

The Heat Is On

Santa Barbara, CA 2004

Mother Nature reminds us what it means to stand READY.

In California we know wildfires. But we have a new enemy—an unknown— that affects us and every other person from here to the East Coast: - - terrorists. To be ready, what will we need? A gas mask? A bulletproof vest? A gun? A vaccine? The capability to abandon our car and pack whatever we need on our backs, for a 100-mile trek on foot? No one knows exactly what the next man-made emergency will demand -- with one exception. It will demand our courage

Today, our enemy is Mother Nature, the greatest terrorist of all. It's 6 a.m. in the charming coastal community of Santa Barbara, California. As I write this perspective, a nearby fire continues to rage, 40 percent contained. Nearly 8,000 acres have burned, and it is only 20 miles from the borders of my hometown, where some 70,000 people live and work. Unfortunately, only two roads wind north (into the fire). The road south converges into a two lane bottleneck one mile out of town.

Later, the "sundowner" winds move in. The trees are dancing a hula as the evening winds whirl and shift north, south, east and west. Any minute I expect the closing of the main Highway, Interstate 101 North. The only other exit road north, State Hwy 154 is already closed. During the last few nights, the fire has whisked down and crossed the road to burn through the railroad tracks to the beach. Sixty-seven fire trucks, 17 bulldozers, 15 helicopters and 1,370 men have not been able to contain it when the winds roar up at sundown. Then it jumps the firebreaks that were laboriously carved out of the precipitous canyons and windy ridges during each day.

As I pound away at the computer, a heavy-lift plane flies overhead. From the noise, I'm guessing it's a C-130 flying low and heavy to the fire. A new convoy of fire apparatus is heading north, sirens bellowing. Yep, it just jumped the line. I may miss this deadline—that bottleneck heading south awaits.

My day-to-day job is as President and CEO of the National Institute for Urban Search and Rescue. We are a not-for-profit "think-tank" that works to invent, discover and focus attention on ways to improve the ability and equipment of our nation's first responders—those of you in fire, law enforcement and medical services that keep us safe, (or safer), everyday. It is you, this very moment, who battles the winds, the 40-foot high flames and the scorching breath of the fire as it advances.

I am the one who will evacuate south. NIUSR's work is done in advance of the fire season. We fight for more aircraft, newer planes, better equipment and new approaches to fighting the fire beast.

Yesterday, the NIUSR folks were in Albuquerque, N.M., setting up a training seminar scheduled for September 28, 2004 that will cover the southwestern border region of the United States and Mexico. At that time, we will look at the beast of terrorism. But on this day, New Mexico also had its own fires to contend with—a monstrous blaze that had already consumed 40,000 acres in the northern part of the state. Los Angeles fire crews were coming in, and smoke jumpers from Missoula, Mont., were on the way.

There was a day when fire and Mother Nature's other catastrophes were the focus of our emergency response efforts. Now terrorism looms large, and so, too, does the task of readying our first responders.

Please understand: To be "prepared" is *not* synonymous with being "ready." For civilians, to be *prepared* for this fire and its emergencies is to have water and food in the car, a flashlight, a full tank of gas, an extra tire and the tools to change the tire, a sharp buck knife on the belt and—don't laugh—duct tape. (The knife is to cut the duck tape.)

Ready is 5 minutes out the door with some money, credit cards, I.D., sleeping bag, ear plugs, flashlight and extra batteries, a change of clothes, your essential telephone numbers, the charger for your cell phone that runs off your car battery, your photo albums (if they are important to you), the windows and back door locked, your house keys to get back in— should you be so fortunate to have a house still standing—and if you're tech savvy, your laptop and/or Blackberry.

Occasionally, someone wants to argue with me that *preparedness* and *readiness* are the same. This is what I tell them. (Bear with me if you've heard it before; it's worth repeating):

"A championship runner can train for years for the Olympics. He is as prepared and trained as can be. But if he misses the starting gun, he was not ready, and his chance for gold is over before the race begins."

Today, the first responders in Santa Barbara stand ready, and they are fighting the fire. Their re-supply and support is ready and rolling. Their air support is flying with water drops in 40-mile-an-hour winds. And the civilian population will move when given the signal to evacuate—ready or not. Emergencies and Disasters strike without warning.

Stand Ready. Suit up and Show up. Destiny is in our own hands.

It will demand our courage.

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