

A dramatic photograph of a firefighter in silhouette, wearing a helmet and looking towards a massive, intense fire at night. The fire is bright orange and yellow, with thick smoke rising. The firefighter's silhouette is dark against the bright light of the flames.

INTO THE FURNACE

TEXT: Helen Norman
PHOTO: Matt Gush / Shutterstock.com



Thanks to an extensive emergency preparedness and disaster recovery plan, the United States Postal Service has kept workers safe during one of the worst fire seasons the American west has ever seen

Between May and October every year, the United States Postal Service (USPS) is faced with a recurring life-threatening challenge. A challenge that needs to be carefully managed to ensure, first and foremost, its workers' lives are protected and to minimize impact to operations.

In 2020, this challenge was the biggest it has ever been. The 2020 wildfire season was a record-breaking one for the US as a whole. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, as of 27 November, 52,113 wildfires burned 8,889,297 acres in 2020. This is approximately 2.3 million more acres burned than the 10-year average and almost double the average burned in the 2019 season.



Photo: Alex Gakos / Shutterstock.com

“The postal service has a long history of preparing for and responding to natural disasters, such as, wildfires, tornados and hurricanes, and those experiences have helped us to respond to the 2020 wildfires”

The western United States was the hardest hit area. Severe thunderstorms ignited wildfires across California, Oregon and Washington in August and September. Due to strong winds and hot dry terrains, these fires turned into record-breaking megafires, which killed around 40 people. These fires are one of nature’s most destructive forces, capable of moving as fast as 14 miles per hour.

Due to climate change, the risk of wildfires continues to rise. In fact, according to NASA, the fire season in the US is now stretching from early spring through to late autumn, with fires igniting as late as 2 December, 2020, in Orange County.

USPS is obviously not alone in tackling wildfire challenges. Postal operators in Europe, South America, Canada, India, and other parts of the world, also face yearly disruption as a result of fires that ravage regions. But USPS’s approach to tackling these natural disasters is one that can help all postal operators. According to USPS senior director for the office of the postmaster general and chief executive officer in the US, Patrick Mendonca, “it pays to plan!”

“The postal service has a long history of preparing for and responding to natural disasters, such as, wildfires, tornados and hurricanes, and those experiences have helped us to respond to the 2020 wildfires quickly to ensure that the mail and our employees are safe,” he says. “In addition, postal officials always work diligently to try to resume operations as quickly, safely and efficiently as possible. Resuming mail delivery after a disaster impacts a community often brings back a sense of normalcy to our customers.”

Responding to the crisis

During the 2020 wildfires, a number of USPS's post offices were damaged and others were closed due to evacuation orders from the local governmental authorities. "In any instance where a post office is closed either due to an evacuation or damage to the facility, the customer's mail is made available for pick up at another postal location," Mendonca continues. "We provide the information regarding disruption in service for our residential customers via a dedicated page on our website."

Aside from ensuring operational continuity during wildfire season, USPS makes sure its staff are prepared for any eventuality through extensive preparedness and response plans and guides, which have been developed alongside the Universal Postal Union's *Building resilience: A guide to disaster risk management for the postal sector* guide. "These plans and guides include a set of actions for wildfire events and checklists to help workers and management prepare," notes Mendonca.

"They are used by regional and local Emergency Management Teams, which oversee the preparation and response to any hazard. In addition, each facility manager is responsible for managing incidents that affect their facility. These facility managers are supported by the Emergency Management Teams, which receive training on an annual basis to ensure they are well informed," he continues.

"Each facility has a standardized Emergency Plan, which is updated and certified on an annual basis, or more frequently if needed. The plan is comprised of a concept of operations for how emergency preparation and response is organized and orchestrated; an emergency action plan that covers evacuation procedures; and a continuity of operations plan that identifies which operations will be transferred to what alternate site(s) if the affected facility cannot continue operations onsite," adds Mendonca.

Prior to wildfire season, USPS identifies at-risk facilities and ensures that evacuation needs are understood by local management. It also makes sure that water

and N95 respirator masks are placed and logged in designated supply hubs, and recommends that a master key stock and log is created for all facilities.

During the season, the postal operator uses information from national weather providers to assess risk in its locations. "The USPS issues a weather report to all operations managers that highlights the risks of elevated or critical fire weather conditions

"We have an extensive communications package, which includes items for posting on bulletin boards, as well as stand-up talks to be given to employees regarding wildfires and air quality protection"

for that day based on information from the United States National Weather Service. Additionally, the USPS uses Airnow.gov to monitor local air quality conditions during wildfires," explains Mendonca.

According to USPS, communication is key during wildfire season. "We have an extensive communications package, which includes items for posting on bulletin boards, as well as stand-up talks to be given to employees regarding wildfires and air quality protection. The Emergency Management Teams use these materials when there is a threat of a wildfire. We also have a National Employee Emergency Hotline, which workers can use to notify other employees and management of the situation," notes Mendonca.

Supporting others

Alongside USPS's role to support its workers during wildfire season, it also participates in the United States National Response Framework, which is a guide to how the nation responds to all types of disasters and emergencies. As a vital part of the nation's emergency response structure, the postal service ensures that mail operations – a lifeline for impacted communities needing

access to medications and essential items – are restored after an emergency or natural disaster.

Looking at how other postal operators can best prepare for natural disasters Mendonca concludes, "We recommend that all posts look at the UPU's *Building resilience: A guide to disaster risk management for the postal sector* guide. The guide is available on the UPU website here. As recommended in the guide the organizing framework of the '3P's – People, Property and Product', can be applied to any threat to help ensure that in preparedness and response posts are prioritizing the welfare of their employees, that they understand what is critical in terms of their assets and those that they rely upon, and how the overall effect of a disaster has impacted the posts ability to provide postal services.

"Posts should also identify and evaluate risks and implement mitigation/preparedness activities, including adopting the emergency

"Posts should also identify and evaluate risks and implement mitigation/preparedness activities, including adopting the emergency response checklists for natural disasters"

response checklists for natural disasters that are part of the UPU's disaster risk management guide. Posts should be familiar with their pertinent national emergency authority and its resources, and establish relationships when possible to leverage the extensive knowledge the post has of the community it serves," Mendonca concludes.

USPS key message during any disaster, including a wildfire, is to, "Think, prepare and act to protect your personal safety and those around you." **HN**



Photo: USPS

On the front line in the Santa Rosa wildfires

When fast-moving wildfires roared into parts of Santa Rosa, California, in late September 2020, residents and workers were asked to evacuate immediately. This time the region was well prepared, as lessons had been learnt from the devastating firestorm that hit Santa Rosa in 2017, which killed dozens of people and destroyed thousands of homes.

The 2020 fires caused two weeks of mandatory evacuations in the region and it was almost a month before the fires were completely contained. Postmaster Roosevelt Sargent III from the Santa Rosa post office, which acted as a lifeline for many local residents, shares his story of the event.

How were you first made aware of the wildfires?

I was made aware via a Nixle alert about midnight the night the fire was approaching our area. A Nixle alert is an emergency system that sends messages to resident's cell phones from the local fire and police departments. Another resource for fire alerts is the SoCo Emergency preparedness site, which monitors fires, provides live heat maps and gives updates to the communities. After that, I received calls from my supervisor and neighboring post offices about the growing fire and mandatory evacuation. The next morning I had a meeting with the USPS Emergency Preparedness Team to go over the logistics about how we were going to safely proceed with mail operations.

How did the wildfires impact the post office?

The closest the fires got to the Santa Rosa Post Office was about five miles away. One day the sun never came out in many parts of the bay area due to the smoke and ash in the air. It looked like nighttime all day. Also, there was longer than usual lines at our retail counters for customers picking up their mail

that was on hold due to the fires. We also had to get extra equipment sent to our post office to store the mail that was not being delivered because of the fires.

How did the wildfires impact your day-to-day job?

The fires impacted mail operations in many ways. Even though there was a natural disaster happening all around us, everyone in the community still depended on USPS to provide a much-needed service and we are proud to be part of the fabric of the community. It's been that way for 245 years. As the postmaster, I did not get a lot of sleep during these fires. I had letter carriers delivering mail and the wind could change at any moment, moving those fires in a different direction, possibly near our employees, putting them in harm's way. I spent a lot of time monitoring the wildfires and working on a contingency plan if needed. The fires became the most important thing regarding how they could impact mail delivery operations.

How important is the local postal service during extreme events like this?

We are business as usual no matter what goes on around us. We know the customers depend on the postal service; I like to use the term "3M" – Money, Medication, and Merchandise. All the important things that get delivered in the US mail. It's always all hands on deck approach during a crisis or pandemic with the postal service. Even as the ash falls from the sky like snowflakes, the men and women of the USPS will always suite up and hit the streets.

With this in mind, I would like to thank my carriers, clerks, maintenance team, supervisors, surrounding postmasters, and all the employees in our region who helped during the wildfires. Managing people during these events really helps me focus on decisions that will be best for the team. The mail and packages do not stop coming to the facility during these times. Each day, as the postmaster, I walked into the facility and tried to show and promote confidence to everyone in the building. Even if at times the deck might seem stacked against us, as the postmaster, I have to maintain the composure and focus necessary to provide support for the employees and get the mail delivered. I'm very grateful for the employees of the Santa Rosa Post Office. **HN**

USPS OPERATIONAL ACTIONS FOR WILDFIRES, including but not limited to:



IF YOU SEE A WILDFIRE:

CALL 911 if you have not received evacuation orders yet. Don't assume that someone else has already called

INFORM employees via appropriate communication methods

Notify higher level management

Notify the Emergency Preparedness Team

REVIEW the facilities Continuity of Operation Plan (COOP) to ensure items are prepared for immediate evacuation if needed



OPERATIONAL ACTIONS – PROPERTY:

ACTIVATE COOP, if necessary

SECURE the facility and ensure all keys are accounted for

ASSESS the extent of damage and what main systems (water, power, gasoline/fuel oil in aboveground storage tanks) need to be secured

REASSESS as to whether postal operations can/should continue at this location. If evacuated, do not attempt to re-occupy the building until safe to do so

POST A NOTICE on the front door informing customers and employees of the facility closure



IF IMMEDIATE EVACUATION NEEDED:

EVACUATE and **SECURE** the facility

Notify all USPS personnel who are responsible for the delivery and pickup of mail in the vicinity that a wildfire is present

If some personnel cannot be contacted, **NOTIFY THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES** of their possible locations

ENSURE an accurate **HEADCOUNT** of all affected employees has been completed and remains ongoing

Review the facilities Continuity of Operation Plan (COOP) to **ENSURE ITEMS ARE PREPARED** for immediate evacuation if needed



OPERATIONAL ACTIONS – PRODUCT:

REMOVE THE MAIL from the PO boxes, HCR/RR routes, accountable mail and account book. Take the mail, account book, etc. to the nearest secure post office

PLACE STAMP STOCK, MONEY ORDERS AND MONEY ORDER MACHINE IN THE SAFE. Work with the Inspection Service, if necessary, in securing Accountable items

DETERMINE whether mail delivery and pickup operations can/should continue in areas affected by the wildfire. If necessary, temporarily suspend delivery and pickup operations in areas that may be potentially affected by the fire and could threaten the health and welfare of USPS personnel

Work with Corporate Communications to **PREPARE MESSAGES** for the public regarding mail delivery

If mail delivery is affected, **COORDINATE** with higher level management to identify a location where customers can pick up their mail

If a large population has been affected, **PREPARE FOR THE PROCESS** of manual PS Form 3575, Change of Address Orders

LOCs and DMS can be used at District/Area/HQ level to **TRACK AND MONITOR DELIVERY LOCATIONS**



OPERATIONAL ACTIONS – PEOPLE:

UPDATE National Employee Emergency Hotline and ensure employees receive latest information

NOTIFY all office employees of current status daily if the office is evacuated

If wildfire smoke is present near the facility, **MONITOR** daily local air quality conditions at www.airnow.gov

If needed, **DISSEMINATE MASKS** if the danger for smoke inhalation is present

Monitor a **DAILY CALL IN/CHECK IN** for affected offices

