

Forester's Log: Solstice Storm

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The Forester's Log is a monthly column published in newspapers and magazines primarily in the American west. Stuever is a forester in the American Southwest. She can be reached at sse@nmia.com.

On the shortest, midsummer night, where enormous redwood trees tickle low-lying clouds, dry lightning filled the northern California skies. Between the Pacific Coast and the Nevada border roughly 6,000 strikes ignited 2,000 fires. Flames erupted in the dry, windy conditions months earlier than the normal fire season.

Fire fighters filled the airwaves requesting support, only to learn that their usual sources of mutual aid were battling their own fires. Akin to the triage process of mass casualty events such as train wrecks, fire managers prioritized resources to protect lives and property. Throughout the region, rural home owners and land managers spent long hours and days responding to fire threats before reinforcements arrived. The Mendocino Redwood Company even hired contract fire engines, crews and bulldozers to make sure their otherwise 'low-priority' timber land received immediate attention.

Within days, firefighters were streaming in from across the country. Over the next month more than 25,000 emergency responders from California and forty other states, as well as several countries, would populate the fire lines and support camps. My assignment was in Mendocino County working with the state firefighting agency, CAL FIRE on 129 fires within their State Responsibility Area.

Now, nearly a month since the storm, the Mendocino Unit Lightning Complex has contained all the fires, which totaled just under 55,000 acres. Throughout northern California, over 900,000 acres have burned. Dozens of fires still challenge firefighters.

Store fronts, marquees, and road right-a-ways are plastered with signs and messages thanking firefighters; frequent honks and handshakes demonstrate sincere appreciation of our response. From my side of the fence, we are just doing our job; albeit in triple digit temperatures breathing smoky air day after day. Though this may be how we earn our paycheck, the encouragement is welcome.

It is, however, the communities that deserve recognition. People have stepped up in a million ways with a million sacrifices to help their neighbors, their friends, total strangers, and themselves.

Volunteer firefighters are obvious heroes. An assistant chief in Little River shared one tale. Spearheading suppression efforts on a fire in his district, he kept calling for help. Each time apparatus headed out his way, they would find another fire, or a different section of the fire he was working on. It was well into the second day before he had a chance to turn command of the home-threatening blaze to the state department. Catching limited sleep he remained with the incident insuring the safety of his crews and equipment.

Other volunteers in the county stayed on fires for weeks. Another volunteer postponed his own wife's memorial service while he insured his elderly neighbors were safe from immediate fire threats.

Residents with dozers and excavators quickly scratched fire lines to protect the structures in their neighborhoods. On each ridgetop and in each valley, neighbors developed communication strategies to coordinate possible evacuation and fire defense.

One of the biggest challenges was getting accurate information to residents and visitors. With smoke everywhere, knowledge of where fires were actually burning was essential for everyone. The media rose to the call. Local papers carried extensive reports, but area radio stations really shined. Station managers would take phone calls in the middle of the night, and groggily head to their stations to make public service announcements. Radio announcers gave frequent updates and kept in constant communication with fire information officers to insure listeners knew what was happening. Even incident personnel found the radio station updates informative.



Businesses donated goods and services; cooks fed volunteers; service station patrons bought gas for fire trucks; therapists treated sore necks and backs; stylists cut hair; neighbors kept watch over the elderly; the list goes on and on. Everywhere, someone was reaching out to someone else.

In an event steeped in unprecedented superlatives, "Thank You" has become the common salutation.



Photo by Peter Armstrong