

Into the Fire

With flames threatening people and animals, rescuers in California braved the heat

BY ALEXANDRA KLEINKOPF



Many horses in Ramona, Calif., were saved in the nick of time. Rescue volunteers themselves barely escaped the blaze. LORI DONNER

“**T**he moon gradually got redder ... and redder ... and then you could start smelling the smoke.”

Ronnie Graves says he has never experienced anything like it before—the 4,000 foot descent down the mountains on Interstate 8 into the blazing wildfires threatening San Diego.

Graves got the call the morning of October 23 from Barry Kellogg, director of disaster services at The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). The fires were moving rapidly. Could Graves drive The HSUS command post from Central Florida to California as soon as possible?

As president of the Sumter Disaster Animal Response Team (DART), Graves didn't think twice. He drove the 38-foot camper and hauler, fully equipped with veterinary area and computer terminals, across the country to rescue horses and other animals threatened by the blaze.

Forty-two hours later, operating on five hours of sleep, Graves and his colleague, Chris Root, found themselves driving

through a surreal transition from clear to smoke-laden air. They had their work cut out for them: Several DART members had trained for disaster situations, but never experienced one in real life. Other eager responders had even less experience: Some had never handled animals before.

Besides the immediate need to save animals and people, providing food and shelter was the next major concern. In the following days, Graves, his team, and several local ranchers delivered hay and water to horses—many of whom were still on property through fire zones. Hundreds of other horses were brought to communal safe zones like the Del Mar Fairgrounds and the Lakeside Rodeo Arena.

“Everybody threw everything that they could at this disaster,” Graves says. “A large number of people and teams responded, and responded quickly.”

It was that fast communication and teamwork that made the fires less devastating than they might have been. Graves describes the rescues and evacuations as “organized” and “run with a high degree of leadership” on the parts

of government officials, organizations, and individuals.

However, with the fires still uncontained days later, and more mandatory evacuations being imposed, some rescuers nearly needed rescuing themselves.

Lori Donner, a local horse owner and trainer from south San Diego, was one of many who came dangerously close to being consumed by the fire. After she'd made multiple trips trailering 30 horses at a time, the fires worsened. So did the traffic on the only two roads leading out.

“We didn't think we were going to make it out, because the fire was nipping at our heels and we were in gridlock,” Donner says with a chill. “I really had a



horrifying feeling that the fire was going to reach us, and we were going to burn in line getting out of the mountains.”

But at the end of the day, Donner was safe. She had personally hauled 105 horses out of the flames, and spent \$2,500 on gas. She and team members used fluorescent spray paint to mark the horses' backs with addresses, ranch names and phone numbers—anything to help owners reclaim them in the aftermath.

During the response, Diane Webber, director of disaster preparedness and shelter management for The HSUS, and Laura Bevan, the director of the organization's Southeast Regional Office, were working around the city of Ramona with teams from San Diego Animal Services.

On October 25, they drove into the mountains north of Ramona to check on some dogs and goats. The team found a pen with a large number of dead goats—some had died of smoke inhalation, and others had been killed directly by the fire, says Webber. The team removed the surviving goats—their pen was still full of smoldering manure and dead animals, and the owner wasn't able to bring in enough water for them. They also brought in water and food for 40 chinchillas whose owner hadn't yet been able to get back to his property.

In spite of the grimmer discoveries, many praised the evacuation and rescue process. Comparing the fires to those the state experienced in 2003, John Gabaldon,

president of the Tijuana River Valley Equine Association, was pleased with the damage control. He praised everyone from border patrol agents and politicians to local media for coming together.

“This really was somewhat historical—a major metropolitan area was on fire ... That there was so little loss of human and horse life is astounding,” Gabaldon says. “I don't know how better an effort can go than the way it went.”

Gabaldon cited the advice of professional horse transporter, Mitch Krauss, who, from the side of a road thousands of miles away in Pennsylvania, used his cell phone and years of experience to help orchestrate some of the equine evacuations.

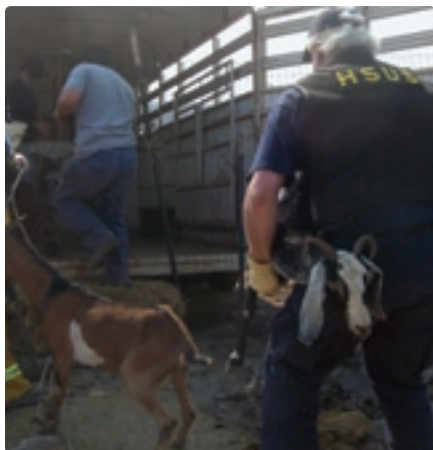
“I would not ever wait until the last minute to try and haul horses in a fire. That's dangerous,” Krauss says, stressing the need for an advance plan, a readily available trailer, and a safe place to evacuate to. Loading horses onto a trailer early is the best way to escape a disaster, he says, and helps to avoid last-minute chaos, congested roadways, and both human and equine panic.

Donner hopes a microchipping system for reclaiming displaced animals will be implemented for future disasters. Webber says that, for the most part, owners were taking care of their evacuated animals, and the Red Cross had allowed many of the human shelters to have pet shelter facilities nearby.

The best part of her day, she says, was when the HSUS team was back in downtown Ramona. A man rode up on a bicycle and asked for their help. His elderly parents had evacuated but hadn't been able to take their cats, and he'd been riding his bike to their house every day to feed them. But he had no money to buy more food.

“He was clearly embarrassed,” Webber says. “The back of our vehicle was loaded with pet food supplies ... so I asked him if he wanted some cat food. I gave him a 20 pound bag we hadn't opened yet. He was so stunned and appreciative he started crying right then and there.”

It was a small gesture, Webber says. But in disaster situations, small gestures often add up to something bigger: Hope. AS



Members of The HSUS Disaster Response Team rescued goats who had survived the California fire. Their pen was still smoldering, and other goats had died at the site. LAURA BEVAN/THE HSUS

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