

News > California News

Hundreds of horses saved from fiery death in volunteer-led Napa rescue operation



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PUBLISHED: October 15, 2017 at 3:39 pm | UPDATED: October 17, 2017 at 1:35 pm

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NAPA — When flames began to close in on veterinarian Claudia Sonder’s homestead and her three horses early last Monday, Tristan Borge was the closest person with a horse trailer. Borge, 20, set out on the road with his mother, and they soon ran into peril.

Flames were tearing through the vineyards and trees on both sides of the road, with wind blowing the fire in front of them.

Borge’s mother told him, “You’re not going through there,” he recalled Sunday. “I said, ‘Yes, we are.’”

“We went through the flames to get her horses, and then back out through the flames. As we went through, the flames kind of blew across the windshield. You could definitely feel the heat through the windows.”

It was only after he’d delivered the horses to a large animal-evacuation center

Since the deadly North Bay fires began the night of Oct. 8, Borge's harrowing trip was one of many made to bring horses to the evacuation center on the 32-acre property of the Napa Valley Horsemen's Association. As of Sunday afternoon, more than 200 horses had been brought to the center from areas either burned or threatened by fire. The rescue operation was led and carried out by nearly 300 volunteers, including almost a dozen veterinarians, from the region and elsewhere.

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"This is a fabulous outreach by this community," Cal Fire spokesman Tom Efirid said Sunday. "I'm really impressed with the generosity of the Napa, Sonoma and Santa Rosa communities."

The group that organized the rescue, the Napa Community Animal Response Team, was formed in partnership with Napa County after the catastrophic Valley fire in nearby Lake County in 2015.

"We realized how unprepared we were," said Mike Kerson, a founding member of the response team.

For the team, activated by the county's Office of Emergency Services, the North Bay fires were their first test. "That's what's so amazing about this," Kerson said. "It's been absolutely incredible."

About a half-dozen evacuated horses were suffering from burns and smoke inhalation, many were severely stressed, and one had to be euthanized. The

Once the response team jumped into action, it would receive reports of horses endangered by fire, then send out a three-person team: a driver for a horse trailer, a vet and one of about 10 ham radio operators who could maintain contact when cellphone service was largely absent.

Local restaurants and coffee houses have been providing food and refreshment for the small army of volunteers. A Bay Area group, the Mounted Patrol of San Mateo County Foundation donated \$4,000 worth of hay for upkeep of the rescued animals. The driver, Jimmy Atkins, who brought the hay was to be paid \$475. “He said, ‘No, I’m not taking your money,’” said Misty Evans, operations lead for the Horsemen’s Association and evacuation center. Facilitating the unloading with a truck-based machine was Pozzi Hay Sales in Petaluma, which declined to take money for the service.

Napa County officials sent portable lighting and tent-like, portable canvas-walled barns for the horses, and businesses and individuals have been donating veterinary supplies. Volunteer Nicole Laggner, who has cared for horses since she was 3, had heard of the animals’ plight and came up from her home in Santa Cruz on Saturday to help. “I realized the need, and so I stayed,” the 32-year-old lawyer said Sunday. She aims to keep coming back every other day.

Kristina Vorhees and Alex Bakula-Davis had come to Napa — Vorhees’ hometown — from San Francisco to help those affected by the fires. They found out about the horse-rescue operation through a Google search. “I felt helpless in San Francisco and wanted to contribute in any kind of way,” said Vorhees, 32.

For Evans, the rescue effort provided an antidote to the horror brought earlier this month by news of the Las Vegas shooting that killed 58 innocent people. “After Las Vegas and just kind of getting that feeling of, ‘What’s going on in the world?’ this has restored my sense that there’s a lot of good going on in the world,” Evans said.

Napa County Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht visited the evacuation center Sunday, and was more than satisfied with the results of the response team’s first action. “It’s one thing to see this happen on paper,” Wagenknecht said. “It’s so gratifying to see it come to flesh and blood. It’s amazing that they were able to get so many (horses) out.”

The Horsemen’s Association plans to keep horses for people who aren’t able to bring them back to their land, Evans said.

“This is the last thing they should be worrying about,” Evans said. “We will take care of your horses — you go deal with whatever you have to do. You need to talk

With many burned areas still unapproachable because of the fires, and many horses unaccounted for, the evacuation work will continue, said the response team's Kerson.

"I think we're going to start getting a lot more injured animals when people start getting back in there."

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