

Script: CalRecycle 2015 Wildfire Debris Removal Efforts

Signs of progress from the depths of despair.

Todd Thalhamer: "The commitment here is unmatched."

Following some of the most destructive fires in California history, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services called on CalRecycle to lead the debris removal efforts.

Natalie Lee: "The Governor's Office of Emergency Services requested and mission-tasked me to come fill this role."

Lance Klug: "So, I was here a month ago. Are you making progress?"

Diane Nordstrom Lamkin: (Smile) Oh, yes. Yeah."

CalRecycle Worker: "I really think we are getting a good groove"

Ken Stuart: "A lot of progress."

Diane Nordstrom-Lamkin: "Look at how many crews we have, did you see all of the numbers?"

Ken Stuart: "It started with six crews."

Natalie Lee: 21 crews

Todd Thalhamer: "We're going to 50 to 55 crews."

Ken Stuart: "So they start seeing there is a future."

Todd Thalhamer: "You're starting to see hope."

Hope – after months of heartache. And a string of wildfires that just kept coming.

NBC: "Right now, fires are burning from one end of California to the other. The so called Rocky Fire has proven the most dangerous."

NBC: "More than 13,000 people have been evacuated."

KCRA: "Mandatory evacuations are in effect as crews battle another fire."

KCRA: "This is the Jerusalem valley area right here."

Back to back wildfires in Lake County – scorching 94-thousand acres and 130 structures. By early August, CalRecycle's cleanup program under the Waste Permitting, Compliance and Mitigation Division was on course to be tested like never before.

Little did anyone know – California's epic wildfire season was about to explode.

Dash Cam: "It's blowing over Grange road."

CBS: SF "It's utter chaos."

Dash Cam: “Go go go go go.”

CBS SF: “A stunning number of homes lost in the Valley Fire.”

Action News Now: “As fires burn through Trinity County, personnel and resources continue to join in the fire fight.”

ABC 10: “The leading southern flank of the Butte Fire just blowing up.”

KCRA: “People have lost their homes.”

As damage assessments poured in – the scope of destruction became clear.

Dozens of homes destroyed in the Trinity County Fires.

130 structures burned in the Rocky and Jerusalem Fires.

More than 800 in the Butte Fire.

And nearly two thousand structures burned in the Valley fire – including 12-hundred homes.

Wes Mindermann: “(We) throw out these numbers—1,000, 500—but those are families,... “Each one of those represents a family now struggling with trying to get on with their lives.”

By October, CalRecycle had teams on the ground conducting four simultaneous debris removal operations in Lake, Calaveras and Trinity Counties. Each headed by a planning chief to manage logistics, an Operations Chief to execute the operations plan, and a Finance Chief to oversee funding, contracting and invoice payments.

While CalRecycle is charged with creating, executing, and overseeing debris removal, federal, state, and local officials play a prominent role in day-to-day operations.

Todd Thalhamer: “It’s just not CalRecycle, it’s retirees, retired firefighters, contractors. It’s everyone coming together working as a partnership.”

Most of the work for debris removal is done by contractors under the supervision of CalRecycle and State partner teams.

Todd Thalhamer: “I’m proud to lead this team to make a difference in day-to-day operations.”

Other State agencies providing assistance include the Office of Emergency Services, California Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Toxic Substances Control, the Air Resources Board, the State and Regional Water Quality Control Boards, the Department of Finance, the Department of Fish and Wildlife and many more.

Todd Thalhamer: “It’s just not one agency, No one agency could handle this.”

A complex undertaking that requires good management and delegation of the right people to the right roles.

Natalie Lee: “I can’t say enough about the Department of Environmental Services.”

The damage from Valley and Butte Fires was so great that those incidents became eligible for federal assistance from the U-S EPA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

EPA: "Even from the very beginning, it's been a really great coordination.

Debris removal efforts are not easy.

Ken Stuart: "Most of the staff works from sun up to sun down."

Diane Nordstrom Lamkin: "We just work earlier now because of daylight savings."

For many of our fellow co-workers who were diverted from their formal jobs to manage fire cleanup, the exhausting work often means days or weeks away from home and family.

Worker: "You actually start to ask yourself, 'what day is today? What is the date?'"

With cleanup now complete at the Trinity County Fires and significant progress made at the Valley, Butte, and Rocky and Jerusalem cleanup operations, homeowners who lost everything can start imagining a future again.

Todd Thalhamer: "We brought hope that they can rebuild and we've got a number of homeowners that are pulling permits to rebuild as we speak."

A testament to the resilience of these fire-ravaged communities.

Worker: "People are definitely hopeful that there's light at the end of the tunnel."

And the dedication of CalRecycle's employees.

Natalie Lee: "There is no description for the amount of effort and personal connection that everyone in this office feels to the members of this community and this project. We have absolutely become a family."