

California wildfires take toll on carriers

With increasing regularity, news outlets report on wildfires in California, so it's easy to overlook their severity unless you live there. The wildfires that cut a path of destruction through California this fall were the most destructive in the state's history. On the job and at home, letter carriers in the area felt the effects of these historic fires.

A total of 9,133 separate fires burned a record 1.2 million acres of California's

forests, grasslands and suburban areas last year, according to data from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the U.S. Forest Service. Authorities blamed lingering dryness from the state's long drought from 2012 to 2017, combined with unusually high winds, for the bad fire season.

The fires included the largest in the state's history, the 300,000-acre Thomas Fire that began in Ventura County in early December, and the Tubbs Fire—

the most destructive in California history with more than 5,000 structures destroyed in the state's wine country and the third deadliest with 22 lives lost. (For more information on the Tubbs Fire, see the December issue of *The Postal Record*.)

Southern California letter carriers are accustomed to wildfires, but that doesn't make the fires any easier to cope with. On the job, a wildfire can bring the risks of heat and smoke, as well as the disruption of closed roads and delivery to addresses of residents who have left the area or who have homes that have burned to the ground. Those carriers' post offices may be closed, requiring work farther from home or temporary reassignment.

After work, letter carriers face the same threats that other Californians experience in wildfires, including property damage and evacuation—or even the loss of homes.

Calvin Brookins, a regional administrative assistant in NALC's Region 1, which includes California, tracked the fires and their effects on letter carriers. Fortunately, no letter carriers lost their lives or suffered serious injury, but the fires consumed the homes of at least three city letter carriers and a rural carrier, Brookins said.

Paul Nelson was finishing improvements on the home he and his wife, Nella, had bought just four months earlier in Ventura when a friend called to ask if he was packed yet. Nelson, a 19-year carrier and Santa Barbara, CA Branch 290 member, had no idea that the massive Thomas Fire was headed his way.

"It was a nice place up in the hills—our dream home," he said. "We were pretty much getting it the way we wanted it. We were finishing the floors the night before."

After his friend alerted him of the fire, Nelson went outside and saw neighbors packing. Then firefighters and police arrived to announce a mandatory evacuation. He said he spotted a "substantial wall of fire" headed his way, driven by unseasonably strong Santa Ana winds.

"They were the worst winds I've ever known in Ventura," he said. "The fire was heading at us at 300 feet per minute," he later learned.

Nelson and his wife grabbed a few things and fled, expecting to come back the next day to an intact home. "We just drove off with a few essentials and thought we'd be back in the morning, but nope, that was it—gone forever," Nelson said. "I lost everything except the clothes on my back, a couple pairs of jeans in a suitcase, a passport and a few documents."

Seeing his dream home in ashes the next day, Nelson didn't come in to



Paul Nelson's house before (above) and after (below) the Thomas Fire consumed it.



work, but the following day he decided returning to work would help him get back to a normal life. “I thought, ‘At this point, what can I do? I might as well work—maybe work through it, get a little routine going.’ ” He took the following week off, though, to deal with insurance claims and living arrangements.

Nelson and his wife stayed with his mother-in-law nearby before renting a home from a friend. He has coped with the help of fellow letter carriers and patrons on his route.

“We’ve had a lot of support,” he said. Some patrons gave him handwritten notes of support. “Being on the same route for a long time, I was really touched.”

Save for a few items in his locker at work, Nelson lost nearly every uniform in the fire. Though he had just spent his uniform allowance, his supervisor arranged for an extension and several colleagues donated the balance of their allowances to help, along with providing moral support. “I had no problem getting uniforms back right away,” he said. “The station’s been awesome.”

At last report, an additional nine carriers had already lost homes in the fires that consumed parts of Northern California in October.

Beyond property damage, one of the biggest problems carriers encountered was smoke. “We had some carriers who had to be provided masks for them to move around,” Brookins said. Throughout the affected areas, the Postal Service provided masks and bottled water, and exempted carriers with medical conditions such as asthma from working in smoke-filled areas.

In Ojai, a town in Ventura County northwest of Los Angeles, smoke, fire



Above: Carriers at the Ojai office unloaded their vehicles after being instructed to return to the office.


Right: NALC President Fredric Rolando visited the Sylmar station on Dec. 16 to talk to carriers about how they were dealing with the aftermath of the fires.



and power outages shut down several postal facilities and caused some letter carriers to flee their homes, though none in the branch lost a home to fire. NALC members in Ojai are part of Tri-Valley, CA Branch 2902.

“In Ventura, Santa Paula and Ojai, carriers were adversely affected by smoke and the particulate matter in

the air caused by the fire, and either had to leave work or were unable to go on the street to deliver mail,” Branch 2902 President **Ray Hill** said. “In the Ojai office, mail delivery was suspended for four days during the peak holiday season, causing a backlog of letters, flats and parcels that took approximately 12 days to clean up.”



An image of the Thomas Fire as it burned through the Southern California hills.

On some days during the fire, Hill said, the carriers in Ojai went out in the morning hours to deliver mail but were instructed to return to the post office when the air quality became too poor for the carriers to continue working outdoors.

Hill said managers reported that some carriers were overly determined to do their jobs despite the smoke.

“There were a few instances where management literally had to instruct carriers that they must return to the office, as conditions were such that they should not be out delivering mail, sometimes to the chagrin of the carriers involved,” Hill said. “Kudos to all of the carriers who went way above and beyond the call of duty and continued to deliver the mail during the peak holiday season in spite of the terrible conditions caused by the fires.”

As the fire neared, Ojai postal employees were evacuated and sent to a Ventura post office to the south. On the date of the evacuation, several carriers were reported missing but later found safe and sound, Brookins said.

Also in early December, fires and roads ordered closed by firefighters temporarily shut down a post office and several routes north of San Diego, affecting city carriers belonging to Escondido, CA Branch 2525. Another post office north of Los Angeles, the Sylmar Post Office, lost power and had to shut its doors. Carriers in both areas also

had to deal with the threat of smoke.

The problems at the Sylmar Post Office, whose carriers are members of Branch 2902, caused suspension of delivery on several routes for nearly a week. NALC President Fredric Rolando visited the Sylmar station on Dec. 16 to see firsthand how letter carriers in California were dealing with the aftermath of the disaster.

“The letter carriers in Southern California dealt with the emergency just as we would expect,” Rolando said. “They rose to the occasion by looking out for their patrons and each other and getting their jobs done regardless of the difficulties—even when some were affected by the fires at home.”

“They are a great group of carriers,” Hill said, “and I’m really glad that President Rolando was able to brighten their day and boost their morale with his Saturday visit to their office.”

Even if their post offices were not directly touched by fire, many letter carriers throughout Southern California had to contend with fires threatening their own neighborhoods and road closures or traffic congestion brought on by fires and firefighting efforts, spreading the chaos to postal facilities across the region. The fires caused mail delays in several areas.

Fire even threatened the outskirts of central Los Angeles and caused the closing of a freeway, Interstate 405, as well as other major roads. Several

dozen carriers were unable to get to work as a result.

Though the fires are finally out and this historic fire season over, the misery hasn’t ended for California. A torrent of rain in a burned-out area, where trees and vegetation were no longer anchoring the soil, caused major mudslides in the Montecito area of Santa Barbara County in January. As this *Postal Record* went to press, at least 20 lives were reported lost in the mud slides.

The Tri-Counties Central Labor Council has established a disaster relief fund to help area union members affected by the fires. To donate, send a check made out to “Labor Community Services” and send it to 816 Camarillo Springs Road, Suite G, Camarillo, CA 93012. For more information, go to centralcoastlabor.org.

Donations to help postal employees affected by the fires 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 significantly damaged by natural disasters or house fires. 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. **PR**