

Sheltering-in-Place during “Nuns Fire”, Glen Ellen, CA

By Julie Atwood

In the middle of the “the morning after”, (Monday, October 9, 2017), I started a diary. I stopped making entries a few hours later, and never resumed— the magnitude of the events was just too great. I realized my “diary” was contained in several hundred text messages that were running conversations, commentary, updates, and sad/funny exchanges with friends. It’s the 21st century version of a disaster journal.

Here’s what happened, what I learned, and what I’ll do to be better prepared for...whatever.



Nuns Fire burns through
Atwood Ranch



Elizabeth
watches her
shed burn



UC Davis Student-VERT



Santa Rosa
thanks First
Responders

Our Experience

Planning for emergencies helped us, and many others, survive and save our animals and property. We were also fortunate, after the first night, that winds stayed calm and nights cool for the several days we were entirely without water for defense.

We had a plan for sheltering in place with our animals in the aftermath of an earthquake, landslide, or wildfire in the Mayacama hills above us. We had worked to make our partly covered metal arena, and the area surrounding it defensible and safe. However, we never planned for a firestorm blasting embers and debris in gale-force winds that felled burning trees and threw flaming branches like missiles.

Sunday, Oct 8, around 10 PM: I smelled smoke and, almost immediately, saw flames just a few hundred yards from our home. I called 911 as I ran then called the neighborhood phone tree contacts.

About five minutes later, the firefighters arrived. It happened that fast.

After stuffing our housecat, Poncho, into a crate and tossing all the go-bags into a car, we raced down to the barn and pastures. Horses were run off the hillsides into paddocks. Jax, the barn cat, scooted into his carrier.

Cats were placed in back of the SUV, buffered by ready-bags and gear. Horses were caught and trotted into the arena. With no time to set up pens, we separated the shod from the shoeless and hoped everyone worked out their differences and got along.

Troughs were filled to brimming, and we quickly sprayed the area to reduce dust and heat. Then, we took a moment to give a few quick pats to reassure horses – and humans.

Just when we thought we had everything covered, KABOOM! Trees began exploding; a blizzard of flaming embers, sheet metal and branches started raining down everywhere from distant properties uphill.

We moved cats into the arena with our mule, Elizabeth. Hoping for mule karma... we ran for hoses, and began what became hours of nonstop defense of trees, barn, shop, gas tanks, trucks and cars.

The fire quickly jumped the highway, overrunning the pastures on Dunbar Road. Fortunately, there was little to burn and plenty of room for the horses, cattle and sheep to move away. Firefighters stopped the fire just inches from the house, but we lost the barn, trailer and truck, and all the feed.

The next 6 or 7 hours are a blur. When the sky started to lighten, and the wind eased a bit, we checked on everyone, got some panels up to separate the elderly broodmares and control feeding, uncovered the cats, and chugged some water. The sky was lighter, but flames were everywhere and the smoke and ash were choking.

We had been told our house and our neighbor, the historic Beltane Ranch Inn, were gone. We focused on caring for the animals and fending off fire—until the water ran out. Pump, gravity-flow line, AND generator were all damaged by falling power poles and trees. The

backups to the backups became useless. We were now at the mercy of weather and luck.

For 3 more days and nights, we prayed for no wind, did not sleep, kept anxious watch on burning trees and smoldering buildings, and cared for the animals.

Simply communicating became exhausting. Messages from concerned friends and pleas for help were overwhelming, particularly when people continued to try calling. Texts were dropped repeatedly due to multiple incoming calls. Emails didn't load. No Internet meant we could not access much of the info being sent out by agencies. Local radio was a lifeline, but news was not always accurate.

Working with local veterinarian, Katy Wilson, we were able to coordinate safe evacuation and welfare checks behind the fire lines in Lovall Valley and Glen Ellen.

In Kenwood, the FEMA-certified Swede's Feeds team of Aspen Meyers, Mike Scheffer, and Dena Agliolo took on the role of coordinating neighbors who stayed and cared for animals in their evacuation area. Together, we worked with Sonoma County Animal Services, (SCAS), to coordinate care and calls.

Even the North Valley Animal Disaster, (NVADG), which can provide mutual aid assistance to agencies outside Butte County, was unable to respond because they were deployed to three fires burning at once in Butte and nearby counties. Our teammates had their own hands full!

The staff and volunteers at our county agencies and mutual aid resources, especially Marin Humane, did an incredible job under worst-case circumstances.

A problem that grew more serious each day was the growing number of people trying to "help" by feeding animals. Lack of communication and coordination resulted in animal welfare personnel responding to owner requests only to find animals were already evacuated or tended. Sonoma County Animal Services Dispatchers received incomplete information from convergent community members that often conflicted with the calls from owners. And, equines and

ruminants, vulnerable to suffering stress colic, were put at risk.

After 3 days, much coordination, and help from Sonoma County Animal Services and the UCD Student Veterinary Emergency Response Team, (s-VERT), we were finally able to get our evac team IN with more generators, water and tools, and send our animals OUT, to our Red Bluff ranch. Without worries about our equines and cats, we were then able to be more responsive and active in providing aid to the community.

For the next 10 days, as more resources from around the state and country flooded in, the emphasis shifted to COORDINATING welfare checks, limiting activities of untrained volunteers not working under unified command, reuniting animals with owners, and providing resource information.

Updates often occurred multiple times in one day, and without access to Incident Command briefings, gathering accurate information often

required hours of texting and slow emails to obtain, then share current updates.

Bright Spots

- Day 3: Seeing the whole UCD VERT, including Dr. John Madigan and Jim Green, and, Andy Douglass and Kevin Davis from SCAS, escorting our friends, Mike and Catherine,

with our supplies and equipment into the ranch. (Our driveway was sandwiched between 2 roadblocks, 2.5 miles apart.)

We all enjoyed a giant group hug, followed by “The Great Goat Rescue”, which involved 2 of our neighbor’s lonely goats that decided they preferred humans to cows, and trekked across the charred pasture to join us. Dr. Madigan turned this into a teachable



moment and soon a makeshift pen was built, goats herded, fed and watered. The vet students congratulated themselves on another successful emergency response. Then, we loaded up equines and cats for the trip up north to fresh air and peacefulness. What a relief!

- Day 4: Repairing pump, filling water tanks, restoring ability to fight fire just in time for return of hot winds. Connecting a small generator at the barn so we could keep phones charged more quickly, boil water in electric kettle, and MAKE COFFEE!
- Day 7: (1 week from first night of fire) Hot shower, minestrone, lasagna and HUGS at the Glen Ellen Fire Station. (You know it's bad when a fire crew roars in to say "We heard you need a shower...")
- Day 8: Koi Rescue and Evacuation with the UCD s-VERT and Center for Aquatic Biology and Aquaculture, (CABA), and SCAS. We received an order at 8am to be ready to deploy in 1 hour! The experience was fascinating, beautiful, surreal, and provided a much-needed break from being on the front lines at our ranch.

Our team captured huge koi from the wreckage of stunning gardens and ponds, transported them in multiple trucks in a brilliant, but simple, makeshift aerated tank system. We evacuated them in a convoy, (with 3 burned kitties, as well), to the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine Teaching Hospital. For "the rest of the story", [SEE VIDEO](#)

- Day 11: CAL FIRE paid a visit to tell us they we were confident we were out of imminent danger. At around 6pm, power was restored to the barn and arena. With water and lights on, we made things more secure without all-night vigils.
- DAY 13-14: We attended BARTA International Conference on Animals in Disasters [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
- Day 15: We slept in our own beds and woke up to blue sky!
- Day 16: Power restored to the house. Now, I can actually see the

dust and ash. And do laundry. And be thankful I have a home and barn. And wait for the Acorn Woodpeckers to return...