

FIGHTING FIRES TOGETHER

As wildfires raged on in several states last summer, some reiners found themselves in the direct path of the flames while others banded together to help.

Article by *Katie Navarra*

Blake Cadigan is running heavy equipment to assist with cleanup from the Creek Fire near Shaver Lake, California. As he looks around to survey the damage, the charred rubble is a stark reminder of the blazing inferno which he found himself near more than once.

To date, the Creek Fire is the fourth-largest single fire in California's history. It's burned about 380,000 acres since igniting on Sept. 4; after a hard-fought two-month battle, the fire was 96% contained as of early December.

"The weather system inside the inferno [had] winds pushing flames so fast and hot that many livestock got caught in its path," said Cadigan, who runs an equine transportation company and operates Evolution Quarter Horses with fiancée Grace Angelos, a non pro reiner. "A herd of 200 cattle were running down the road trying to escape. They were running on nubs because the fire made the blacktop so hot it burned off their hooves."

Reiners worked together last year when they found themselves and their friends in the path of wildfires out West.

COURTESY OF BLAKE CADIGAN



Rampant wildfires in states like California produced blankets of smoke and flames that illuminated the sky with an orange glow.

Using the couple's four-horse weekender trailer, Cadigan volunteered his time to navigate rugged terrain roads with fires raging on both sides to help rescue stock. There were times the fire was so close, he was surprised authorities even let him in. All told, he moved 1,000-plus animals with his own equipment.

"One road had such steep switchbacks, the fenders came off the trailer, the bottom got scraped up and the axels are bent. The trailer is completely trashed; I'm not even sure how we're going to haul our horses [Smarties Candy, New Wimp In Town and HA Rey Mobster] next summer," he said.

Cadigan is used to driving into

the fire when others are fleeing. He began coordinating evacuation efforts for wildfires across the area in 2015, and on average, he said he helps out with 10-15 operations each year.

In 2016, Cadigan was honored with a community service award for livestock evacuation during the Soberanes Fire in Carmel, California. In addition to the Creek Fire, he led coordinated evacuations from the 2020 Carmel and River fires, too.

Fighting fires is a family tradition for Cadigan; he attended wildfire school and several generations of his family have served as firefighters. Although he and his wife are accustomed to

experiencing the heat of wildfires, the Creek Fire burned too close to home — only 25 miles away.

The valley was soaked in with smoke, making it impossible to ride. The couple was even forced to install duct work and fans to make sure their horses were breathing in clean air in the barn. Knowing how lucky they are to be spared from the flames, they've taken the financial burden in stride as best they can. Now they're working to establish a nonprofit organization to help offset the thousands of dollars they personally invest in evacuation efforts.

"It was the worst year for loss of livestock in California in years," Cadigan said. "We're not sure how

COURTESY OF BLAKE CADIGAN



When non pro reiner Sally Berg left to attend her son's baseball tournament, the CalWood Fire was not a direct threat to her home and barn in Longmont, Colorado. As she struggled to find a way home around road closures, her husband called to say the flames had jumped the highway and were headed for their property. Berg's friends sprang into action to evacuate her horses. After a nerve-racking wait, Berg received news that crews were able to stop the fire just 300 yards from her home.

we're going to do this for next summer, but it makes me feel good to be helping someone out."

Close Call

In Longmont, Colorado, non pro reiner Sally Berg of Barn 66 LLC faced off against the CalWood Fire.

Berg was attending her son's baseball tournament in Frisco 105 miles from home. At about 11:30 a.m., she received a call from a neighbor saying there appeared to be significant smoke west of the Foothills ridgeline near her home.

Berg called the local fire department to check in, and they assured her all was OK. She also checked in with her husband, Justin, who headed home early from

LEFT & RIGHT: COURTESY OF SALLY BERG

hunting at a nearby farm to check on their daughter, dogs and horses.

Believing nothing was wrong, Berg settled in to watch the remainder of her son's game, checking Twitter for fire updates. A half-hour later, she learned mandatory evacuation orders were in place just a few miles from her home, and her home was now located in a "be prepared to evacuate" zone.

"I knew Justin's truck had a drawer system in the bed and was not capable of hauling a gooseneck trailer, so I decided to leave the game early in my truck, just in case I needed to hook up the trailer and evacuate the horses," Berg said. "I quickly arranged a ride home for

my son, and then raced the fire home for the one-hour-and-40-minute drive."

Constant updates from Justin came in, and she soon learned the winds jumped up to 50 mph, blowing right at their place. The fire then crested the last ridge to the west of their property. As the fire raced down the ridge, it engulfed a neighborhood of 19 homes just on the other side of the highway.

Berg told Justin to start putting halters on their four horses so they'd be ready to move as soon as she arrived. Unfortunately, only a few miles from home, she was stopped by the authorities, who refused her entry through a road closure.

“Thank you to the brave men and women fighting this fire, my family, my fabulous husband, all of my friends who expressed concern, our invaluable horse community and everyone else who helped address this very scary situation.” —Sally Berg

Just as she learned she would not be allowed to get to her property and help evacuate the horses, Justin called to say the fire jumped the highway and engulfed their neighbor’s home to the north — about 300 yards from their barn.

“Justin — and this is when he looked up at the huge plume of smoke — yelled, ‘God, I could use a little help down here!’” Berg recalled.

Time was running out. Berg and her husband agreed that, if they could not quickly find someone already inside the road closures to bring a trailer, Justin would have to cut their fences to allow the horses to escape, and then quickly evacuate himself, their daughter and their dogs.

“This is when I panicked,” she recalled. “After some hysterical calls to NRHA Professional Ryan Rushing, my vets Jamie Yurek and Grant Finley, and my neighbor Gedeon LaFarge, we had multiple volunteers to bring a trailer to evacuate our four reiners.

“Carolyn Elam was the angel that arrived, and helped Justin and Gedeon get the horses trailered and evacuated ... literally at the exact moment [Justin] grabbed his tools and was headed to cut down our fences.”

Berg eventually found her own way home through a maze of backroads clogged with people trying to take pictures of the fire. She hooked up her trailer and evacuated the neighbors’ two

miniature horses, along with Barn 66’s cat, Apollo.

Rushing and his wife, Amy, invited Berg to stay at their ranch in Fort Collins while Justin took the kids to his parents’ home in Boulder. The Rushings made Berg dinner and offered comforting company while she awaited news of whether or not the house and barn were burned. She was relieved to learn the buildings were intact.

The fire burned through the night. It was a harrowing 24 hours before it was clear that crews fighting the nearby Lefthand Canyon Fire, with a little assist from a change in wind direction, were able to stop the fire — less than 300 yards from the Bergs’ facility.

With the fire abated, the mandatory evacuation order was lifted two days later. Once Berg had her horses back safe at home, she thanked all those who helped in a heartfelt Facebook post.

“Thank you to the brave men and women fighting this fire, my family, my fabulous husband, all of my friends who expressed concern, our invaluable horse community and everyone else who helped address this very scary situation,” she wrote.

On the Outskirts

Gilroy, California-based NRHA Professional Jesus “Chuy” Chavez knows a thing or two about evacuating during a fire. Last year, he was just a few miles from his

Cielo Hills Ranch when he learned it was in an evacuation zone.

Chavez was hauling 15 horses back from a show. NRHA Two Million Dollar Rider Jordan Larson offered space at his barn for a layover until the area was clear. In 2020, Chavez’s ranch was on the edge — within a warning evacuation zone — but not directly in the fire’s range.

“We had everything on standby, but luckily it was not super close,” he said.

NRHA Professional Tracer Gilson, who lives in Central California near Fresno, counted himself as one of the lucky ones since the fires stayed 50-60 miles from his ranch. Still, smoke hung in the river bottom area for about 60 days, he said, creating enough haze that it was possible to look directly at the sun without squinting.

“We missed a few days of work, but mostly it just kind of smelled like a campfire,” he said. “We were fortunate enough that if it smelled a little smoky, we could turn on the fans in the covered arena and we were good.”

Since his place was relatively safe, Gilson housed as many horses as he could for those who were forced to evacuate, though space was limited with a barn full of broodmares and recipient mares. The local agricultural community collectively pitched in to help each other out, he said.

Although Gilson was well out of



The devastation of wildfires reaches far beyond the day the fire is extinguished. It will take years for the area to recover.

range of this year’s fires, several of his friends — especially those in the mountain towns — were affected.

“They used to let people graze their cattle, and so there never were really many wildfires there,” Gilson said. “Since that’s no longer allowed, when the fire got started, there was so much dead timber and undergrowth that once it took off, it was going to be a chore to control.”

Fires have been too close for comfort near NRHA Professional Tom Foran’s ranch in Los Angeles County, California. Usually, the fires are triggered by the Santa

Ana winds — 50-60 mph sustained gusts that pull down power poles and electrical wires, often sparking fires. The winds propel the burning embers a mile in a matter of seconds, and then a whole region can quickly ignite.

“Power companies cut power to certain zones to keep more fires from starting,” Foran explained. “Not only do we lose refrigeration, but I lose my cell service because it is dependent on the power in my house. We are literally in the dark.”

In these situations, Foran hikes to the highest point on the ranch to keep an eye on fire. When it looks like the flames are headed

his way, he gets out. Two years ago, he evacuated 35 horses himself.

Every region of the country has its disasters to worry about — from tornadoes to hurricanes to fires. Foran commended his fellow reiners of all levels for typically having an emergency plan in place, which helps keep natural disasters from becoming a catastrophe.

“At least with fire, you generally know it’s coming. If you have a plan, you can react,” he said. “We have good protocols in place with everything from water cannons to brush clearance to make [the ranch] as fireproof as possible.” ❖