

Escaping a Wild Fire: A nightmare for llama and alpaca owners

By Eric Hoffman

The day started peacefully enough. I filled my pickup with old boards and headed to the County dump. Three miles from home I stopped at a gas station. As the numbers showing the cost of my purchase raced by in an excruciating blur, and the gallons increased in slow motion, I diverted my gaze to the verdant coastal forest that is part of my larger home. Instead of finding the peace of mind I sought, I recoiled in horror. An immense mushroom cloud of red brown smoke surged thousands of feet into the air above the forest. The broad column of smoke was in the vicinity of our ranch. I finished off the tank and started for home with a hollow feeling in my gut.

The next 72 hours were exhausting, and put me on an emotional roller coaster. I evacuated 52 alpacas, and was ordered off my farm which, for a number of hours, I believed had been lost to the fire. I got to know my neighbors, and came to have greater faith in the innate goodness of people. I learned more than I ever wanted to know about responding to a forest fire.

My hope in recounting this event is to inspire alpaca and llama owners living in potential wild fire areas to develop a fire evacuation strategy. You may see areas you would've handled differently. Whatever strategy you think will work best for you, the time to plan it is now. When a fire starts is too late; you only have time to react.

We live in coastal northern California, in steep terrain covered in redwood and Douglas fir forests interlaced with patches of chaparral and tan oaks on south facing slopes. Chaparral (varieties of dense brush) is highly flammable in summer months. It typifies the vegetation on many hills in southern California but less so in the north where we live.



In parts of southern California tinder dry chaparral covered hills and high winds, known as Santa Anas, often result in destructive fires. Beginning with the fires in June, what is often seen as a problem for southern Californians has become statewide. Over 2,000 fires have raged from Mexico to the Oregon border, even in places that hadn't had a forest fire in a century. Scientists warn that changing weather patterns will increase fire dangers in many regions.

In the Santa Cruz mountains, just south of San Francisco where we live, the last forest fire of any consequence was in the 1930s. Conventional wisdom had it that the prevalent Redwood forests, especially ones near the coast, are not prone to forest fires like those common to the drier parts of California's interior and southern areas. We average sixty inches of rain a year.

But here I was racing home, up a winding mountain road through the tall redwoods of Fall Creek State Park, to save my ranch from fire. As I drove through the park a smoky haze filled the forest giving it an ominous quality. As I neared the summit I passed the Empire Grade Fire Station. This station is less than one half mile from our ranch. As I look back on the event that was unfolding, I realize that the close proximity of the fire station had lured us into a false sense of security.

The fire station was fast becoming a staging area. Already thirty or forty pieces of equipment were assembled, local trucks, and those from nearby fire districts. Helmeted fire fighters were organizing in units. I saw red and white trucks I hadn't seen before emblazoned with "Cal-Fire" All eyes were on the immense columns of smoke that were growing in size and taking up more and more of the sky. The fire's intense heat pushed the smoke straight up several thousand feet until it towered over us and spread into a mushroom cloud. The upper part of this cloud was drifting our way indicating that there was a slight onshore breeze. The inferno was to the west and very close, less than a mile from us as the crow flies.

My progress was halted by a tractor trailer pulling a huge bulldozer. I watched the smoke that suddenly changed from an ominous red brown to black. A fireman

standing along the road near my idling truck offered, "Black smoke, probably a house just got toasted. When a structure goes it produces black smoke."

As I waited a woman came up and tapped on my window. She seemed to know I had livestock and wanted to know how I planned to move my animals. I said something about needing all the help I could get as I sped off.

When I got home two young men who help out on the farm, Ryan and Johnny, were already rounding up alpacas. There were 52 animals spread over fifteen acres. About half of them were already secured in their catch pens where they could be rapidly loaded into a vehicle. We needed to catch fifteen alpacas housed in paddocks; that required baiting them into catch pens, haltering and walking them fifty yards to reach a loading area. Securing them took about thirty minutes. This group was in the greatest danger.

Events began unfolding rapidly. The fire was reported at 2:30 pm. It was now 3:45 pm and we were in peril. Spotter airplanes were circling overhead. The people in these planes orchestrated what would turn out to be an extremely impressive performance by state and local fire fighters. Coordination and strategies were just beginning to unfold. Equipment and fire fighters were arriving in great numbers. The quickness of the response was reassuring but like any battle there was no way to know the outcome until it was over.

With the fire one mile away there was still no official notice to evacuate. However, the closeness and intensity of the smoke told us we needed to act. We



knew we had to make our own decisions.

To get a look at the fire, Ryan climbed about 150 feet up a large Douglas fir. He yelled down, "I can see flames. It's about a mile from us. We need to get out of here." He descended so rapidly I thought he might lose his grip and fall from the tree. "Slow down," I yelled. "We don't need any dead people."

We ran to the alpacas that would need haltering and walking to get them to a place to load. Naomi, a neighbor, suddenly appeared. She had begun making phone calls when she saw the smoke. She called all the members of her band "Naomi and the Courteous Rude Boys" plus her mother who had just arrived at the airport from Chicago. She talked rapidly, "I told them to bring vehicles that could carry animals as fast as possible. I told them it was an emergency." Naomi and her boyfriend Johnny literally ran off to collect their instruments and valuables and pack their cars.

Within five minutes people began



pulling onto our property. Beverly Bell, a longtime friend and alpaca owner, who lives about five miles away arrived pulling a stock trailer. She hadn't been called, she was just responding to the smoke and reports on the radio. Our veterinarian Kristin Wallace also saw the smoke and heard a news bulletin. She cancelled her afternoon appointments and sped to our farm. Vans, driven by Naomi's band members pulled up. Suddenly we had a small traffic jam of vehicles: my own truck and small trailer, a larger truck and stock trailer and assorted pickups with camper shells and a van. I knew Beverly and Kristin but not the other drivers.

A car radio was announcing evacuation points for people and livestock. They suggested a nearby county horse facility. I considered going there but feared it would be chaotic with all kinds of rescued livestock converging in one spot. I also did not know if the enclosures would be safe for alpacas, and feared the possibility of exposure to disease. I decided to offload my herd to a llama ranch owned by old friends, Pat and Paul Shirley, about ten miles down the mountain; and to Beverly Bell's farm five miles away in the opposite direction. I knew the fencing, housing arrangements, and husbandry practices at these farms. If possible, I wanted to move our alpacas to a stable environment we could control. We had discussed using these farms for herd evacuation years earlier. Beverly was standing in front of me so sending animals there wasn't a problem. I phoned the llama ranch, but nobody



This P2-V is a converted US Navy submarine chaser, now assigned to fighting fires throughout North America. This plane, or one like it, flew over the author's farm to slow the wild fire's advance. Photo by Leo Jarzomb, San Gabriel Valley Newspaper Group.

answered. I decided to take them there anyway, even though my last conversation with the Shirley's was about ten years ago.

Beverly was clearly agitated and wanted to get out of the area. Days later I asked her what she'd felt, "Fear we'd be burned alive," she said without a smile. She thought the fire would be on us any moment. I felt the urgency but felt we had some time. We loaded eight animals in her trailer and sent her off. Then we loaded animals into the vehicles of the folks Naomi had called.

I now came to understand why the band (which performs up and down the West Coast) is called "Naomi and the Courteous Rude Boys." She is the band's heart as well as lead singer, and despite appearances, the supporting cast was

more than courteous. Everyone Naomi had called stopped what they were doing and came as fast as they could, some of them in borrowed vehicles.

We'd open a vehicle, in some cases push tools and content to one side and then load however many alpacas would fit. The animals were halter trained, so getting them close to a vehicle was fairly easy. But, we found just the act of putting each halter on took up valuable time. We soon opted to lift each animal in. Once loaded we explained where to take the animals and each vehicle sped off. This went on for an hour or more.

I filled my truck and trailer and still we had twelve animals left. Among them were the geriatric group (some as old as 23), late term pregnant dams and an alpaca who had just been hospitalized.

I had elected to keep these stress sensitive animals on the farm because I had noticed the direction of the fire had shifted. The huge smoke cloud was now curving to the south. The air was easy to breathe. The shifting wind was pushing the fire away from us but in the direction of a development with 250 homes. The drone of low flying aircraft was constant. Wrong or right, I had made the decision to only move these animals if we were ordered to evacuate. I figured we could load them in about twenty minutes.

A virtual review of old military aircraft was taking place overhead. Conscripted for Cal-Fire's use they were now painted combinations of bright orange and white with large numbers on the tail and wings. They dropped bright orange fire



"Naomi & the Courteous Rude Boys", proved to be front line alpaca rescuers as well as an outstanding rock band. At Naomi's call for help all band members raced up the hill to transport our alpacas to safety. Because of her fast reaction and their immediate response, they were able to get up the mountain before check points were set up, blocking other would-be rescuers.



*Residents of Bonny Doon watch Martin fire grow in size.
Photo by Shmuel Thaler, Staff photographer, Santa Cruz Sentinel*

retardant. I recognized a P2-V, a plane I knew because my father flew them in the Korean War. The P2-V passed so low we could see the pilot's red helmet. The planes came right over our farm as they barreled down the slope to drop their fire retardant. Helicopters were also at work: a huge Chinook would fill up at a nearby reservoir while smaller helicopters took water from the ocean.

I stopped at the house on my way out wondering if I should pack up things as well as animals. The phones were ringing off the hook. I answered and learned that friends who tried to make it to our ranch were being turned back at checkpoints lower down the mountain. Sherry, my wife, in Palo Alto recovering from surgery, called with a list of computer files and valuable papers for me to pack. One call was from the animal rescue service. A niece who lives in San Francisco had called Animal Rescue in Santa Cruz County and their people, with large stock trailers, were trying to reach us. However, they were being held on the coast until further notice. We were still on our own.

Naively, I hadn't figured that I might be forbidden access if I left my property. My turn around time to drop off the animals would be less than an hour. I decided I had no choice but to deliver the alpacas I had on board, make sure there was water and forage for the relocated animals and that the herd was secure in

its new locations. Beverly, who created extra paddocks with portable panels, had things under control at her place.

I went to the llama farm. John, a neighbor to the farm, helped unload animals. Another neighbor had phoned the Shirleys in Montana to tell them folks were filling their paddocks with alpacas. They phoned to tell us they were happy their ranch could offer us sanctuary, and to stay as long as necessary. When I knew the animals all had water and feed I left for home hoping I wouldn't be turned away. I soon came to a roadblock manned by about 10 highway patrolmen and park service rangers. I asked to pass to my home. At first I was denied entry. I pleaded my case to pick up livestock. They waved me on. A van following me was turned away. I think the trailer I was pulling made the difference.

I pulled up to our gate and found a huge Budget rental truck trying to squeeze through. Another equally large truck pulled in behind me. I got out to talk with the drivers. One vehicle was driven by Naomi's mother. The other by her sister's boyfriend. Their trucks were big enough to hold fifty animals. We returned one of the rental trucks, deciding that should we have to move the remaining 12 animals we would need only one truck, since my truck and trailer were available.

Just as the rental truck was leaving five pickups pulling large stock trailers rolled

down our half-mile driveway. The local animal rescue, had finally been allowed into the area. We thanked them and explained that we had vehicles enough to remove the remaining animals if we were ordered to evacuate. Because our driveway is only one lane wide it took about thirty minutes for the rescue people to free themselves from their gridlock. They were forced to back out of the driveway with its sharp turns to get back to the main road. Had the fire rolled in it would've been a catastrophe. We were set for the evening.

In all we had moved forty alpacas. We had people watching them. My sister, brother, and brother-in-law suddenly appeared. They had responded to the news reports and had talked their way through the check points. They came to get our important papers, art work and photographs. As happy as I was to see them at first I thought we didn't need this support because the fire seemed to have moved away. There were no sirens or low flying aircraft. I didn't realize firefighting wanes when the sun goes down. To counter my over-confidence my brother-in-law pointed out the fire was still only five percent contained and it was far too



Loading alpacas quickly became a necessity with a wildfire approaching. Here, Sherry Edensmith (author's wife) and Rick Harker demonstrate the two-people-alpaca lift. By grasping hands under the alpaca's abdomen while holding around the alpaca's chest two people can walk fairly comfortably with a recalcitrant alpaca. By sharing the lift with a partner each person is carrying half the weight. For each person the 140 lb animal becomes the 70 lb animal which is tolerable. Most animals are easier to load by sliding them into a vehicle backwards. This way they don't realize they are being loaded until the door begins to close.



dangerous to relax. “You may only have twenty minutes if the wind shifts again,” he kept saying. My family left about 2:00 am in three cars, loaded with computers, file cabinets, our dogs, cats, art, and family heirlooms. My brother-in-law’s warning would prove to be prophetic.

I slept for a few hours and woke around 6:00 am.

The air was filled with an eye-watering haze. There was more smoke than the night before. The low flying airplanes were back and disappearing at treetop trajectory down the slope towards the ocean. However, there was no ominous mushroom cloud hanging over us.

Uncertainty returned. The smoke became thicker. Ash began to float down from above, some of it hot and glowing. The smoke became so thick breathing was difficult. Suddenly two park rangers appeared. They didn’t mince words. “Leave immediately. This is a mandatory evacuation. If you elect to stay, it is at your own peril.” We raced down the hill and began loading the remaining animals. The rangers stayed just long enough to see that we were really leaving before speeding off to warn others. They tied yellow caution tape to each property’s entrance as they left. This was to tell fire fighters residents had been ordered out.

The smoke worsened. We took one load of animals to the large rental truck parked outside our entrance gate and its driver revved the engine and left as the tail gate was still being secured. I had hoped the truck would stay until we

made sure the alpacas that remained could all fit in my rig. We soon loaded but found we’d have to leave two behind, which was not a good feeling. As we loaded the last animals everyone was yelling to move quickly. People peeled away. I couldn’t blame them. Johnny and I were the last two to leave the property. As I sped down my driveway I wondered if I’d ever see our ranch again and I was thinking of how to get the last two animals out. I called my veterinarian Kristen Wallace DVM because of her contacts with Animal Rescue people.

When I reached the main road visibility was poor and fire fighters were moving up the road in bunches. As I passed the firehouse I could tell it was being abandoned. The heavy equipment was moving further up the road. Airplanes were roaring overhead as I turned and descended the one road that was still open.

For the next two hours newscasts announced the Empire Grade Fire Station had been abandoned and the fire was approaching the area where we lived. We thought our home had burned.

At the llama farm I was introduced to Susan Coale, the head of Equine Rescue in Santa Cruz County. She happened to live across the road. I explained I’d left two animals behind and would like to try to get them out. She jumped in my truck and we raced back up the hill. People manning the checkpoints knew her and waved us through. She explained that she would decide if we had to turn around.

The wind and smoke had shifted once again to the south. The wind had saved us for the moment. When we arrived an SPCA van was parked on our driveway, presumably sent there by Kristen Wallace DVM. The two officers had a rope tied around our llama’s mid-section, but he wasn’t cooperating. Understandably: he’d never had a rope tied around him before. I slipped a halter on him and he followed closely and jumped into the trailer. We loaded the remaining alpaca. She refused to walk and had to be carried. Everyone shook hands and sped off.

For the next three days Cal-Fire and numerous other agencies battled what became known as the Martin Fire. Johnny, Naomi and I stayed with the animals at the llama ranch. For two nights I slept in my truck, parked by the pens. We watched the helicopters and airplanes coming and going. Little by little radio reports talked about containment: 25% contained, 50% contained, then two days later it was at 75% contained and we were allowed to return. It took a day to bring all the animals home again and about three weeks to unpack documents, photos, art and heirlooms. We had a birth hours after arriving at the rescue pen, and another shortly after our return home. Mothers and crias did fine. All the geriatric animals and the animal just home from hospitalization weathered the transitions too.



I know we were very lucky. The fire, at its closest, came to within 400 yards of our property. The fickle wind and the amazing marshaling of human resources made the difference. A week after our fire, a fire in the southern part of Santa Cruz County killed twelve horses and llamas and destroyed many houses. This fire moved so fast the best anyone could do was open the gates of corrals and hope the animals would outrun the fire. The llama fatalities occurred when the frightened



of an irresponsible rock band. They couldn't have helped more, and they did it, in Naomi's words, "...because it needed to happen." Kristen Wallace DVM, canceled her appointments, showed up to help, and boarded our ailing alpaca at Adobe Animal Hospital for the night. There was no bill. There were 64 messages on our two phone lines, from people expressing concern or offering help. In the chaotic days that followed we continued to be aided by the kindness of others. Friends Bonnie and Joe Wolf filled our refrigerator with food while we were out picking up animals, helping us to enjoy a forgotten pleasure, eating! We feel very lucky, and know we incurred a debt that can never really be repaid. We do know that we have continued to make our property "fire safe" and that we will always be ready to lend a hand to neighbors in need.

animals ran into their barn to hide.

We were inspired by what our experience showed us about humanity. So many friends and strangers came forward and took risks to help us and to save our animals. "Naomi and The Courteous Rude Boys" erased any image



About the Author

Eric Hoffman is the primary author of the second revised edition The Complete Alpaca Book, (Bonny Doon Press, 2006). He wrote the first scientifically based alpaca registry (today known as ARI) in the world and is author of hundreds of articles on all four species of camelids. His articles have appeared in International Wildlife, Animals, Pacific Discovery, California Living, Wildlife Conservation and many other publications. His speaking engagements on camelids have taken him to many places including Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Peru, Germany and England in recent times.

CQ

"Life goes on..."