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DPW UPDATE

FIRE

Personal Tragedy Professional Triumph

by Bill Polick, Editor

When Steve Thompson's telephone rang at 2 a.m. on October 26, he had no idea the message he received would change his life for weeks to come.

Heroes come in many forms. Some do spectacular things and wear shiny medals on their chest while others see a need, fill it and move on with very little notice. While the worst wildfires in California history swept through San Diego County in late October and early November, DPW employees stepped up and performed heroically.

Thompson's phone call was from Station M and the message he got was to close the south end of Wildcat Canyon Road. Fire was racing down the narrow canyon and taking lives and property as it swept toward him and his neighbors. Thompson, road crew supervisor for the Lakeside road station, closed that road and many more over the next few days, helped those fleeing for their lives and spent weeks afterward supervising crews' clean up efforts.

"My wife called me early Sunday morning and said we had to evacuate the house," Thompson said. "She and the neighbors went to our church, and then the fire forced them to leave again."

Shortly before noon that same day, Joe Rymer sped away from the home he and his family had lived in for only two weeks. His life, too, changed—the new house is now a pile of rubble.

Rymer, not knowing if his house was still standing, got his family to safety then reported for work. "There was nothing else to do and I thought I might be needed," he said. "We moved to Alpine because we'd been evacuated from our old home in Julian several times because of fire."

Thompson and Rymer are not alone. Hundreds of DPW employees helped both during and after the blazes. Long hours and sleepless nights were par for the course.

The largest of three major fires that wreaked havoc on the County was the Cedar fire. It burned 280,278 acres, killed 14 people and destroyed 2,232 homes. Most of the damage was in unincorporated areas. The second largest fire killed two people and burned nearly 57,000 acres in and around Valley Center and the third major blaze in Otay burned 46,291 acres and destroyed one home.

For DPW's employees, this wasn't just a news event–it was personal. Five employees lost their homes to the fires that swept through their neighborhoods and several others were evacuated as flames moved quickly toward theirs.

Department assets were also damaged or destroyed. More than 1,100 street signs were burned, thousands of feet of guardrail were destroyed, traffic and streetlights were damaged, hundreds of culverts were blocked or threatened, burned trees fell in rights of way, a landfill gas recovery system was destroyed and construction survey stakes for the Valley Center

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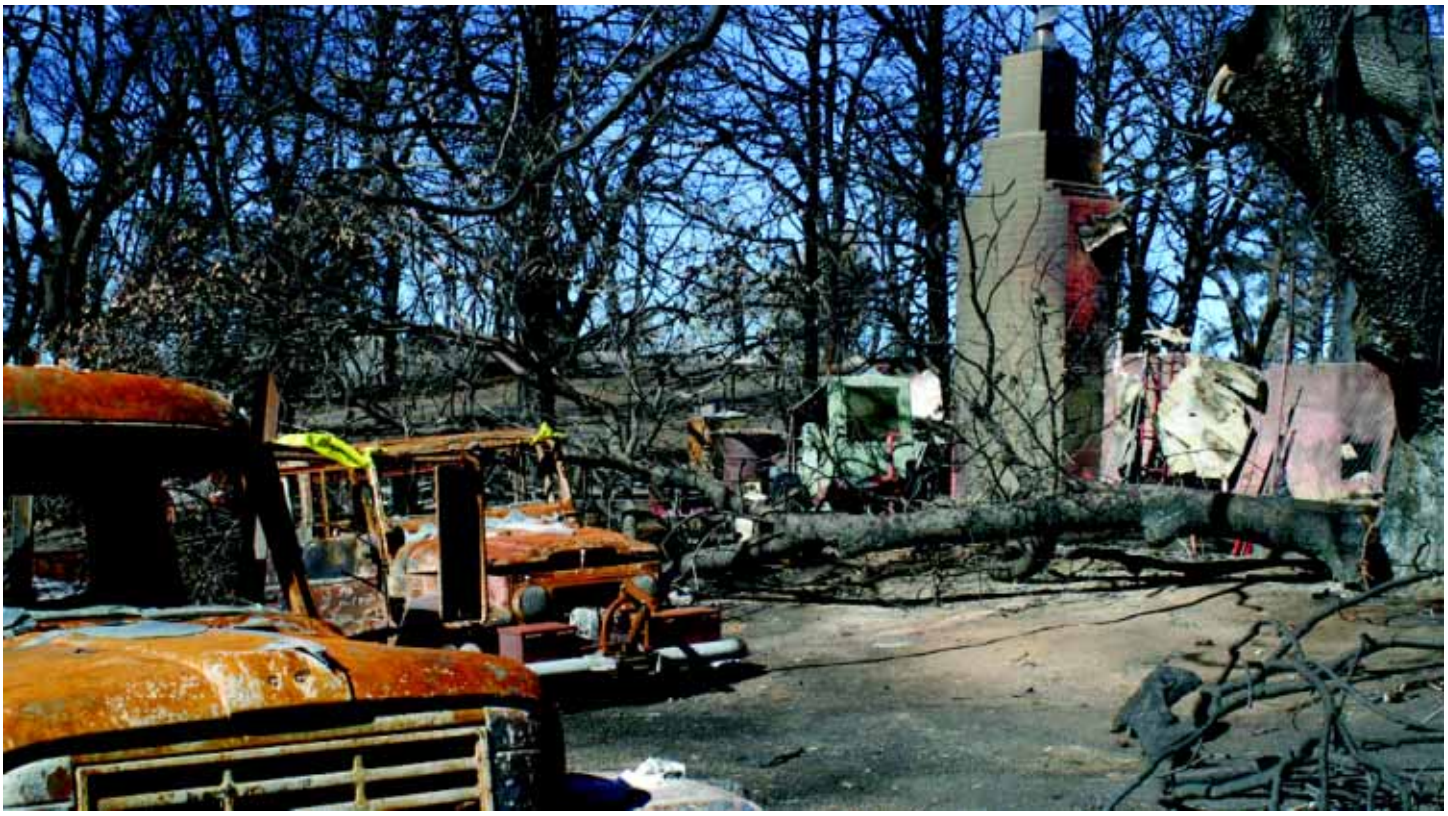
Fire rages in October. Photo by Jeff Stoffel, Lakeside Road Station.



Harrison Park fire damage.

FIRE (continued)

Road widening project were destroyed.

"This disaster touched every part of our department," said DPW Director John Snyder.

"Nearly 400 of our 550 employees were directly involved in emergency efforts, from our crews in harm's way in the field to our support staff making and taking telephone calls in the office. Our team had significant impact on our citizens. Even those not directly involved in the fire effort contributed by filling voids in other areas."

"We faced massive work fraught with danger and a need for quick action and you responded with a positive attitude, can-do spirit, lots of initiative and tons of hard work."

— John Snyder, Director

DPW Crews Step Up

While 300-foot walls of flame moved from Ramona to San Diego to Alpine to Julian and beyond, DPW crews jumped to action.

Road Crews

Flames leaped roads, shot up mountains and destroyed homes as firefighters fought one dramatic battle after another. DPW crews followed behind, closing roads and helping those fleeing their homes. Breathing the acrid air was miserable at best. Eyes teared from the smoke.

As the firefighters advanced, DPW and utility company crews moved in, working in an area as soon as they could to make roads safe, clear culverts from massive amounts of debris, restore electricity, water, and telephone services.

DPW crews cut trees that had fallen across roads or were ready to tumble into rights of way. Road surfaces needed inspecting to determine if they were still usable after the intense heat generated by the fires.

"We used every type of truck and machine we have," said Tom Davis of Field Operations. "We put everything on the line from dump trucks to rock plows to bucket trucks."

Then Govenor-Elect Schwartzenegger (at lecturn) speaks to firefighters at Gillespie field.
Photo by Mike Carson, Airports.

Airports

Gillespie Field looked more like a firefighters convention than an airport. Some 5,000 men and women and hundreds of pieces of equipment filled the ramp in front of the terminal building and adjacent aircraft parking areas. Firefighters from all over the state converged there to coordinate

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their attacks on the blazes. After the flames were out, President Bush, Governor-Elect Schwarzenegger and Governor Davis visited the airport to thank the men and women who battled the fires and to Airport staff and others who provided support to the firefighters.

Ramona Airport was another busy place. As home to the California Department of Forestry and U.S. Forest Service aerial attack base, planes and helicopters flew continually during daylight hours to drop retardant on the fires.

Airports Director Pete Drinkwater and the other 33 members of his staff ably provided whatever assistance was needed by the CDF and even the President's Secret Service detail.

Wastewater

Fire cut off electricity to burn areas and that created havoc for many DPW facilities. Take, for example, sewage pumping stations.

Wastewater crews hustled to places like the Galloway and Harbison stations near Alpine where flames threatened the facilities. Emergency generators at sites like this kept important machinery running to prevent a possible environmental disaster. James Creagh, Bob Braun, Ron Basil, Steve Gaspar and Steve Matthews were in the thick of things. They joined two citizens knocking the fire down with hand tools and garden hoses at the Galloway site. They were able to save the station and small cabins nearby.

Emergency Operations Center

On Sunday, October 26, the County's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Kearny Mesa was activated and throughout the next week DPW managers operated the Transportation desk, monitoring movement of machines and materials.

Other DPW employees managed the Land Use and Environment Group desk troubleshooting as need arose.

Another task handled at the EOC was media and public relations. Getting information to the public was vital during the fires and DPW staff assisted by writing news releases, coordinating interviews with reporters and updating the department's Road Closure web page.

Galloway pump station.

DPW staff remained at the EOC through Saturday, November 1, when the facility deactivated. But that wasn't the end of the department's efforts. Not by a long shot.

Providing Support

When the California Highway Patrol mistakenly gave out DPW's main information phone number as the source for road closure information, Len Snavely got together with the Support Services and Personnel staffs to coordinate answering questions.

"We were extremely busy for quite a while," Snavely said. "We pulled up our DPW road closure page on the web and were able to keep callers abreast of what was open and what wasn't."

That web page was busy—linked by several television stations' web sites and referenced by almost all local media—there were more than 70,000 visitors in the first four days the road closure information was on line.

Bob Christopher on duty at the EOC.

Recovery Efforts

Chris Heiserman at Alpine Local Assistance Center.

"Jill" lost her home and everything she owned when fire swept up Peutz Valley so quickly she barely escaped with her life. She sat forlorn on a bench in front of an old bank building in Alpine. Exhausted after dealing with piles of paperwork, she just wanted a friendly ear to listen to her story. One DPW staffer sat patiently as she told of the terror of escape and the trauma yet to be overcome.

Once fires were nearly contained, recovery efforts began. With so many families burned out and so much red tape needed to help them begin to put their lives back together, County Chief Administrative Officer Walt Ekard named DPW's Assistant Director, Chandra Wallar, to head the recovery team. She and her staff set up Local Assistance Centers (LAC) in Alpine, Ramona, Valley Center and Julian that brought together federal, state and County agencies to provide "one stop shops" for fire victims.

The Wallar team called on DPW again to help provide on-site assistance at the centers.

"This was an emotional experience for me," said Land Development's Nickie Jones, who worked at the Alpine LAC. "Your heart goes out to these people who've lost everything."

Roy Gray of Management Services worked at the Valley Center LAC.

"I was very impressed with the way DPW employees dealt with fire victims," Gray said. "This was a difficult job, and our people did it well."

Nickie Jones at Alpine LAC.

Several DPW staff helped answer County Disaster Hotline calls.

Helping Residents with Erosion Control

Greg Carlton walked up a slight hill to one of two homes still standing in Harrison Park. The house, once surrounded by oak and pine trees, now looked out to black, eerie monster fingers of burned trees, chimneys and burned cars. Surreal quiet permeated the scene.

With winter rains approaching, many property owners worked to protect their homes from the risk of mudslides and flooding.

Unloading BMPs at Lakeside Road Station.

Residents of unincorporated areas of San Diego County affected by the fires picked up free soil erosion control devices at five road stations—Alpine, Julian, Lakeside, Ramona and Valley Center. Traffic's Mike Robinson quickly stepped up to organize teams from throughout the department. These teams used their knowledge and skills as erosion experts at each road station and at the LACs to explain how each device should be used and installed.

Teams from Environmental Services, Capital Projects, Landfill Management, Construction Engineering, Field Surveys, Wastewater and other sections worked on assessments and recommended how residents use their BMPs to best protect property.

From November 7-25, DPW provided erosion control assistance to residents:

- Served 3,515 homeowners at five road stations
- Performed 1,063 erosion control on-site assessments
- And Issued:
  - 101,160 sand bags
  - 30,269 gravel bags
  - 15,468 pounds of seed mix
  - 6,683 straw waddles

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Getting DPW Facilities Back On Line

Most damage to DPW facilities was repaired within 30 days of the start of the fire. That included:

- 10,000+ ft of guardrail replaced
- 1,900 trees removed
- SDG&E power restored to impacted wastewater facilities
- More than 1,000 road signs replaced
- Landfill gas system replaced
- 2 dozen streetlights replaced or repaired

Greg Carlton of Land Development assesses the need for erosion control devices with property owner in Harrison Park, near Julian.

RECOVERY (continued)

Stormwater Manager Cid Tesoro and a crew from County Television Network put together a short video for cable TV. It also played at the five road stations issuing BMPs. The video covers use and installation of the devices.

Flood Control provided important weather information with winter storms approaching.

Sections of the department you may not recognize as "emergency" workers dug in for the long haul as well. Financial Services was one.

Crew installs BMPs at demonstration site.

Financial Services

Amparo Suter worked on numerous purchasing contracts and letters as part of coordinating overall financial resources. The flow of funds and account management are difficult to track when there's so much going on and Financial Services staff stayed busy with that as well as normal duties.

EOC decision makers examine fire map.

Carto

Another section that could be easily overlooked is Cartographic Services. That is, until you realize the scope of their efforts for the Local Assistance Centers. In addition to their normal production, Carto created:

- 30 42" x 37" outdoor banners
- 76 tabletop signs
- 130 36" x 27" wall-mounted signs
- 35 foam board poster signs
- 3 8′ vinyl welcome banners
- 7,000 Firestorm Victim cards
- 700 Recovery Team member badges
- 3 County Mobile Library signs
- 50 emergency closure signs for Parks
- 12 Debris pickup signs for Recycling
- 103 vehicle magnetic decals for erosion control, damage assessment and fire assistants
- 39 No Parking signs
- Numerous counter signs for DEH, DPLU and DPW

Valley Center road crew clears culvert after Paradise Fire sweeps through area.

GIS

Mike Binge and the GIS staff spent days creating maps tracking the fires' progress and outlining burned areas. EOC planners used these maps to plot progress and determine what needed to be done.

Debris Removal

Recycling staff helped set up debris removal and provided advice on recycling hazardous materials such as television sets, propane tanks and computer monitors. Watershed Protection staff updated information for distribution to the media about ash removal and the danger of debris working its way into waterways.

More Work to Come

With the fires out and winter rains coming, DPW crews worked feverishly to prevent erosion, mudslides and flooding. Working with a private contractor, managers used satellite images and on-site inspections to identify areas where problems might occur.

Four weeks after the fire began, most residents were dealing with their recovery. Massive amounts of debris still needed clearing, but most victims approached their problems with resolve.

Clean up of home sites is expected to take months. Deputy Director Donna Turbyfill, Burnsite Management's Jon Rollin, Recyling's Wayne Williams and their staffs arranged for free debris bins for fire victims. Other DPW staff will spend months helping County residents recover their lives after the fires.

Fire Relief Fund for Employee Victims Set

Harbison Canyon.

Hearts opened wide for fire victims after blazes swept through the County. Volunteers were quickly on the scene at assistance centers and donations of clothing, food and other necessities sometimes overwhelmed workers.

Five DPW employees, and several others from County staff, lost their homes to the blazes and the department, along with the County, has a way you can help them with your donations.

One hundred percent of contributions to the Active/Retired County Employee 2003 Fire Relief Fund go directly to those in need. Checks can be made payable to **ARCE 2003 Fire Relief Fund**. Cash donations are also being accepted.

For more information, or to make a donation, contact Kristin Vent in the DPW Personnel office, (858) 571-4229.

Safety

Long hours, Rough Areas Create Need for Caution

by Carl Spiron, Safety Officer

In response to the Fire Storm, DPW stepped to the plate to fill the many needs of County residents. During this process we learned important lessons.

Safety awareness is crucial to keep at the forefront when we are working extra long hours, and many times involved in entirely new tasks.

We found that footing in burned areas is dangerous. There are holes covered with ash that seem like a solid surface and they are not. Slipping on a slope is easier when covered with ash and there are still burning embers below the surface.

Be cautious working around roadways. There are many "Lookie Lous" out driving around to see fire damage.

When reaching out to grab something when walking through an area, be very careful — the object you choose as a hand hold may not support your weight. Many of the fence posts have burned from the inside and will snap off under any pressure, allowing barbed wire to spring loose and hit you.

Many of our office staff have been in the field helping fill sand bags and moving materials. Remember to use good body mechanics and always ask for help when the load seems heavy.

Remember to stay focused — you are DPW's most important asset, and your health and safety is #1.

Working in Barona.

From the Director's Desk

When you measure a team's mettle you judge success not on how it performs when it's ahead, but what it does when it faces adversity. In my scorebook, you're all winners.

Faced with daunting challenges brought on by three major fires, the entire DPW team moved quickly and with great professionalism to handle some very rough assignments. Many have had to work long hours, weekends and holidays. Many have had to perform assignments they've never done before. Almost everyone had to shift priorities immediately.

We faced massive work fraught with danger and a need for quick action and you responded with a positive attitude, can-do spirit, lots of initiative and tons of hard work.

I think we've done great serving the public these past few weeks and I thank you for a job well done.

John Snyder,
Director

Steve Thompson talks with crew during tree trimming and clean up along Wildcat Canyon Road.

Training

Erosion Control: Material and Installation

by Kirsten Aaboe-Hope, Training Officer

All of us were affected by the fires in October and November. Many us face the problem of having heavy winter rains erode the soil around our homes and in our neighborhoods.

There are a few inexpensive and readily available materials to help you protect your property's soil from eroding in the upcoming rainy season. These materials and their installation are what Stormwater Manager Cid Tesoro recommends.

Julian Road Station.

Materials:

1. ***Sandbag:*** The most economical, easy-to-place item for redirecting flow away from your house
2. ***Fiber roll:*** Plastic mesh 25-foot long tube filled with straw. It's rolled out and staked in place at 4-foot intervals
3. ***Gravel bag:*** Burlap container filled with rocks that allow water to be filtered through it. Keeps material from being washed away since the water goes through the burlap and rocks but the material will be left behind.
4. ***Straw mats:*** Designed for steep slopes, rolled out and held in place with staples placed at about every 3 feet.

Installation Techniques:

1. ***Sandbag:*** Set up in a "U" shape to allow water to come down a slope, drop its sediment and debris load behind the sandbag line. Clear water will flow past the sandbags down the hill to the roadway
2. ***Fiber roll:*** Dig a shallow trench 2-3 inches deep, level with the area. When the trench is dug, roll out the fiber roll into the trench line, pull it tight and pound in the stakes at about 4-foot intervals. Be sure to drive the stakes in a good 12 inches if possible, or as deep as the soil will keep them in place.
3. ***Gravel bag:*** These function in much the same way as a fiber roll, except they are burlap sacks with rocks inside them. To install, lay them out in a line just like the fiber roll. Put the top end of the burlap in the opposite direction of the way the water flows. Place them up against each other tightly, down the trench line, with a slight overlap.
4. ***Straw mats:*** These are very important if you want to keep steep slopes from eroding. Key in a trench 2-3 inches deep at the top edge of where the straw mat will lie. Roll out the straw mat so its top edge overlaps the trench line just a little. Fill in the trench you dug out with the same dirt, burying the top edge of the mat. After you've filled it in, walk along and tamp down the soil to keep it in place. After the top edge is secure, pound in the metal staples every 3 feet across the surface area of the mat.

Use of these materials and installation techniques will help you get through the rainy season and keep erosion to a minimum.

Carl Spiron and John Snyder with fire status board at EOC.

Kisten Aaboe-Hope on duty at EOC.

Digging mud near Valley Center.

Ray Carpenter directs traffic in Alpine during hydromulching operation.

Hydromulching along Arnold Way in Alpine.

Julie Davis of Engineering Services enjoys a light-hearted moment with a fire victim at the Alpine road station distribution center.

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