



the perfect storm

The recipe for disaster isn't always plagued by a lack of preparation, sometimes it's simply unavoidable thanks to Mother Nature. That was the case for Paradise, Calif., last November when the deadliest wildfire in the state's history ripped through the Sierra Nevada foothills.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Just an hour before the Camp Fire blazed into the Paradise community, Holly Foster drove through the peaceful town back to her family's cattle operation due south. A text message on Nov. 8, 2018, at 6:30 in the morning and the smell of smoke were the first warnings she received about the fire, but it wasn't until she saw the plume of smoke for herself that she fully understood the magnitude of it all.

"Once I got away from the foothills and saw how large the fire was, I realized we had bigger problems than me missing a day of work," Foster says about

her decision to turn around when she was headed to the Western Video Market office 70 miles north of the family homestead. "Because of all the steep canyons, it was difficult to gauge how quickly the fire was actually moving. That is probably why Paradise wasn't evacuating when I drove through it."

By 10 a.m., embers were hitting the ground around the barns and corrals of Robert Foster Ranch. At a spry 88 years old, Robert Foster was the only ally Holly had on the ranch.

"My brother was at our other ranch location up in



PHOTOS BY MIKE RUSHER

“There are little things we have done for years that keep us prepared for the fires that will inevitably come our way. We keep 100 feet of defensible space between all of our buildings and corrals by putting in fire breaks, trimming the grass and removing brush.”
— Holly Foster

the mountains about 70 miles northeast of our main facilities,” Holly says.

Lucky strike

The extreme drought conditions in the fall coupled with a plethora of dry fuel load created the perfect conditions for a raging wildfire. It was also why the Foster cattle had not been moved down from the mountains to their pasture in the foothills. The seasonal creeks the ranch depends on for stock water weren't flowing and the grass wasn't ready either.

“It was a blessing we had not moved our 350 head of cattle with their calves down here yet, or it would have been even more of a nightmarish situation for us,” Holly explains as she counts her blessings and remarks how some of their neighbors weren't that fortunate.

An estimated 153,000 total acres burned, with roughly 40,000 of that previously used for grazing. The topography of the area made the fire difficult to track, see and contain. It's only because of their years of preparation that the Fosters kept a majority of their structures intact.

“As ranchers and property owners, we were better prepared to handle this situation than other folks,” Holly explains. “We have the equipment and have dealt with fires before.”

Each spring, the Fosters spend significant time on fire mitigation practices. Fire breaks along the fences next to roadways served as a stopping point for the fingers of the Camp Fire that hit them.

Dozer trails spread throughout the pastures help with cattle movement across the rough terrain, but they served as fire break starting

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points for the firefighters pouring in from surrounding states.

Reinforcements

“It [the Camp Fire] was the largest I have ever seen and I have been a fireman for 30 years,” says Polk County Fire District No. 1 Captain Mike Rusher. “It was hundreds of miles wide. It was the most devastating thing I have ever seen.”

Called in from Oregon, Mike was one of many fire crews helping CAL FIRE. With another large fire raging in Malibu, Calif., the state’s resources were quickly depleted.

“Our main job was to secure residents still in town and search the homes,” Mike says, noting that very few buildings had more than the bare-bones of their foundation remaining. “After we got there on the third day of the fire, we were there for a total of 16 days, cutting fire lines and securing structures.”

The number of displaced animals continued to grow exponentially after the fire moved through town. Thousands of animals found refuge at the airport in Chico and Butte County Fairgrounds. However, Mike only recalls seeing a few hundred head of cattle in a kaleidoscope of colors grouped together, all appearing untouched by the flames.

“The fire was moving so fast that we couldn’t keep up with it, so we had to wait for it to come to us and our fire breaks,” Mike explains about the strategy to continuously direct the flames toward Orville Lake.

No rest for the weary

Holly and her father found themselves fighting the flames through the night on Nov. 8 as it enveloped their property.

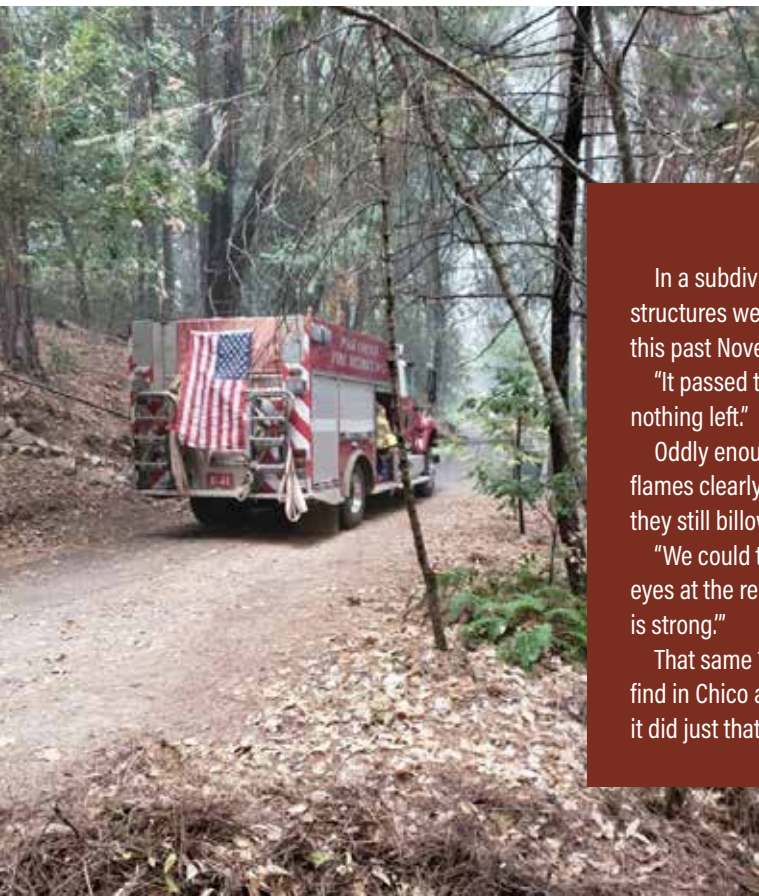
“The fire departments were overwhelmed with protecting the community and human lives,” Holly says. “We were pretty much on our own.”

The Fosters spent the better half of that afternoon in bulldozers. Robert reinforcing their existing fire breaks around the property and Holly directing the incoming fire agency bulldozers through the treacherous terrain of their pastures.

“We decided to stay on the ranch instead of evacuating because we knew as soon as we left they would not let us back in,” Holly says. “The fire burned our entire ranch, and it surrounded two of the residences. Only about 400 acres of the 4,000 were spared.”

A 100-year-old barn and accompanying structure built by Holly’s great-grandfather in the homesteading days was lost. Luckily, all four of the Foster family residences were still standing.

With the fire moving the length of a football field every second, it’s truly a miracle any piece of their ranch was saved.



America strong

In a subdivision of any size, 30-year firefighter Mike Rusher says maybe two of the structures were even marginally recognizable after the fire raged in Paradise, Calif., this past November.

“It passed through in about three hours,” Mike explains, “basically, there was nothing left.”

Oddly enough, hundreds of American flags remained unscathed in Paradise. The flames clearly licked at the tips of the flags hung on trees, poles and mailboxes, but they still billowed proudly almost entirely intact afterward.

“We could tell that nobody hung them up afterward,” Mike says as tears brim in his eyes at the remarks of the youngest member of his crew. “He said, ‘I guess America is strong.’”

That same 18-year-old fireman later bought the largest American flag he could find in Chico and hung it from their fire engine. He says “it will keep us safe.” Indeed, it did just that.

Mitigation

“Our grazing management is a big part of our fire control, we use it to reduce the dry fuel load,” Holly explains of the delicate nature of grazing the land they rely on completely for their winter feed supply.

Surrounding residents recognize the danger of leaving the dry fuel load to its own devices. These neighbors appreciate the view out their window of Foster cattle peacefully grazing on their property and the protection from harboring fire fuel the livestock provide.

“There are little things we have done for years that keep us prepared for the fires that will inevitably come our way,” Holly says. “We keep at least 100 feet of defensible space between all of our buildings and corrals by putting in fire breaks, trimming the grass and removing brush.”

A D6 Cat® creates the two-blade-wide fire break along their roadway fences. It’s a common sight in California, but some producers don’t have the rocky terrain the Fosters do, so they just till up the ground with a disc.

This was the first fire Holly needed to think about storing water reserves. The electrical company recently implemented a protocol to shut the power lines down in the event of high winds. This makes moving water impossible.

“As we plan for next year, we are looking at generators to pump water after the power is shut down and having more storage capacity,” Holly says. “When embers start coming in and getting under buildings, that’s when the danger really starts. It’s also when we need the water most.”

After the fires were officially extinguished on Nov. 25, the Fosters quickly made the decision to buy as much hay as they could find. And the miles upon miles of lost fencing is an ongoing process that may never truly end.

“We are so appreciative of everyone that stepped up and offered help,” Holly says with sincere gratitude to those near and far. “The ag community has truly been amazing.” **AJ**

Editor’s note: For information about resources available to cattlemen before, during and after a natural disaster, contact your local cooperative Extension agents or USDA Farm Service Agency office.

Get a game plan

by Kasey Brown, Angus Beef Bulletin associate editor

When disaster strikes, family must come first, says Louisiana State University Agricultural Center Extension Veterinarian Christine Navarre. A disaster kit that includes a week’s worth of food, water and batteries is the recommended minimum.

Cash is king before and during disaster recovery. If there is no electricity, that means credit cards won’t work when you need to purchase feed, fencing and fuel, Navarre says.

Your comprehensive game plan should include checklists to give organization to the chaos. Resources for what a checklist needs to include are available through your state’s extension agents.

Animals should be easily identifiable to prevent unintentional rustling. Taking pictures of your animals and equipment will make those tough insurance claim conversations later on much easier.

Navarre notes that a shared Facebook message asking for help can truly save lives. She adds that Facebook has also helped share recovery resources and ways for people to help.

An influx of volunteers and supplies can be overwhelming, a management plan will maximize these helping hands.

Biosecurity awareness after a disaster saves a significant amount of added grief. From fire ant contamination in donated hay to toxic water sources, always be aware of what your animals have access to, Navarre adds. And also have an idea of how to treat these animals if the food or water makes them sick.

If cattle are to remain on the ranch, know where they should be and have several routes to get feed and water to them.

Prepare for euthanasia, especially in areas with fire. Know who’s going to do it and how, she says. Know what to do for disposal and who to contact.

Disasters are unpredictable and devastating. Being prepared can help reduce the chaos.

