

Three Defendants Face Federal Charges of Bilking and Attempting to Defraud FEMA with Fraudulent Claims for Wildfire Disaster Benefits

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Central District of California

LOS ANGELES – Three defendants have been charged in recent days with fraudulently seeking federal disaster relief funds by falsely claiming their properties were damaged by the Eaton and Palisades wildfires when in fact they did not have an interest in the affected property or the property was not affected by either fire, the Justice Department announced today.

Three defendants – two in Southern California and one in Texas – were arrested this week after being charged with defrauding the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“These defendants allegedly made false and fraudulent claims to FEMA for emergency benefits related to wildfires that devastated Los Angeles County two months ago,” said Acting United States Attorney Joseph McNally. “These false claims resulted in badly needed disaster-relief money being denied to actual wildfire victims while these defendants allegedly used property information to illegally line their own pockets.”

“The Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, along with our law enforcement partners, including HSI, SBA OIG, FEMA fraud investigations and Inspections Division, IRS Criminal Investigation and the U.S. Attorney’s Office, will continue to investigate anyone who attempts to defraud FEMA in order to protect the integrity of government assistance programs, and to ensure FEMA funds are accessible to those who truly need them,” said Matthew Brackett, Special Agent in Charge of DHS OIG, Los Angeles Field Office.

“Criminals will seize every opportunity to defraud the government, even at the expense of those who have lost everything,” said Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Los Angeles Acting Special Agent in Charge John Pasciucco. “We strongly urge the public to report any suspicious activity related to

disaster relief claims to the HSI Los Angeles' El Camino Real Financial Crimes Task Force and our law enforcement partners."

"These suspects are accused of attempting to defraud the U.S. Government out of disaster relief funds carved out to help those who lost loved ones, pets, and homes...as well as those whose properties were damaged instead of destroyed," said Special Agent in Charge Tyler Hatcher, IRS Criminal Investigation, Los Angeles Field Office. "IRS Criminal Investigation stands proudly with our law enforcement partners to prevent and deter this sort of fraud to ensure relief funds exist for those in need as Los Angeles rebuilds our communities."

The allegedly false claims were made in the wake of the Eaton and Palisades fires that started on January 7. Together, the wildfires burned nearly 60,000 acres, destroyed more than 16,000 structures, and resulted in the deaths of 29 people. As a result, the President approved a Major Disaster Declaration, which prompted FEMA to develop a program to provide financial assistance to fire victims.

FEMA offered various forms of relief, a one-time payment of \$750, up to \$43,600 for "other needs" assistance, and housing assistance for up to 18 months. Homeowners are also potentially eligible for additional relief of up to \$43,600 for home repair.

The fraud alleged in the three cases include payment of "other needs assistance" based on false claims of damage to personal property, lost vehicles, and medical and relocation expenses.

The cases announced today were investigated by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General and HSI's El Camino Real Financial Crimes Task Force.

United States v. Turner

Joyce Turner, 55, of Rosharon, Texas, was arrested Tuesday after being charged Friday in a criminal complaint with fraud in connection with major disaster or emergency benefits.

Turner allegedly submitted an application claiming her home had been destroyed in the Eaton fire, but she appears never to have lived in California and in fact had no connection to the address she claimed was destroyed in the fire. Instead, she allegedly forged a lease making it look like she lived there, and she received more than \$25,000 from FEMA because of the fraudulent submissions.

"Turner submitted at least ten other applications to FEMA for disaster relief (so eleven total) related to seven other federally declared disasters, e.g., Hurricane Katrina (2005), Hurricane Ike (2008), Hurricane Isaac (2012), Hurricane Harvey (2017), and Hurricane Beryl (2024), and otherwise has a criminal history showing previous arrests and convictions for fraud offenses," the affidavit states.

Turner is scheduled to make her initial appearance today in United States District Court in the Southern District of Texas and is expected to appear in the Central District of California in the coming weeks.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Kerry L. Quinn of the Major Frauds Section.

United States v. Barnes

Tyrone D. Barnes Jr., 38, of Paramount, was arrested Tuesday after being named in an indictment charging him with making false claims that was returned by a federal grand jury on February 21. The indictment alleges that Barnes submitted a disaster relief claim to FEMA for an Altadena property owned by other individuals who did not know Barnes. The true owners of the property contacted FEMA about potential assistance, which is when they learned another person had already submitted an application in relation to their property.

Barnes is expected to make his initial appearance this afternoon in United States District Court in downtown Los Angeles.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney David Y. Pi of the Major Frauds Section.

United States v. Robertson

Hedeshia Robertson, 36, of Lakewood, was arrested on Tuesday after being charged in a criminal complaint filed Monday. Robertson allegedly filed a fraudulent application for FEMA benefits on January 28, seeking benefits related to a damaged residence in the Pacific Palisades that she did not own, did not rent, and in which she did not reside or work. As a result of her fraudulent application, Robertson obtained approximately \$24,899 in FEMA benefits to which she was not entitled. At the time of her arrest, Robertson also allegedly attempted to obtain additional FEMA benefits for a purported property lease in San Francisco. She is due to make an initial appearance in court this afternoon.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Scott Paetty and Roger Hsieh of the Major Frauds Section.

Complaints and indictments contain allegations of criminal conduct. All defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

The charge of fraud in connection with major disaster or emergency benefits carries a statutory maximum sentence of 30 years in federal prison. The charge of false, fictitious, or fraudulent claim against the United States carries a statutory maximum sentence of five years in federal prison.

To report fraud related to FEMA disaster-relief public assistance, please contact the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (DHS-OIG) hotline at (800) 323-8603. Homeland Security's tip line may be contacted at (866) 347-2423.

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Updated March 12, 2025