

Wildfires in northern California leave carriers without homes, routes

At 5:30 a.m. on Columbus Day, there was a pounding on Jerry Andersen's door. It was a neighbor, who told the Santa Rosa, CA Branch 183 president that wildfires had gotten as close as three miles away and that local neighborhoods were being evacuated.

Later, after 10 days of firefighting, during which the residents worried about every rumor concerning which way the fire was turning and three more days of thick oppressive smoke that hung over everything, nearly 9,715 structures were lost between Napa and Sonoma counties. With 175,000 residents, Santa Rosa is the largest city in Sonoma County. Its 1,550 square miles of valleys are circled by mountains just north of San Francisco, an area not used to wildfires.

"According to what I saw," Andersen said, "the final toll was 4,382 homes in Santa Rosa. It impacted 14 routes, and some routes saw between 33 percent to 99 percent destruction."

A Santa Rosa neighborhood that was mostly destroyed by the wildfires.

Of Branch 183's 550 members, 10 active carriers and two retirees, along with a city carrier assistant from Ukiah Branch 1563 who lived in the area, lost their houses and their possessions to the all-consuming fires.

"To see the devastation it did, even in a concrete neighborhood—all of a sudden, those houses are gone," Andersen said. "I still can't fathom it."

Napa Branch 627, which is about 40 miles southeast of Santa Rosa, fared better. "We had members who were evacuated, but nobody lost their homes or had any damage," President April Salvadori said. She added that her branch still was dealing with routes that have lost a significant number of houses as this issue went to press.

Back on the morning of Oct. 9, Andersen had called the post office to make sure that letter carriers were not being sent out to deliver parcels. He was told that carriers were being sent out to deliver only in unaffected areas.

He also received texts and phone calls from the branch's stewards about carriers' residences that were in harm's way. It was a confusing period.

"A couple of people we thought lost their homes, didn't lose their homes," he said. "We found out later that a couple other people had lost their homes. Many carriers were evacuated, but did not know for days whether their homes survived."

Meanwhile, postal managers reached out to Andersen to make sure that all carriers were safe, including those on long-term disability who were still on the rolls. "From what I was told, they were able to contact all the employees who hadn't reported to work, even those on leave, in less than 24 hours," he explained. If they couldn't find someone, they sent out postal inspectors to locate the carrier and make sure they were safe.

The day after Columbus Day, the carrier annex—where the majority of carrier routes are—was closed and without power, so all of the 100 carriers reported to the Santa Rosa main office. Carriers didn't have any flats and just took DPS mail and parcels out to be delivered.

"They just delivered what routes they could," Andersen said.

The blaze rolled in from the east and raged on three sides of the city. "The fire came down a hill and jumped a six-lane freeway and then just went hit-and-miss," he explained. "There's a strip mall that made it through. There are other malls that you would think would be a firebreak and it just devastated some of the buildings. We were surrounded everywhere."

Napa Branch President Salvadori was on her route and remembers just





Above: The wildfires moved down toward Santa Rosa from the hills to the east of the city.
Right: Little remained after the fires consumed the houses in their path.

watching the fire in the distance. “It was very scary,” she said. “I had a customer tell me, ‘It’s good to see you, maybe for the last time,’ because she thought her house was threatened.”

Both management and NALC shared the same message with carriers out on routes while the fires raged: “If you are not sure and you don’t feel safe, bring the mail back and let somebody know,” Andersen explained.

The next day, the displaced Santa Rosa carriers moved to Petaluma, about 20 miles south of Santa Rosa. They were there from Wednesday until they returned to their regular office the following Monday.

One of the major issues was the smoke that hung in the air, even after the fires were extinguished. On 90-degree days, carriers were walking their routes while wearing masks the whole time. “It was miserable,” Andersen said.

Salvadori said it took two days and a call to NALC’s Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr. to even get the proper masks, as the first ones were only designed to filter dust.

“We did a check on the particulates [in the air] in Napa and we were up at 493 [micrograms per cubic meter] at



one point, and they say that 50 is when it starts getting dangerous,” she said.

And even then, it’s not easy to deliver while wearing a mask. “You’re breaking out all around and it’s just hard to breathe in those things for extended hours of delivery,” Salvadori said.

“We were wearing them inside and outside because a lot of stuff came into the office as well,” she said. “It’s all over the cases, the vehicles inside and out. You just feel it. You go home and you’re just full of smoke in your clothes.”

The smoke only started to clear after three days after the fires were under control, thanks to a rain that helped clear out the air.

After the fires had been extinguished, 16 routes remained affected,

some almost completely vacant. Andersen and Region 1 National Business Agent Bryant Almario inspected one neighborhood. “There were houses standing and then the rest were just chimneys,” Andersen said. “And this goes on for miles.”

Most carriers who lost their homes or were displaced have been staying with family or friends. When some have talked to their insurance companies about where to stay, the companies have found places as far away as Foster City, 75 miles south of Santa Rosa.

The Postal Service reached out to the uniform companies to supply carriers who had lost theirs, and the Santa Rosa branch contacted a shoe supplier. The branch has set up a dedicated fund to assist local NALC members who have lost homes in Santa Rosa,

Ukiah and Napa. Donations can be sent to: NALC Branch 183, 2017 Fire Relief Fund, 888 3rd St., Santa Rosa, CA 95404.

Donations also can be made to the Postal Employees' Relief Fund (PERF), the charitable organization operated by the various union and management organizations of the Postal Service to benefit postal employees. PERF provides relief grants to help qualifying individuals get re-established after their homes have been signifi-



cantly damaged by natural disasters or house fires. Charitable donations from letter carriers are needed now.

Direct donations by check or money order can be sent to PERF, P.O. Box 7630, Woodbridge, VA 22195-7630. To contribute online by credit card, go to postalrelief.com.

During the fire and even as this issue was going to press, some carriers were delivering the parts of their routes that they could, while for others the mail was being staged at the post office. Many residents had to stand in line, sometimes for more than two hours, to get their mail from the office.

Jaimie McGuire, a steward in Santa Rosa, was off her route for eight days, and cased and staged her mail at the

Left: Jerry Andersen (l) with Tony Prado, a letter carrier who lost his house in the fires.

Below: Andersen and Region 1 NBA Bryant Almario (not pictured) went to examine the Santa Rosa area once it was safe to do so.

The fires released so many particles into the air that the letter carriers had to wear masks while delivering their routes.

post office so residents on her route could pick up the mail. "I made sure when they came to the window that I was the one who gave them their mail," she said, "because the one time I didn't, my customer said, 'No, I want to see my carrier.' I try and stay in touch with my customers because I'm not just delivering mail; I'm part of a community."

Once carriers returned to their routes, residents were glad to see them again. "As things started to relax and areas started to open back up, I had people tell me that it was a return of a sense of normality," Salvadori said. "It brings back to them that it's all safe."

McGuire said that the residents of the retirement community on her route hugged her when she was back in the neighborhood. "I've had quite a few of them come up to me and tell me their experience, asked if I was OK, and just be very grateful that they still had a home to come to," she said.

Andersen said that for any branch dealing with a natural disaster, including a wildfire, communication between the union and management is key. "There was a lot of misinformation," he said. "It was a crisis and somebody might have said something and it was misconstrued. Before anyone did anything, you wanted to make sure."

He praised NBA Almario and Regional Administrative Assistant Calvin Brookins, who he said were able to get things accomplished at their level when there were conflicting messages at the local level. "Once I found the right person to talk to, I got stuff done," Andersen said. **PR**

