

Wild fires

The Summer of 2015



*“Fires are
not political.
Climate change
is not political.
It is real.”*

Governor Jerry Brown

Utility Reporter

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Volume 64 No. 5 • November 2015

UNITY IS STRENGTH

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PG&E crews replace poles
after the Valley Fire in
Hidden Valley, California.

Photo by John Storey

THE *Wild fires* OF *2015*

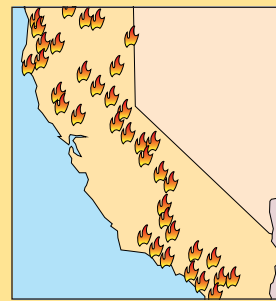
IBEW 1245 RESPONDS

This year's fire season has been one of the worst in recorded history. The wildfires have been longer, stronger, hotter and more destructive than ever before. Twelve active IBEW 1245 members and seven retirees have lost their homes and all their belongings in the rash of fires that swept across California in recent months.

Dozens of other members were temporarily displaced due to the fires, and when they were able to return to their homes, many were relieved to discover that the power had already been restored, thanks to their hard-working Local 1245 brothers and sisters.

Upwards of 1,000 physical and clerical members were dispatched to handle the aftermath of the fire. Our members of the physical side worked tirelessly to replace burned poles, take down dangerous trees and repair damaged power lines, while members of the clerical side served to support those members in the field and provide them with the resources they needed.

This special edition of the Utility Reporter is a tribute to those brothers and sisters who have been impacted by the fires, as well as those who worked around the clock on the restoration effort. This edition focuses on the three most destructive fires of the year – the Valley Fire, the Rough Fire and the Butte Fire – but that should not discount the devastation and restoration associated with the other wildfires that have hit California this year, including the fires we featured in the last edition of the Utility Reporter.



Charles Rowe

Fully Engulfed

Local 1245 member Charles Rowe recounts harrowing Valley Fire experience

Rowe's daughter captured this photo on her cell phone on the day that the Valley Fire took their home.

By Rebecca Band

IBEW 1245 member Charles Rowe used to love waking up around sunrise every Sunday to listen to the wind blow through the trees and enjoy the peaceful, majestic scenery outside his home in Cobb, California.

"It's the reason I moved up here," he said. "That was my favorite time of the week."

But that was before the Valley Fire struck. Now, Rowe's house, which he had just purchased less than a year ago, is nothing more than a melted pile of debris, and the lush, wooded view he so enjoyed has been transformed to a charred, desolate hillside.

"We evacuated ourselves"

Rowe, who works as a crew foreman for Utility Tree Service, was over at a friend's house just a few minutes away from his own home on the day that the fire swept through his community. He was helping his friend cut down some trees when the two first noticed the smoke. He decided to keep working while his friend went to investigate.

"I finished up the job, not really thinking much of it," Rowe recalls.

But then Rowe spotted the helicopters circling overhead, just as his friend came racing back up the hill to tell him it was time to pack up and go.

The fire had escalated so quickly that the authorities had not had a chance to warn the residents.

"We never got evacuated. We evacuated ourselves," Rowe said.

He quickly called his 18-year-old daughter, who was at home at the time.

"I said, 'Hey, what's the story with the fire? What are you seeing on the news?' And she said, 'What fire?'" Rowe recalled. "At that point, it was already down at the end of the street ... From what I understand, my neighborhood was the first one to get it."

As Rowe made his way back towards his home, he saw all of his neighbors frantically loading up their belongings into their cars and trailers.

While the sky grew darker, Rowe attempted to pack what he could. The first items he went for were his prized mountain bikes, but he realized he didn't have his bike rack installed on his car, so he left the bikes in

Rocky Fire Lake, Yolo and Colusa Counties Started: July 29 Acres burned: 69,438 Structures destroyed: 43 residences, 53 outbuildings	Rough Fire Fresno County Started: July 31 Acres burned: 151,623	Jerusalem Fire Lake & Napa Counties Started: August 9 Acres burned: 25,118 Structures destroyed: 6 residences, 21 outbuildings	Butte Fire Amador and Calaveras Counties Started: Sept 9 Acres burned: 70,868 Structures destroyed: 475 residences, 343 outbuildings Fatalities: 2	Valley Fire Lake County Started: Sept 12 Acres burned: 76,067 Structures destroyed: 1,958 Fatalities: 4	Tassajara Fire Monterey County Started: Sept 19 Acres burned: 1,086 Structures destroyed: 12 residences, 8 outbuildings
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the garage.

“I figured I’d be back for them in a few days,” he said.

With just minutes to spare, Rowe didn’t have time to collect much. He quickly grabbed his two dogs, his sister-in-law’s remains and some firearms, and got on his way.

Fully engulfed

“I believe we were the second-to-last people out [of our neighborhood],” Rowe said. “The guys at the end of the street were still packing stuff up, so I told my daughter to take off and I ran down there to help them out a little bit.”

When Rowe finally got on the road to catch up with his daughter, he was quickly confronted with the true severity of the situation.

“As soon as I got to the little valley area by the community pool, I noticed there were about 12 or 14 houses that were fully engulfed [in flames],” said Rowe. “That’s when I started to get really, really nervous, because I knew, more than likely, my daughter went that way.”

Rowe kept driving towards the meeting place he had prearranged with his daughter, and without warning, a huge cloud of smoke surrounded his vehicle. The temperature in the car increased, by his estimate, about 40 degrees in just a few seconds.

“I was surprised that the paint didn’t peel off the car,” said Rowe. “And as soon as I passed through the cloud of smoke, there was a power pole that was down, laying in the road. So I had no choice but to turn around and go back.”

Rowe went back up towards his house, stopping only to warn the neighbors that he had just helped out that the main road was no longer passable and they will need to go the other way.

He was able to talk to his daughter on the phone and was relieved to hear she was ok. They picked a new meeting point, at a motel halfway between Lower Lake and Kelseyville. His wife also met up with them later that day.

“We just stayed there, in limbo, watching it all unfold, watching the cloud getting bigger and bigger,” Rowe said.

At that point, Rowe already knew he had no home to go back to. He had gotten a call less than an hour after he had left, telling him his house was on fire.

Rowe and his family stayed at the motel that night. But at 6:00 am the next morning, that whole area was evacuated, so Rowe, his wife, his daughter and the dogs piled into the car once again and started driving. That night, they ended up sleeping in the car. Eventually, they made their way to a family friend’s home, where they stayed for about two weeks until they were able to get a rental.

The Aftermath

When Rowe first ventured back to survey the wreckage where his house once stood, smoke was still rising from the area that used to be his kitchen (see video at <https://youtu.be/4aXV4qB4its>). He managed to salvage some items that he refers to as “artwork” – including the bumper of his Volvo, which had melted into a

Utility Reporter

puddle – and plans to hang his “artwork” in his new house once his insurance claim comes through.

All in all, Rowe remains in good spirits, despite the harrowing experience he went through and the fact that nearly all his personal property is lost. In fact, he returned to work almost immediately, missing just one day before coming back to his job. That’s some extraordinary work ethic.

“I was more depressed when I was not working, which is unfortunate, because I like my time off,” he said with a smile.

But Rowe’s job – which involves clearing burned trees just a short distance away from where his home once stood – has begun to take its toll.

“Now that I’m living off the mountain, coming up here to work every morning is a little depressing,” he said, noting that the “Welcome Home” signs that others have put up are particularly disheartening, given the fact that around 80% of the homes in the area are gone.

He’s grateful for the fact that everyone got out ok, and that he had two cars parked at a friend’s house that made it through the fire. He’s looking forward to rebuilding his new home, feels fortunate to have supportive friends and co-workers, though he’s declined to take advantage of their generosity.

“We’ve been getting all kinds of offers and all kinds of help, but I haven’t really taken any,” said Rowe.


IBEW Local 1245 knows that Rowe and the other members who have been impacted by the fire don’t want to accept financial assistance from others, but the fact remains that they need the help to make ends meet while they wait on insurance claims. So the union quickly took up a collection both in-per-

son and online via GoFundMe. The union also asked the IBEW International office for a contribution for the Emergency Relief Fund. All these proceeds are going directly to Rowe’s family and others who have been displaced by the fires.

To make a contribution, visit www.gofundme.com/IBEW1245Fire.




Charles Rowe returned to his job as a tree trimmer almost immediately, despite losing his home and all his possessions in the Valley Fire. Photo by John Storey



UtilityReporter

November 2015
Volume 64 No. 5
Circulation: 22,800



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Published quarterly at 30 Orange Tree Circle, Vacaville, CA 95687. Official publication of Local Union 1245, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, AFL-CIO, P.O. Box 2547, Vacaville, CA 95696.

Periodical postage paid at Vacaville and at additional mailing offices. USPS No. 654640, ISSN No. 0190-4965.


POSTMASTER: Please send Form 3579, Change of Address, and all correspondence to Utility Reporter, P.O. Box 2547, Vacaville, CA 95696.

Single copies \$1. Subscription by arrangement. Have you moved recently? Please send complete new address and your Social Security Number (by U.S. Mail) to: “Address Change” IBEW Local 1245 P.O. Box 2547 Vacaville, CA 95696.

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Herrin captured this photo of the cloud of black smoke. The two smaller homes are now gone, but Herrin and his crew managed to save the large yellow home.



Gary Herrin at NCPA. Photo by John Storey

No One Ever Said It's Time to Leave

IBEW 1245 member Gary Herrin describes how he saved nine homes – including his own — from Valley Fire

By Rebecca Band

IBEW 1245 member Gary Herrin has lived in Middletown, CA ever since he was a teenager. He's built a life there, established a career at the nearby Geysers, and raised his kids in the area.

Herrin, who works as an Op Tech at the Northern California Power Agency (NCPA), loves his tight-knit community and cares deeply about his neighbors. So when the Valley Fire raced through his area before the firefighters even had a chance to respond, Herrin made a bold choice – to stay behind with his two sons and a few friends, and fight the fire themselves.

"No one ever said it's time to leave"

Herrin had just hopped on his motorcycle and was heading up to NCPA to grab a backpack that he had left at work when his phone rang. It was a friend, telling him about the wildfire that had started in nearby Cobb. Herrin glanced at Facebook and saw friends and

acquaintances who lived on that side of the hill posting about the fire, and he decided he would take his bike over in that direction to see what was going on. By the time he got there, the roads were already blocked off, so he headed back to his house in Middletown, where his two 20-something sons, Bobby and Scotty, were hanging out with a few friends.

"We were watching the fire from the hillside, and we saw this huge cloud of black smoke," Herrin recalled, noting that most of his neighbors didn't seem to notice or show any concern at first. "Our next-door neighbor is an ex-sheriff, and his girlfriend and kids were out playing in the yard, like it was just a normal day."

About an hour after the smoke cloud appeared, there was still no official evacuation order, but Herrin noticed some of the neighbors had started packing up. People were leaving. Herrin and his sons figured they should prepare as well. They gathered up the family photo albums and some other irreplaceable items– but they didn't leave.

"We decided we're going to stay for now, and when the fire gets to [a certain point], then we'll leave," Herrin said. "Well, the fire got there, and we didn't leave. No one ever said, 'It's time to leave.'"

As the fire swept into Herrin's neighborhood, with no firefighters or first responders to be seen, Herrin realized that the only way his neighborhood stood a chance was if he and his team of young men took matters into their own hands.

"We thought we were done for"

Thanks to his union job, Herrin was as prepared as anyone could be for this sort of blaze.

"At NCPA, they're always giving us fire and safety training," said Herrin. "NCPA is so good about all their training."

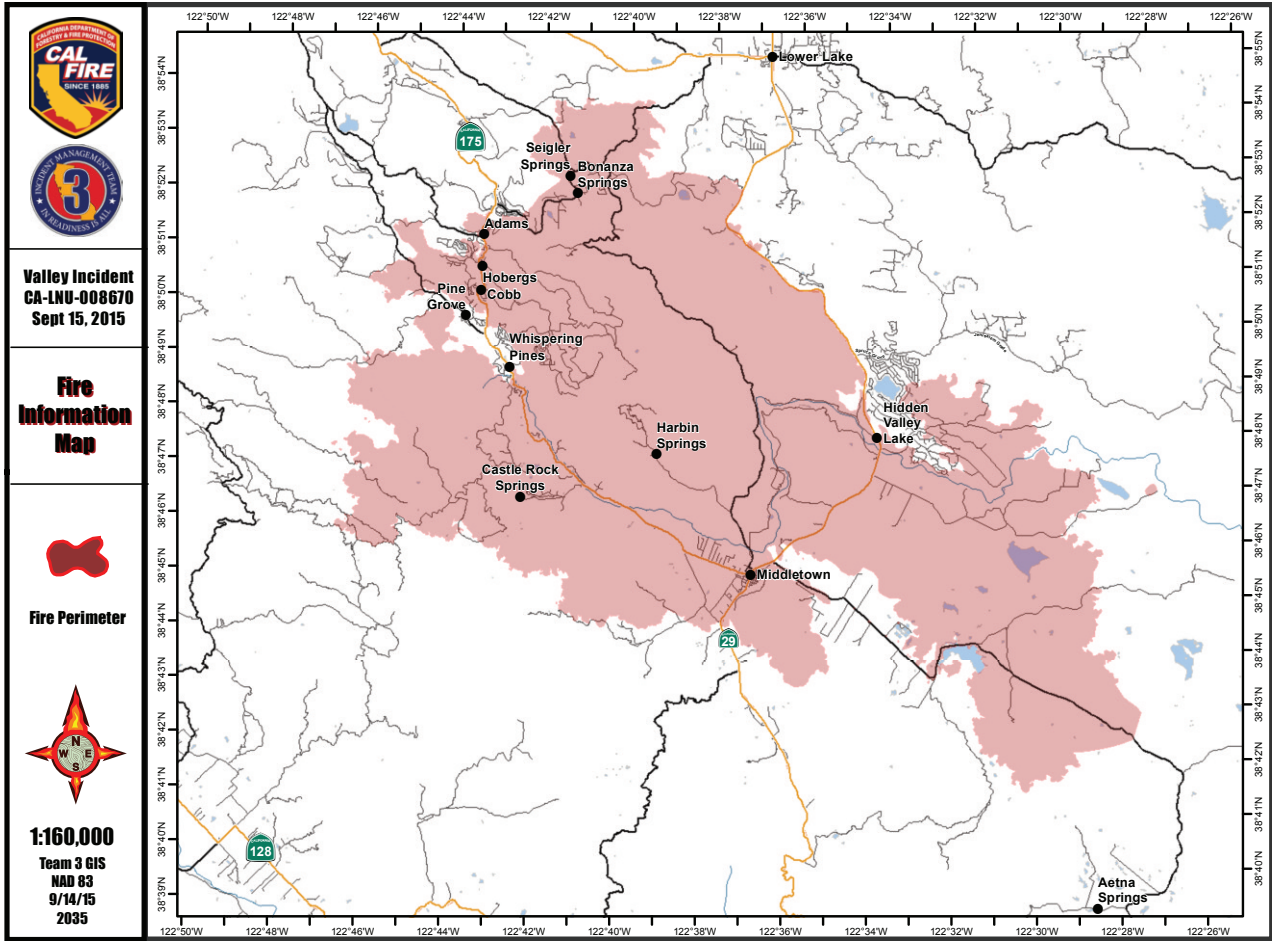
But no amount of training could have prepared him for the speed and voracity of the Valley Fire as it descended on his neighborhood.

"The fire was coming down the hill so fast; [the wind] went from 15 miles per hour to about 50 or 60," Herrin said. "It was blowing so hard, it was ripping shingles off my roof."

As soon as the fire reached his street, Herrin and the five young men leapt into action. By that time, most of the neighbors had left, and so the Herrins and their friends grabbed some hoses from various neighbors' yards and pumped water from their own swimming pool to fight the fire. As fences around them burst into flames, the men used the hoses to extinguish them. One of Herrin's sons used a tractor to tear down the fences between properties to keep the fire from spreading.

"We went across the street, putting out fence fires or just tearing the fences down," Herrin recalled. "Two houses next door caught on fire, and my neighbor, he was still there. He was trying to hose things down [with an electric pump]. Then the power went out, and my neighbor looked at me, threw the hose down, jumped in his car and left. Not five minutes later, his house was completely engulfed."

"Once the electricity went out, we thought we were done for," Herrin said. "The smoke got so thick, I was on my knees trying to catch my breath. As the houses





Herrin took this photo as the fire raced towards his neighborhood.



These images depicts just how close the fire was to Herrin's home.



What remains of Herrin's brother's house.
Utility Reporter

would heat up, the propane tanks would blow off. Every time [that happened], it would sound like a rocket."

Despite the incredibly hazardous conditions, the men kept working. Another fence caught fire; they put it out with swimming pool water. A pile of railroad ties in a neighbor's yard went up in flames; they used a tractor to dump dirt on it. They continued in this fashion for hours, combatting the fire with whatever they had on hand or could find lying around.

Herrin credits the bravery of his two sons and their three friends for staving off the flames.

"I'll never forget the three young people who stayed with us," Herrin said. "Nothing there belonged to them. And one kid had already lost three family homes on Cobb, but he stayed the whole time."

Herrin's makeshift fire crew never mentioned leaving. They just kept working to extinguish flames. At the end of the day, they managed to save nine homes, including the two houses on Herrin's property where he and his sons live, along with numerous horses, dogs, goats and other animals they rescued from neighbors' yards.

"We ended up losing about eight or ten houses right where I live," said Herrin. "I know if we would have left, every home out there would have been gone."

"Fighting for what we love"

Herrin's bravery did not go unnoticed. Friends, neighbors and even strangers came by to express their appreciation, and he was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support he and his boys received.

"All my neighbors, when they came back, they were so thankful. They were hugging me and telling me they loved me," Herrin said. "I had one neighbor who raises turkeys and chickens, and he brought me a 36-pound turkey. Never seen one so big. People kept coming by and giving us food and sunglasses and all sorts of stuff. I kept telling them, 'You guys don't owe us anything.' We were just fighting for what we love."

For Herrin, the immediate aftermath of the fire was far from celebratory. As the man who stayed behind, Herrin also had the difficult task of delivering the bad news to his many friends and acquaintances whose homes and belongings were lost. Herrin recounts the experience with visible emotion.

"People were contacting me on Facebook, saying, 'Is my house still standing? Can you go check it out?' That's all people wanted to know," said Herrin, the grief still in his voice. "And I had to tell so many people that their houses were gone."

A tragedy on this scale can rearrange the way people view each other.

"I had a neighbor down the street, and we never saw eye to eye. Well, when the fire went up the creek bed ... before we knew it, his house was ablaze," Herrin said. "When I finally saw him, I hugged him and told him I was sorry that he lost everything."

"We never thought this would happen here"

Even though Herrin's house is still standing, his family has experienced major loss. Herrin's brother, his brother-in-law and his niece lost everything they own, as did many friends and acquaintances. Talking about the fire is still difficult for him.

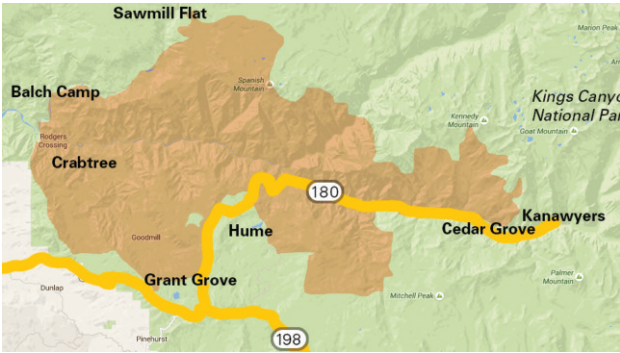
"This is where all my kids were born and raised. We never thought this would ever happen here. It's always something you see on news, but aren't involved in. But for us, it's real," he said. "A lot of people choose to live up here because of all the beautiful trees and scenery, and now it's gone. It's all gone."

Herrin said that most people don't realize how hard it can be for a community to deal with the aftermath of such a disaster. Just because the fire is out doesn't mean life returns to normal. He is particularly upset by the number of aggressive looters that have come through, combing through the wreckage of his neighbors' homes.

As hard as the ordeal has been, Herrin knows how fortunate he is to have his home and his family, and hopes that eventually his community will flourish once again.

"Every day gets a little bit better," he said.

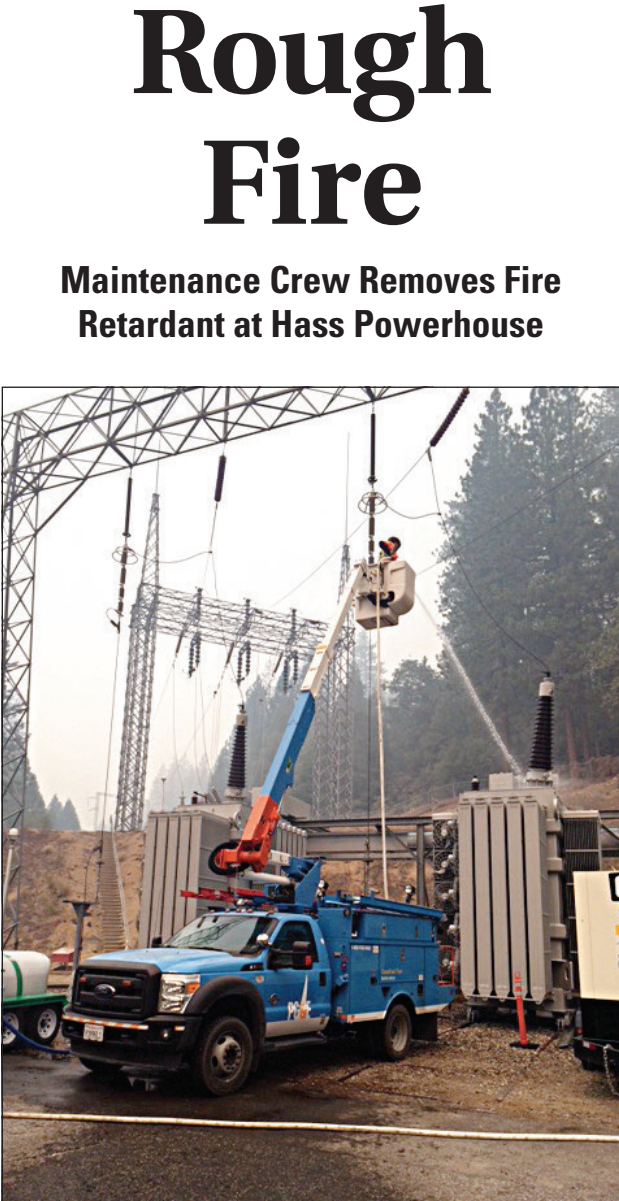
Read more about Herrin's experience in the Press-Democrat: www.pressdemocrat.com/news/4488275-181/how-six-men-saved-cobb



Fresno Substation Maintenance Crew Lead Bart Thompson submitted these images from the repair and clean-up.

The Rough Fire broke out in the Sierra National Forest east of Fresno on July 31, and as of Oct. 16, the fire was 95% contained. The Rough Fire raged for more than 10 weeks and burned over 150,000 acres, making it the largest wild fire in California this year.

While most of the area impacted by the Rough Fire is sparsely populated National Forest land, the fire did threaten PG&E's power generation facilities at Balch Camp and Hass Powerhouse, and both facilities were de-energized for several days during the height of the fire. At one point, the entire Balch Camp headquarters had to be evacuated and temporarily relocated to Auberry.

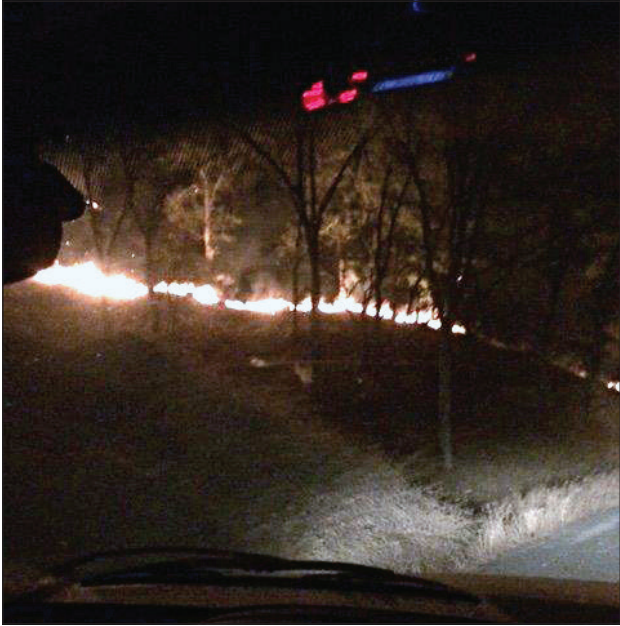


The fire also disabled the vital 70 KV line that feeds the Helms Hydroelectric Facility, and an Electric M&C crew quickly came in to replace the poles and bring the line back up. Helms plays a critical role as the "back up" to the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, supplying restoration power if Diablo Canyon were ever to lose station power.

The steep, wooded terrain made it exceedingly difficult for firefighters to fight the fire directly, relying instead on aircraft to disperse fire retardant over the flames. Once the fire was contained in the Hass Powerhouse area, a PG&E maintenance crew was tasked with pressure-washing the facility to remove the fire retardant.

Rough Fire

Maintenance Crew Removes Fire Retardant at Hass Powerhouse



Evacuation from Balch Camp. Photos By Don Barker

- Crew members:**
- Joshua Carroll, Fresno Maintenance Supervisor
 - Steve Orsaba, USFS Escort
 - Brian Seder, Electrical Machinist
 - Spencer Johnson, Electrical Machinist
 - Jerry Arneson, Electrician - Electric & Hydro
 - Don Barker, Roving Operator
 - Karl Smalling, Roving Operator
 - Dean Petropoulos, Roving Operator
 - Isaac Maltos, Electrician
 - Ken Harvey, Electrician
 - Jeff Newman, Electrician
 - Say Moua, Electrician
 - Daniel Guzman, Electrician Switching
 - Richard Trejo, Electrician Switching



PG&E apprentice Erik Morring works in the ashes of a home.



PG&E apprentice Dustin Trimble cleans the drill after digging a new hole for the replacement pole.

Valley Fire Restoration

Four hundred PG&E members, along with 100 tree trimmers and 100 contractors, worked to restore power, remove hazardous trees and replaced burned utility poles after the Valley Fire burned a large portion of southern Lake County.

CalFire reports that the Valley Fire began on Sept. 12 and was contained on Oct. 6. It burned more than 76,000 acres and destroyed 1,280 homes, 27 multi-family structures, 66 commercial properties and 585 other minor structures. Four firefighters were injured and four civilians were killed.

The fire caused a disruption in service to more than 7,200 PG&E customers, and crews and support staff worked day and night to restore power as quickly as possible.



Lineman Jake Southard rolls out wire for connection to the new pole.



Dustin Trimble, right, and Erik Morring check alignment.





A compilation of badges from all the agencies that worked on the Butte Fire.
Photo by Rosario Garcia



Phil Shepherd (dark cap) goes over plans for the day.



PG&E lineman Joe Menor puts a burnt pole on a truck.

Photos by John Storey



PG&E apprentice Matt Atkins attaches wire to a pole



The crew replaced dozens of damaged transformers.



PG&E lineman Josh Ramos attaches a cross arm to a pole.

Butte Fire P

More than 300 IBEW 1245 members from PG&E worked around the clock to replace burned utility poles, take down damaged trees and restore power in Amador and Calaveras counties following the Butte Fire. Two-thirds of these members travelled from outside the division to work in the fire zone.

The PG&E electric crews, troublemen, fleet, gas, materials, hydro, substation and clerical members, along with more than 100 line clearance tree trimmers and 60 contractors, worked closely as a team to complete the restoration quickly and efficiently for the 16,000 customers



on the side of a mountain.

Restoration

who lost power due to the fire.

According to CalFire, the Butte Fire started on Sept. 9, in the area just east of Jackson, and was not fully contained until Oct. 1. It burned over 70,000 acres, destroyed 475 residences and 343 out-buildings, and caused two fatalities.

"The area is a sad sight. Old growth trees throughout the once-beautiful hillsides burnt to a crisp. Houses are burnt to the ground, and families are evacuated with no homes to return to," IBEW 1245 tree trimmer Rosario Garcia reported from the fire zone. "There is a lot of work that needs to be done up here."

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PG&E foremen go over plans for the day with PG&E crews.



John Rossi with Trees Inc., clear cuts burnt trees underneath transmission lines.



PG&E foreman William Rhodes pulls wire for new poles.



PG&E lineman Joe Menor tightens a guy wire on a new pole.



Francisco Diaz with Trees Inc., clear cuts burnt trees underneath transmission lines.



PG&E apprentices Matt Atkins (left), pre-apprentice Kyle Gustason (middle), and Brian Hinckle set a pole on the side of a mountain.



Linemen John Marshall and Josh Ramos



PG&E crews replace poles.



Cody and Jessica Smith with baby Hayden.



Above: the Smith house before and during the fire.



Smith's sister captured this photo on her phone as the fire raged around them.



Jessica Smith captured this photo in her rear-view mirror as her house burned down in front of her eyes.

Lineman Cody Smith recounts how he and his family survived the Valley Fire

We Watched Our House Burn Down

by Rebecca Band

Like many expectant parents, IBEW 1245 member Cody Smith and his wife Jessica had a lot on their minds as they awaited the arrival of their first child, due at the end of September. With just a couple of weeks left until Jessica's due date, the last thing they were thinking about was the possibility of a wildfire taking their home, destroying all their belongings and endangering their lives.

But on Sept. 12, everything changed, as the Valley Fire blazed through their community at a breakneck pace and gave them no time to evacuate.

"Everything was on fire"

When the fire first broke out on Cobb Mountain, Smith, a lineman with PG&E, was called in to work to de-energize some power lines to make it safe for the firefighters to go in and attempt to quell the flames. Once he finished the job, he got a text from a co-worker, letting him know that the fire was careening towards his own neighborhood near Middletown, and so he quickly headed back towards his house. But before he could get there, his wife, nine months pregnant, called him on his cell phone, frantic because she could see how quickly the fire was moving in their direction.

"By the time I got over the hill, everything was on fire. Everything," Smith recalled. "[The fire] beat me from Cobb to my house, which is about 20 miles, max."

When Smith arrived at home, he found his wife inside of their family's 300-foot sand-filled equestrian arena. His younger sister, his stepmom, and another family—a mother and two daughters who had already evacuated their home and had come to the Smith's to seek refuge—were moving animals and vehicles into

the arena, where they felt they would be safest from the flames. At that point, they knew that leaving was no longer an option.

"It was already way too late for us to get out [of town]," said Smith. By that time, all the roads in and out of his community were blocked off. "The only reason I even got in was because I was in my [PG&E] work truck with the strobes on. Otherwise, I would have never made it."

Smith and his family, along with the other family, camped out in the arena as the fire surrounded them on all sides. They tried to remain calm, for fear that any increase in stress would cause Jessica to go into labor. They made repeated attempts to call for help, but the fire made it impossible.

"I couldn't get a call out on the company radio," said Smith. "All the girls kept calling 9-1-1, to see if [first responders] could get us out, but no one would answer. And when they did answer, they said, 'We can't get to you.'"

"We watched our house burn down"

Trapped in the arena with no hope of rescue, the group took cover from the heat by staying in their cars with the air conditioning on full blast. They kept driving the vehicles around the arena, and Jessica worried that eventually the cars would catch on fire and it would all be over for them.

"Embers the size of softballs and basketballs were bouncing off the cars, sparks were flying, and the windows were hot to the touch. There was no smoke, it was all flames," said Smith. "And then, about two and a half hours later, we watched our house burn down right in front of us."

He attempted to shield his pregnant wife from witnessing the destruction by parking the



The Smith house after the fire

car facing away from the house. But Jessica couldn't help but glimpse in the rear-view mirror, where she caught sight of the home that her husband and father-in-law had built seven years earlier, as it was engulfed in flames.

About 30 minutes after their home burned down, Smith managed to get through to someone on the company radio. A co-worker helped to connect him with the sheriff's department over the radio, and they were finally able to get some assistance.

The sheriff's deputy arrived, and he and Smith decided that they should try to get everyone out, but in order to do so, they would need to move quickly. Smith jumped into his work truck, the others into their cars. They followed the sheriff in caravan fashion down towards the highway. But when they got to the main road, they discovered that it was no longer passable.

"The phone lines were down all across the road, piled about five feet high. At that point, there was no getting out," said Smith. "Everything was still on fire all around us, so I sent everybody back up to the arena because that was

the only place that was safe at the time."

While the rest of the group turned around, Smith's wife stayed in her car out of harm's way, and Smith used his company radio to call his boss at the Clearlake Service Center and confirm that all the power in the area was out. Once he knew for sure that the lines wouldn't electrocute him, he went to work, using his lineman experience, along with the rubber gloves and hot cutters he had in his truck, to clear the road.

"I just started cutting everything, all the wires that were in our way. It probably took me about 20 minutes, but it seemed like an hour. Everything was falling all around me," said Smith. "I finally got the wires all cut, and we were able to leave. I called everybody who was up at the arena, and they followed us out."

Smith knew that his particular set of skills, along with his service vehicle, were what gave them the means to escape.

"If I didn't have my work truck, we probably would have stayed in that arena all night," he said. "We might still be there."

At 2:30 am, they arrived at the PG&E

Service Center in Clearlake, where they stayed until morning. It was there that the women, unable to sleep, decided to surf the internet and look up the meaning of the name that the Smiths had chosen for their baby weeks before. Turns out, the name – Hayden – means "fire" in Welsh.

"Where do you go from here?"

On Sept. 25, Jessica delivered a healthy baby girl. As he held baby Hayden in his arms, Smith beamed with pride and joy.

The Smiths had been through a whirlwind of emotions in those few short weeks, from extreme fear, to extreme grief, to extreme happiness, and also extreme exhaustion. Through it all, they've been fortunate to have their PG&E family around to help them through this tumultuous time.

"They've been great, from start to finish. Every single one of them. We have no complaints," said Smith. "They helped us out with fundraising, and they brought the power back to my

dad's house so we could have somewhere to stay for a couple days."

Smith's father's house is located right next door from where Smith's own house stood, but somehow it evaded the fire. It's the only house left standing on their road.

The Smiths are currently staying at another property that their family owns, located about halfway between Middletown and Clearlake, but they are looking forward to rebuilding their home, and are already working on getting plans drawn up.

But many in the community are still reeling from the massive devastation, Smith noted.

"Everyone's looking forward, but I don't think we've hit the very bottom yet. There are so many families who don't have a house to go back to... some are still staying at the campground. I would say people spirits are up, but it's like, where do you go from here?"

Read the Smith's story in the San Jose Mercury News: [mercurynews.com/california-wildfires/ci_28813588/family-recounts-harrowing-hours-before-being-rescued-from](https://www.mercurynews.com/california-wildfires/ci_28813588/family-recounts-harrowing-hours-before-being-rescued-from)

It Happened Really Fast

Local 1245 member Nish McDowell recounts how the Valley Fire changed his family's life

By Rebecca Band

For IBEW 1245 member Nish McDowell, the greater Middletown area is home to his entire family; four full generations of McDowells live there. He's raised his three kids – ages 10, 8 and 3 – just outside Middletown, near Anderson Springs. His parents have lived in the house next door for decades. And both sets of grandparents lived in the area as well.

When the Valley Fire blazed through his community, it took no mercy on McDowell's family. His home burned down, as did his father's. His paternal grandparents, who had owned their property for more than 50 years, lost their home as well. His mother's mother was the only family member with a house still standing, although she still lost all of the outbuildings on her property.

"It happened really fast"

When the fire first broke out on Cobb Mountain, McDowell was with his wife and two older children in Santa Rosa, picking up some groceries. His mother, who was at home with his youngest child, called him and told him that there was a fire nearby, but at that point McDowell didn't realize the urgency of the situation. But when his mom called back about an hour later, after they were already on the way home, and told him how quickly the fire was moving, it occurred to him that they could be a serious situation.

By the time they arrived home, the fire had already burned through Cobb and was heading straight towards his family's property. They had to act quickly.

Utility Reporter

"It happened really fast. I can't even explain how fast the fire moved. We had only 15 or 20 minutes by the time we got there," McDowell recalled. "And so we grabbed some stuff before the fire was too close and we had to leave. My wife grabbed the computer, I grabbed a few important papers and a little cash that I had. The kids got their school backpacks, a change of clothes, a couple sentimental items, and that was about it. By the time we were leaving, [the fire] was literally right across the creek that bordered our property."

At that point, the McDowells had to split up. His wife, kids and mother travelled towards his maternal grandmother's house, while he and his father – along with their three dogs — went to go get his paternal grandmother from her home.

"By the time we got my grandmother and went to meet back up with my wife and kids, the fire had crossed and burnt through my neighborhood," said McDowell. "As we were heading to Highway 175, CalFire stopped us, and we had to go up towards Healdsburg."

At that point, McDowell was pretty sure his house was already gone. He was able to see black plumes of smoke where his neighborhood used to be. Indeed, the following day, a friend of his who works for PG&E was in his neighborhood and texted him to let him know that both his home and his father's house next door had burned down.

Meanwhile, his wife, mother and children had met up with a friend who lived in Cloverdale, which is where they stayed that night. McDowell, his dad, his father's mother and the dogs ended

up at the fairgrounds in Calistoga, which had been designated as an evacuation center.

The next day, McDowell re-connected with his wife, and they decided that she and the kids should go up to Seattle and stay with his wife's family for a while. McDowell stayed behind to be with his own family in the area.

"Like a family"

McDowell camped out at the fairgrounds for almost a week after the fire. While other people might have chosen to dwell in what they had lost, McDowell was simply grateful for all the help he had received.

"The volunteers and donation at the fairgrounds were incredible," said McDowell. "I got a cot and other stuff there. My coworkers had donated some cash to me so I was able to go down to get toiletries and clothes and that type of stuff. As far as food and stuff for dogs, a lot of that was donated at the fairgrounds. That was really nice."

Six days after the fire took his home, McDowell was finally able to get back up to Middletown, and a friend at the Diamond D ranch took him in. That was on Friday. Two days later, on Monday, he returned to work at the Northern California Power Agency (NCPA).

McDowell had started his first union job as a mechanic operator at NCPA just six months earlier, and feels incredibly grateful to have the support of the employer and the union.

"I've been very impressed with NCPA," McDowell said, referring to both the company itself, as well as his col-

leagues. "Once I got back to work, all the guys were giving me cash, clothes, food, whatever we needed, and were willing to support me in any way. The union has been very supportive also. I never worked for union shop before. It leaves me with a good feeling, like it's a family."

"God's got a plan for us"

When his wife and kids returned from Washington about a month after the fire, they decided to return to their property to see if they could salvage anything from the wreckage.

"My wife's mom had passed away, and we were able to go back in and find her mother's urn. We also found her mother's ring and my wedding ring, and a couple other pieces of jewelry that were sentimental to my wife," said McDowell. "She collects ceramic figurines, and we found some of those. I found some tools and stuff, and my kids found a couple old metal toys. They were burnt, but we could still tell what they were."

"It was kind of a sad time, but it was also kind of fun to be able to sift through and find stuff," said McDowell, likening the experience to a sort of treasure hunt. His wife plans to make a shadowbox to display some of the items they salvaged, as a way to transform something dark into something beautiful.

McDowell says his family is looking forward to rebuilding their home once their insurance claim goes through. Given the extent of his loss, he remains in surprisingly good spirits.

"It's different. Definitely humbling," he said. "But I know God's got a plan for us."



Mutual Assistance Crews Aid NCPA Restoration After Valley Fire

The Northern California Power Agency's main geothermal facility at the Geysers is located just outside the southwestern perimeter of the Valley Fire zone. While the plant itself emerged from the fire relatively unscathed, its capacity was largely diminished due to the widespread destruction to the power poles and lines, along with the fact that most of its workers were evacuated from the area for several days for their own safety. Four Local 1245 members at NCPA lost their homes and belongings in the fire, and several others had remarkably close calls (See pages 4-5, 11, 16.)

The 14 public utilities that belong to the NCPA consortium (11 of which are represented by IBEW 1245) rely on NCPA's geothermal plant to provide them with power, and several of those utilities – including the cities of Santa Clara, Healdsburg, Lodi, Roseville and Redding, as well as Truckee-Donner PUD – quickly dispatched crews to help get the power station back up to its full capacity as quickly as possible.

The plant was offline for four days during and after the fire. The crews worked tirelessly to replace 50 burned power poles and rebuild the 21kv line that feeds the re-injection water pumps, and within a week, the plant was operating at full capacity once again.



NCPA geothermal plant

Photos by John Storey



Jason Hageman and Garon Arapa



Chayton Osmon

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE CREWS



At left:
Chris Foster



Dawid Coetvee and Bryan Goshia



Chris Foster and Chris Dunn

Utility Reporter



Brent Sirkel passes a tool to Jason Smith.



Elton Lamborn



Brent Sirkel



From left, on ground: Rich Willett, Ryan Mahler, Brent Sirkel.
Operating boom: Jason Smith

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE CREWS



Jake Kremless and Bill Jordan



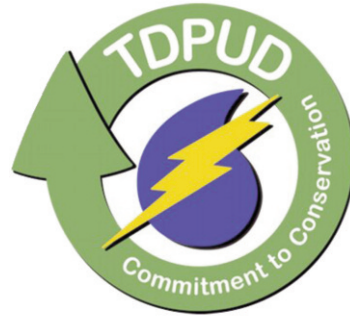
Phil Hartnett



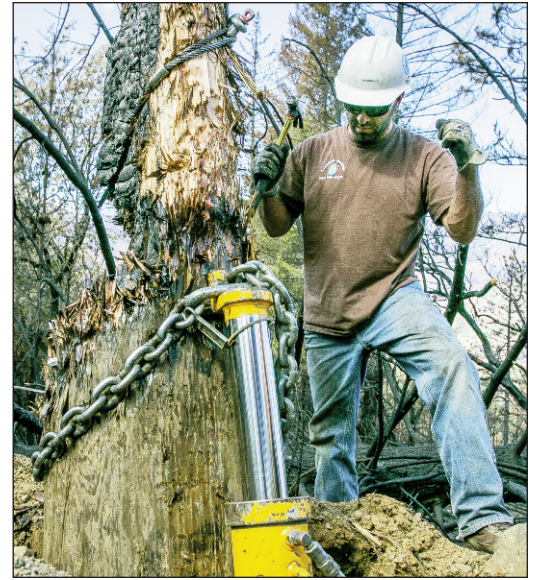
Bill Jordan



The Roseville crew works together to set a pole.



At right:
Dan
Baumbach



Dan Baumbach



Ed Atkins and Dan Baumbach



Dan Baumbach and Ed Atkins

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE CREWS



Randy Sandifer



Kenny Nachman



Kenny Nachman

Utility Reporter

Photos by John Storey

UTILITY TREE SERVICE



Chris Perry



Charles Rowe



James Stencil



James Stencil and Charles Rowe



From left: Manuel Rojas, Ricardo Orozco, Miguel Orozco, James Stencil, Charles Rowe, and Chris Perry

Still Here

NCPA employee Jennifer Finney has close call in Valley Fire

Story by Rebecca Band

IBEW 1245 member Jennifer Finney had been hoping to make it through the summer “fire-free.”

Finney, who works as a Chemical Performance Technician at the Northern California Power Authority (NCPA) lives with her husband, two children and younger sister in Cobb, a small community in Lake County with a population of less than 2,000 people.

“I just had this feeling all summer...

it’s been a long time since Cobb has had a fire. We have a lot of dry grass and dry brush, and a lot of dry trees that are beetle-infested. A lot of fuel [for a fire].”

Right up until mid-September, there had been no wildfire action in Finney’s community.

“We had the Rocky Fire and Jerusalem Fire, but they were not in our area,” she noted. “Those were more towards the Hidden Valley/Lower Lake area.”

But on Sept. 12, the Valley Fire swept in, and everyone in Cobb was evacuated.

“You guys need to go now”

Before Finney noticed the smoke, it was just a relaxing weekend afternoon for her and her family.

“For whatever rhyme or reason, my entire family was home that day,” she said, noting that was fairly unusual for a Saturday, when they frequently had activities planned that would keep them out of the house for much of the day.

The weather was hot and windy. As Finney stepped outside her home to join her husband in the yard, a chopper flew overhead.

“We looked up and saw smoke,” said Finney. “I went inside and told my sister ‘I think there’s a fire.... It’s pretty close to the house. I need you to pack your stuff in a bag, and get the kids ready to go.’”

Finney and her husband drove to the other side of the neighborhood to get a better vantage point of Cobb Valley and figure out where the fire was.

“We had a direct line of sight of the fire from our neighborhood,” said Finney. “As the crow flies, it was maybe a mile or two miles away.”

She knew that given the particularly windy weather, the fire could move fast,

and so the couple returned to their house and got ready to evacuate. Finney called her extended family and asked them to come up and help them out. While Finney and her sister began to pack up personal belongings, her husband started to move their vehicles to his parents’ home, which was further away from the fire but still in Cobb. While he was out, he could see the fire getting closer to their residence.

“He called and said ‘Jenny, you guys need to go now. The fire is right in the neighborhood below us.’”

That call came just about 40 minutes after they first saw the smoke, so they had to move quickly.

“It wasn’t much time, but you can get a lot done when you need to,” Finney said. “We told the kids, ‘pack some clothes, and anything mom can’t buy you at the store that’s important to you.’”

She applied that same logic to her own packing decisions.

While Finney and the rest of her family left the area, her husband stayed behind to help his parents and some friends pack up their things. Before going to reunite with his wife and kids, he figured he had time to stop by the house to grab some additional personal items. But just minutes after he got there, he had a feeling that it was definitely time to leave, and as he drove down to the end of their road, he passed right through the flames as they surrounded Finney’s neighborhood.

“Still here”

Finney’s husband was pretty convinced that their house would not make it through the fire, given what he knows about fires and their tendency to burn uphill. Their eight-year-old daughter was also very anxious about the prospect of the house burning down. Finney, on the other hand, didn’t necessarily think about losing their home, and was just happy to have gotten everyone out safely.

“If the house is gone, it’s gone. It’s just stuff,” Finney recalled thinking that first evening. “We got everything we needed.”

The next day, Finney’s husband received a text from a friend. It was a



Jennifer Finney, Chemical Tech, in front of the NCPA geothermal plant. Photo by John Storey

picture of their house, and a caption that read, “Still here.” Against all odds, their house had made it through.

“That picture was worth a thousand words,” Finney said.

That first night, Finney and her family stayed with friends in nearby Kelseyville. But at 6:00am the following morning, the Kelseyville area was also under evacuation orders, so Finney and her family helped their friends to pack up and head out to a vineyard that the family friends own, where they all stayed for a few days until the evacuation order was lifted.

The fact that Finney has a home to return to means that she is one of the fortunate ones. Four of her colleagues at NCPA lost their homes and all the possessions that they weren’t able to grab as they evacuated.

“Everybody’s there for those employees, and offering any help that they

can,” said Finney. “The employees have banded together, and the company is treating us well. They paid everyone for the full week [during the evacuation] ... And our employee association did offer anyone who needed it \$250 to help them during their time of displacement.”

Despite the ordeal and the devastation in her town, Finney still maintains a positive outlook.

“I think the future holds a lot of hope for people who want to rebuild,” said Finney. “The community around here is very strong.”

She may be optimistic, but she remains a bit wary of the possibility that this might not be the last fire in her community this year, and plans to be prepared.

“When my gas tank is half empty, that’s when I’m filling up,” she said.

Eric Wolfe contributed to this report.

Support IBEW Local 1245 Members Who Lost Their Homes in California Wildfires

Several IBEW local 1245 members and retirees have lost their homes and all of their belongings in the recent California wildfires. Many of them narrowly escaped with just the clothes on their backs. The union is looking to raise funds to help these members pay for clothes and lodging during this difficult and tragic time.

Visit gofundme.com/IBEW1245Fire to contribute what you can. Every dollar can make a difference for a union family in need.



**Congressman
Mike
Thompson**

“Many thanks to FEMA for quickly approving federal funds to help our first responders contain and eliminate the fire, and to help our district recover from the damage it has caused. The brave men and women of CAL FIRE, and all emergency responders, are in my thoughts and prayers as they selflessly work to protect our communities.”