse, Law360 Regional Powerhouse Series
- The Bar Register of Preeminent Lawyers™
- Product Liability Practice Group of the Year, 2020, Law360
- Verdicts Hall of Fame, The National Law Journal, Inducted in 2020

- Mass Torts Elite Trial Lawyers Law Firm of the Year, Finalist, 2020, ALM and The National Law Journal
- Daily Journal Top Verdicts – Top 10 Plaintiffs' Verdicts by Dollar Amount

[Read our blog](#) for more information and for links to the motion we joined, plus our joinder.

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