

Firestorms leave heartbreak & heartening stories in their wake, and a long, costly road to recovery.

by Kim F. Miller

The night of Saturday Oct. 7 was a happy one for California horse people. Local favorite Mandy Porter had just won the Longines FEI World Cup class at the Sacramento International Horse Show at the Sacramento area's Murieta Equestrian Center. Equally popular Californians Jenni McAllister and Richard Spooner were right behind her on the winner's circle and spirits were high through the night of celebration that followed.



Twenty-four hours later, it was urgent concern and actions as flames erupted 100 miles to the west, where the Wine County/North Bay fires began their terrible trajectory. On Monday, Oct. 9 Southern California had its own fiery concerns as the Canyon Fire 2 erupted in Orange County.

For lack of the reportorial army necessary for a comprehensive account of all the fires' impact on the California horse industry, we've focused on an evacuation in each end of the state. Both are remarkable examples of horse people – and “some regular guys in business suits” – coming to each other's aid, often putting themselves at great risk.

A Northern California Story

Eleven days after the first flames of the Tubbs and Atlas fires in Santa Rosa and Calistoga reared their ugly red heads, Sunset Horse Rescue founder Lisa O'Connor saw the region's first scrap of blue sky. Even better, there was a 100 percent chance of rain forecast for that night, Thursday Oct. 19. By then those original two of what became at least 10 Wine Country fires were mostly contained and Lisa had her first chance to take a deep breath.

Every minute of every day before that, however, was an unending stretch of harrowing decisions, heroic efforts, heartbreak and inspiring stories that are familiar to the thousands affected by California's unprecedented outbreak of wildfires last month.

The firestorm in Northern California's North Bay Area began Sunday night, Oct. 8. It was severely exacerbated by high winds that carried embers and sparks long distances in erratic directions, igniting more fires and causing complete unpredictability about where they would arise next.

Preceding the mandatory evacuation of the Calistoga area where Sunrise's horses live at the Tamber Bey Winery property, Lisa and her team agonized over their best course of action for their own horses. Simultaneously, they contributed to widespread efforts to help evacuate other horses under immediate threat. The Sonoma County Horse Council's extensive spreadsheet of volunteers, including their horse handling and hauling equipment and experience, was one of several life-savers. It's a very long list, but likely represents only a portion of those who dropped everything to help.



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