



Their Livelihood Set Ablaze

When record-breaking fires swept across California, cattlemen banded together to make a difference.

by **Kayla Jennings**

A smoky haze consumed the sky for days preceding what would be the darkest two weeks of the year. The news rang out regarding fast-moving, intense fires — unlike anything the region had seen in decades. As wind gusts topped more than 60 mph, the smoke in the distance was soon not so distant at all.

Evacuation protocol was in place as the orange blazes of the Tubbs Fire advanced toward Santa Rosa, Calif.

Families fled their homes, knowing they might never return. Business owners abandoned their livelihoods in order to escape. As for the agricultural community, fences were cut and



prayers were sent pleading for the well-being of the livestock that could not be rescued in time. The fires in and around Santa Rosa were a tragedy not easily forgotten.

Fire season

Each fall, much of California is at risk of severe fires. It is common for many acres of forest or pasture to be destroyed, along with some structures. Yet, with each spring comes new growth and the land repairs itself — almost always better than before.

This year the cycle was a bit more extreme. The fall 2017 fire season was the worst California has seen since the '60s. More than 1.5 million acres burned in the 9,000 wildfires that flared up statewide, resulting in 46 fatalities and 11,953 damaged or destroyed structures — the most in the state's history. To date the total cost of suppression is \$701,844,181.

It took more than 277,800 courageous personnel to fight these fires, among them Hereford breeder Jim McDougald. Currently the division chief, McDougald has served with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) for 24 years and is in charge of law enforcement and protection planning for the Fresno Kings Unit.

In addition to his involvement with CAL FIRE, McDougald is president of the California-Nevada Hereford Association. The fourth-generation cattleman grew up raising registered Herefords and commercial cattle on a ranch which has been home to his family since 1889.

The McDougald family used to run cattle in the High Sierra Nevada Mountain Range on



CAL FIRE Division Chief Jim McDougald is also president of the California-Nevada Hereford Association.

forest permits, but when the stocking rates on the permits decreased, their herd size followed suit. The other side of the family owned a sawmill where McDougald worked during college until logging declined, as well.

At that point neither of his passions were viable career options. A desire to properly manage land led the avid outdoorsman to CAL FIRE.

"It is all about doing things to reduce the risk and damage of fire to the landscape," he says. "But at the same time, we need fire for the landscape. Learning how to put fire back in the landscape in a safe manner to reduce fuels and make the forest healthier is what I get excited about."

He says the change in the landscape across the state due to increased population and decreased grazing land has offset the balance in certain areas. Tree mortality has skyrocketed due to numerous years of drought, providing more fuel for fires to thrive. Although firefighters are on the front lines of these hazards, not even a seasoned veteran like McDougald could have predicted the devastation in 2017.

"Last year would have been the most impactful fire season in California," he says. "The most homes were destroyed and the most people were killed due to these fires in California's history."

McDougald says the fires in Sonoma and Napa Counties were driven specifically by wind. Especially challenging was the area around Santa Rosa — seven fires culminated in a single, massive fire almost overnight.

"You have got to stop the forward movement of these fires to stop them from destroying more homes and more ranches," he explains. "That was one of the most difficult things there. Because fires were coming together, one place may be safe today, but it would be impacted by fire tomorrow coming from different directions — which is not normal."

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Fortunately, there were agricultural areas in the midst of forests and residential zones that provided space where firemen could work. Grazed land or green orchards create fuel breaks in themselves, so fire will not completely consume those areas. "Ranchers also provided water resources to us," he adds. "They all have ponds or lakes that we can use during these fires, so there is a lot of value in ranching and cattle, and even farming, that we can use to put these fires out. Having those water sources is huge."

In turn, more emphasis is placed on working with ranchers continually to preserve their livestock and land. "We always do everything we can to save rangeland in these fires," McDougald says. "When a fire is that big, your priorities are always life and property. We work with landowners and ranchers, when it is safe, to get their cattle out or to a safe place. At times we will even haul water to the livestock."

Close to home

McDougald has always worked tirelessly protecting the property complete strangers. That is, until the Tubbs fire.

"This was the first time I had ever worked on a fire where I knew the ranchers that were being

impacted," he says. "I have known the Mickelsons forever. They are a part of the California-Nevada Hereford Association, so fighting a fire on their property was just a different connection that I had ever had before."

Jim Mickelson and his family own and operate Sonoma Mountain Herefords, a registered Hereford cattle outfit that produces replacement females and bulls for commercial cattlemen. The Hereford heritage extends many generations, as his wife's family has had Hereford cattle since 1904. The longtime Sonoma County residents also own a vineyard and Jerry and Don's Yager Pump and Well.

What began as a routine Sunday afternoon in early October turned into an evening that threatened their home and livelihood for the next week — at least.

"It started on a Sunday evening in Napa," Mickelson recalls. "We had low humidity and high north winds, which is perfect for fire conditions."

The intensity of the nearby Napa fires pulled a lot of resources from Sonoma County. Before those resources could be replenished, fires sprang up in Sonoma County, reaching the Mickelsons' ranch around 10 p.m.

"I went out to move the cattle to the barn areas,



Four people died and 1,200 homes were destroyed as the Tubbs fire swept through the Coffey Park neighborhood in Santa Rosa, Calif.

which were protected by the vineyards,” Mickelson says. “That night there was no less than five or six fires burning in Sonoma County. Within two or three hours, it traveled from the country into the town of Santa Rosa and burnt right around 1,000 homes that night.”

There was much more fire than there were resources to extinguish it. Extreme winds and high temperatures fueled the blazes as they spread nearly uncontrollably in the middle of the night.

“So many people lost everything,” Mickelson says. “So many people woke up with just a few minutes to get the keys to their car, their phone and just the clothes they had on to escape the fire. The fires were moving so fast and were so intense people were waking up at two or three in the morning with neighbors pounding on their door, or someone calling and saying, ‘hey, you’ve got to get out and hurry up.’ It was truly unbelievable to experience what went on.”

The Mickelsons evacuated on Sunday and were at risk of losing their home until Wednesday. The smoke was so thick aerial firefighting was delayed up to four days. Fire fighters flocked from all across the western United States. Among them was a dear friend — Jim McDougald.

“Everyone says it is a small world. Jim is pretty high up in CAL FIRE, so when there is a major fire, he is usually there,” Mickelson says. “When I knew Jim was coming to our area, I offered for him to stay at our house. I knew if he was there, our house would not burn.”

Mickelson saw tremendous value in having McDougald on site. He credits his friend’s livestock background for an inherent “drive and know-how” to protect livestock, as well as structures. When the Mickelsons returned home, they found their livestock and structures were indeed secure.

The aftermath

The fire affected the region in tremendous ways. Mickelson’s pump and well business has been busier than ever, rebuilding water system infrastructure for the wells at many lost home sites. It was nothing like he had ever seen.

“We had a fire very similar to this fire in 1964. It burned much of the same area,” he remembers. “The difference between ‘64 and now is the number of structures that have been built in the county that did not exist in 1964. Normally when we have a fire, there are enough resources to deal with putting the fire out. This fire was more than one fire. It happened under ideal conditions — high winds, low humidity, and warm weather. You can’t fight a fire that is being pushed by 20 to 75 mph winds. You just can’t stop it.”

McDougald notes the fire will help the land in the long-run. “However, in the short-term it



Marcia and Jim Mickelson, owners of Sonoma Mountain Herefords, had to evacuate their ranch during the Tubbs fire.

was devastating,” he says. “Ranchers lost all the rangeland they would have had in the fall, so they were forced to feed everything or sell out. When nothing was left and all the fences are burned down, it left a huge impact on those ranchers.”

The fires also had a crushing impact on wine production.

“Growers and wineries suffered significantly,” he says. In October, wine country is in the midst of harvest. It was impossible, Mickelson says, for most employees to travel to work because of mandatory road closures and evacuations. Still, the most damaging factor for many wineries was smoke damage to the fruit. Many unharvested grapes that escaped the flames suffered from smoke taint, ruining their flavor.

Beyond the agricultural industry, the fires affected every facet of the economy. Rent and real estate prices, already at all-time highs from an on-going housing shortage, have gone through the roof.

While architectural firms and similar businesses may be making a good profit right

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now, general home maintenance and specialty service outfits lost upward of 35% of their revenue overnight. In some cases, those businesses had to close their doors.

"It was the first time I had ever seen entire communities gone," McDougald observes. "Most years it will burn a house here or a house there, but this time entire subdivisions were gone."

CAL FIRE employees were in the area for more than a month afterward helping with suppression repair. After the dust and ash settled, the goodwill and positive outlook of community members perhaps outshined the fires.

"It is hard to describe," McDougald says. "The people that live there are just amazing people. You'd be somewhere and these people that had just lost everything were telling you thank you for coming."

While many community members and volunteer firemen played a role in helping responders, the division chief says ranchers possibly played the largest role in the effort. Ranchers are valued partners to firemen because of their extensive resources and geographical knowledge.

"They bring a lot to the table," he says. "There were numerous ranchers who provided knowledge of the area that was an asset in putting out these fires. They are a great resource, and they are extremely valuable. They really help out all their neighbors, and I don't think the neighbors realize the help they provide."

Picking up the pieces

It took a village to rise up from the ashes. One of Mickelson's many contributions was renting generators

to run wells used for livestock. "[Mickelson] is a huge part of the recovery in that area," McDougald praises. "Not only was he impacted, but he is also one of the biggest factors in the recovery. I can't tell you everything he did, but I saw him going up and down the road early in the morning until late at night helping people."

Mickelson and his family hauled hay and water wherever they could. Power companies quickly set out rebuilding infrastructure. Cattle and equine associations and feed companies provided aid to producers. The county fair opened its facilities for livestock and pets to seek shelter — and the list goes on.

Mickelson says around town there were local and volunteer firemen finding out their houses had burned while they were protecting other homes. "The community was amazing as far as helping out," he fondly describes. "It was just overwhelming to see the community support for helping people."

If it had not been for the hard work and dedication of firemen like Jim McDougald and residents like Jim Mickelson, there is no telling how much worse the devastation could have been. The fires are long gone now, the grass is growing back and the region is rebuilding. However, those several days in early autumn will be forever branded in the history of the Northern California community. **HW**