

Fires, heroic efforts and boundless generosity spread with equal speed.

by Kim F. Miller

The scope of December's fires has been matched by the scope of generosity toward its victims. "We are so inundated with people who are looking to donate," says Stacy Kendall, founder of the nearly 12,000-member Facebook group, Southern California Equine Emergency Evacuation. "In eight years of doing this group and for the 30 years being a member of this community, I have never experienced anything like it."



Wind-driven wild fires broke out the night of Monday Dec. 4 and some were still raging as we went to press Dec. 15. Like October's fires in Sonoma and Napa counties, they were spread widely, erratically and incomprehensibly fast by high winds. "Santa Ana" conditions of high temperatures and dry air made matters worse. Unlike in Northern California, the Southern California fires claimed many horse fatalities. An estimated 47 horses perished at the San Luis Rey Downs racehorse training facility in San Diego County's Bonsall and a reported 29 died at Rancho Padilla in Sylmar. Those events dominated social media reports and news headlines. On Dec. 14, a firefighter was lost battling the viciously persistent Thomas fire as it continued its reign of terror in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

All the while, donations of money, equipment, supplies and time poured into evacuation centers,

charitable efforts and GoFundMe pages. “How the horse community has pulled together, with the help of the internet, is just remarkable,” says hunter/jumper trainer Archie Cox. Located at Middle Ranch in Los Angeles County’s Lakeview Terrace, Archie’s Brookway Stables suffered miraculously little damage. His main barn remains intact with hopes that the 35 horses evacuated could return by the New Year. Colleagues at other barns at the historic and beautiful Middle Ranch were not so fortunate. Their barns burned down, losing all or much of their supplies and equipment. Rather than lament their losses, though, several of the affected professionals emphasized their gratitude for those who helped evacuate their horses and the fact that the horses and their staffs were safe. “We were very lucky,” says Archie, echoing the sentiments of many. “We’re trying hard to help the other evacuees and people who have lost so much.”

Archie’s husband Jorge Hildago and Virginia Fout started one of many GoFundMe pages, which had raised \$32,000 for the San Luis Rey victims as of mid-December. Taking advice from former jockey Julie Krone, the effort was directed at replacing everyday necessities for displaced families. “Coffee makers, microwaves, refrigerators, clothing, etc,” Archie explains. Good will was such that he ventured a bold hope: “With a bit of luck, maybe it can make Christmas an enjoyable day for them in a terrible time when they lost everything.” He applauded the many companies who’ve stepped up with product donations to replace important tools of the victims’ trades.

Another GoFundMe site had reportedly raised \$600,00-plus for San Luis Rey-related needs.

Describing the huge quantity of donated items flowing into the Del Mar Fairgrounds for equine and human fire victims, Archie says, “It’s really unbelievable what they have done until you see it.” Customers of Mary’s Tack and Feed, for example, had contributed \$20,000 and counting for supplies delivered to the nearby Fairgrounds as of mid-December.

Stacy surmises that the year’s earlier natural disasters: the hurricanes in Houston and Florida, may have set the stage for this unprecedented generosity. The number of fatalities was likely a factor, too.

Into The Fire

Hundreds of heroic efforts saved hundreds of equine lives. Experienced equine evacuators,

regular horsemen and citizens who knew nothing about horses did everything they could. Over a long day of hauling approximately 20 horses to safety, hunter/jumper trainer Deirdre Davis saw a TV reporter loop the cord from his microphone around a horse's neck and lead it to safety from Gibson Ranch in Sunland. At another point in her 19-hour day of rescuing horses, Deirdre was waiting at a stop sign when strangers loaded two horses into her then-empty trailer.

Like many fellow horse people, Deirdre began her day with a wee-hours phone call, in her case: 4:30 a.m. "I knew it was going to be a windy week," she said of her mindset going to bed the previous evening. "I knew it wouldn't make sense to do any yard work on Monday because it was going to be windy, but I didn't have the sense that anything like what happened was ahead."

An intense and chaotic day lay ahead. She headed to Middle Ranch first, where the first flames in Kagel Canyon were racing toward one of the main stabling areas. Several large rigs had hauled out most of the horses by then, and with the last two in her trailer, she insisted that a lingering trainer jump in her truck. As they left, "the fire was burning over my truck. I can't believe the paint didn't melt."

A trainer at the Hansen Dam Horse Park in Sylmar, Deirdre lives in the area. She keeps her own retired horse and a Mini at home and capitalized on her knowledge of the area's many small stable set-ups and backroads to continue her rescues. With regular updates from her brother regarding the status of her own home and horses, Deirdre evacuated her own horses last.

With a week's reflection on the terrifying day, Deirdre admits "It hasn't all sunk in yet. With this fire and the one down south, people lost lives, their homes and so many horses died. What brings a positive light to the situation is when you realize how many horse people are helping each other. We're all doing the same thing because we have the same passion and empathy for horses."

In San Diego County, Pomponio Ranch's stable manager Margeaux Day would give anything to erase the fires' existence. Short of that, she was grateful to have been able to help. In 2003, the San Diego resident didn't have her own trailer and counted on a stranger to haul her horse to safety in that year's fires. Being able to help others this time was a big help in coping with the devastation.

Besides the heat and wind, it was a normal morning at Pomponio Ranch's location in Rancho Santa Fe. But when a friend repeatedly called her in the early afternoon, Margeaux got word of the fire in the area. Monitoring the news on the internet, she learned of the San Luis Rey Downs situation. Her out-of-town boss, show jumper Karl Cook, gave an immediate green light, and Margeaux and her Pomponio Ranch colleagues hooked up the ranch's six-horse and four-horse trailers and lit out for San Luis Rey. Faced with terrible traffic jams and several CHP blocked roads, they turned to GPS terrain maps to find a way to the ranch. Neighbors and dirt bike riders helped guide them and a cool-headed co-worker maneuvered the rig, backwards, down a long, steep driveway along the way. They talked their way past CHP officers, who reminded them they were proceeding at their own risk.

"It was like a war zone," Margeaux recounts of the scene at San Luis Rey. As was graphically documented on social media and newscasts, horses were turned loose when the racing flames left no time for them to be led to safety. "It was like Armageddon. There were palm trees lighting up like tissue paper does when you blow a flame on it to make a fire." Smoke and flames engulfed the scene as they drove on to where grooms were grabbing horses and loading them. There were so many horses, if one balked, they let it go and grabbed the next one. Seven horses were loaded into the six-horse rig and they headed off for safety of the Del Mar Fairgrounds, where 800-plus horses wound up.

On their way, they stopped to attend to a trailer issue. "The horses looked so exhausted," Margeaux recalls. An "amazing sight" of a well-prepared Del Mar Fairgrounds was a big relief as they pulled in. Along with being directed to a barn and asked where the horses were from, the horses they had been worried about were getting examined by top vets within 20 minutes of their arrival. "These are A circuit vets you wait months to come look at your horse," Margeaux reflects. Stalls awaited with two bags of shavings and two flakes of hay and volunteers were being directed how to help – in short, a relatively calm counterpoint to the chaos they'd come from.

What's Next?

Ideally, the magnitude of these fires will trigger a commensurate commitment to disaster preparedness. Climate experts predict that California is in for more fire-friendly weather in the months and years ahead. It's discouraging that even the best-laid and rehearsed plans can be useless in the face of fires moving at light speed and in unpredictable directions. Nonetheless, preparation is critical.

“The problem is everybody gets really fired up while the big fires are happening, but when we go to coordinate meetings or events to train and certify volunteers, very few people actually show up,” acknowledges Stacy of Southern California Equine Emergency Evacuations. “People start to get complacent and I’m not personally sure how to combat that. This happens with every fire, but with the scope of these fires, I really am hopeful that more people will follow through.”

County animal services agencies are a good place to start or advance disaster preparedness efforts. Establishing relationships and communications with local fire departments is critical to getting a jump on fires. Getting horses out early is the universal advice from emergency experts. There may be rare cases where topography or accessibility make it smart to shelter in place, but usually it’s best to hit the road with horses in tow at the first hint of trouble. Typically, there are three warnings: advisory, voluntary and mandatory. Go at the first.

Make sure horses will load into trailers, and give refresher courses to horses that haven’t been hauled anywhere in many years. Follow protocols for fire-safe landscaping around barns and throughout horse-keeping properties. Create or revisit evacuation plans, ideally with several options, and rehearse them.

Everyone we interviewed deflected attention from their own efforts and were, instead, grateful for “the itty bitty sliver of what I could do,” as Margeaux put it. The experience also prompted re-examinations of existing emergency plans. “It makes you look at everything differently.”

The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.

Mark Conley Seeks App Developer for Equine Emergencies

After the Lilac fire in San Diego County, hunter/jumper trainer Mark Conley commented that there is a need to join forces and develop an app that would put volunteers with rigs and horse owners in contact with each other. Much like Uber and Lyft that finds rides for humans, an app that could find the closest rig and expedite the rescue process, would be a huge resource for the horse community.

Such an app would require investors and an app developer that could team up to create this life saving tool. Anyone interested in getting involved with this project please call Mark Conley (619-246-1148) or Riding Magazine founder Cheryl Erpelding (858-967-5765).