

Sonoma County firefighters and aid workers rally to help Los Angeles in its time of need

Press Democrat

It's been seven years and three months since Annie Barbour lost her Coffey Park house in the Tubbs Fire. On Tuesday afternoon, as fierce winds fed similarly destructive wildfires in Southern California, her phone started blowing up.

"You know how close Coffey Park is," said Barbour, referring to the northwest Santa Rosa neighborhood where over 1,440 homes were lost in the 2017 Tubbs Fire.

"Everybody's feeling it, and everybody wants to help in some way," she said of the tight-knit neighborhood that became a model of grassroots postfire recovery. "They want these people to not be struggling like we struggled."

Barbour is in a good position to pitch in. Since 2020, she's been the Northern California coordinator for United Policyholders, an advocacy group that takes the side of fire survivors who find themselves struggling with unexpected gaps in their insurance coverage.

In addition to the havoc they're causing in Los Angeles County, the latest, wind-driven megafires serve as a haunting parallel to the 2017 inferno that devastated the North Bay, where a half-dozen major, named fires and an equal number of smaller ones broke out across four counties in one fearsome night, destroying more than 6,000 homes and killing 40 people, with the heaviest toll in Sonoma County.

Just as local firefighters urgently sought mutual aid then from their Southern California counterparts, noted Santa Rosa Division Chief Fire Marshal Paul Lowenthal, "now Northern California is supporting them as they respond to multiple, large-scale fires down there."

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As of Wednesday afternoon, Sonoma County had sent three firefighter strike teams to battle the Southern California wildfires. Each strike team consists of five fire engines, a leader and up to four firefighters.

The first two strike teams were dispatched overnight Tuesday. A third departed Wednesday afternoon. Local fire agencies sending firefighters and equipment include: Sonoma County Fire; Santa Rosa Fire; Rancho Adobe Fire; Gold Ridge Fire; Petaluma Fire Department; Sonoma Valley Fire; Sebastopol Fire, Monte Rio, Northern Sonoma County and Napa City Fire.

Chief Shepley Schroth-Cary of the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District said that roughly 60 firefighters and 15 engines from the region are currently in Southern California. Responding to calls for mutual aid he added, is part of a firefighter's job.

"It's a burden, it's an ask. While it's part of the job, I am still asking people to leave their families."

Schroth-Cary said each firefighter and leader, particularly those who battled wildfires in the North Bay several years ago, have a strong sense of what to expect in Southern California. They also remember all outside help received during local wildfires, he said.

"We recall all the help we've received in this county," Schroth-Cary said. "And that certainly motivates us as we head down."

The two strike teams that were dispatched overnight Tuesday were sent to the Palisades Fire just northwest of Los Angeles. The team sent Wednesday afternoon was dispatched to the Eaton Fire, which is threatening Altadena, Pasadena and other communities.

Sonoma Valley Fire Chief Stephen Akre said a fourth strike team, comprised firefighters and equipment from Humboldt and Mendocino counties, was being organized Wednesday afternoon. That strike team will be directed by two team leaders from Sonoma Valley Fire, Akre said.

"This is what makes our county, our operational area so special," Akre said. "Everyone participates. We've got volunteer agencies, we've got career agencies, everybody gives as much as they can to help out other communities when they're in need."

Akre said the fires that ravaged the North Coast several years ago, including 2018, 2019 and 2020, are “still very fresh in our minds.”

Meanwhile, Bay Area aid organizations like United Policyholders and After The Fire USA, a recovery-based nonprofit that sprung up in the aftermath of the Tubbs Fire, jumped into action behind the scenes.

In the days after the Tubbs Fire, Barbour recalls, she made three different trips to the Local Assistance Center, or LAC, in a suite of offices on Mendocino Avenue in Santa Rosa.

“The DMV’s there, you can get your birth certificate, death certificate — all that kind of stuff to start piecing your life back together.”

Fast forward seven years and three months: Barbour is now will soon travel to Southern California to train United Policyholder workers at the Local Assistance Centers now springing up beside recently fire-ravaged areas.

“What we don’t want is for survivors to make the new survivor feel recovery is out of their reach. We’ve got to be cautious.”

Barbour has worked numerous fires for United Policyholders, harnessing her skills and experiences to help new survivors. It never gets easier, she said.

“There is no callus,” she said. “It’s weird. This is something you pack in your suitcase every day. It’s part of who you are now.”

Jennifer Gray Thompson, CEO of After The Fire USA, held a call Wednesday morning with a half dozen human resource directors from Southern California companies, educating them on how to help employees who’d lost homes.

“We directed them to immediate service organizations like United Policyholders, and talked to them about warning their employees we talked to them about warning their employees against being in such a hurry to secure a contractor that they overpay. We’ve seen a lot of that.

Her nonprofit never charges communities. “The cost for our services,” she said, “is you gotta help us on

the next one. If you can.”

It works, she said, “because we’ve lived it, we know the trauma of it, and we’re very respectful.”

Matt Windrem, Sonoma County Fire District’s EMS division chief, called mutual aid an important part of statewide fire fighting efforts. The fires in Southern California, occurring outside of what was traditionally considered fire season, are an example of how wildfires have become a ‘year-round’ occurrence, he said.

“We are glad to be able to participate in a (mutual aid) system that works so well throughout the state,” Windrem said.

The trio of fires burning in the Los Angeles area have destroyed more than 2,000 structures, killed at least five people and forced tens of thousands across the county from their homes.

Windrem said the scale and scope of such wildfires are such that no fire agency, not even those the size of the Los Angeles County and city fire departments, can go it alone.

“The scope and scale of some of these incidents, especially when driven by extreme weather or extreme conditions, can overwhelm even the largest agency,” Windrem said. “Nobody can do it alone, solely. We have to be able to rely on assistance.”

Maintaining the level of staffing, equipment and personnel necessary to handle “the worst case scenario” all year round would be completely unsustainable, he said.