



AFA DISASTER

As I watched the California fires on TV, all I could think of was our avicultural friends and what they must be facing at that time. As Chair of the American Federation of Aviculture, Inc.'s (AFA) Ad Hoc Disaster Relief Committee, I immediately began putting together a relief team to deal with this new disaster. The team initiated the relief effort by attempting to contact aviculturists in the fire areas of Southern California, to determine their needs and how we could be most effective in addressing these needs.

To further assess the needs, I scheduled two 'town hall' type meetings where those affected could meet directly with us. I believed this would enable us to determine their needs as well as give them the opportunity to present ideas as to how we could improve future disaster relief efforts. The first meeting was held in Fallbrook, California on Monday evening of November 5, 2007. This meeting was held at the Hidden Forest Art Gallery, hosted by Lisa and Gamini Ratnavira. The second meeting was held on Wednesday November 7, 2007 at the Denny's Restaurant in San Diego, California. AFA President Jim Hawley joined me in California and attended the Wednesday meeting. I really appreciated his support as we sought to help those in need. The AFA Store donated a number of T-shirts that we gave to anyone in the fire areas, many of whom had lost everything.

There were some amazing stories describing how birds had been saved from the fires, but there were also tragic accounts from people who lost most, if not all of their possessions. However, as one person put it, "Everything we had in our homes was just stuff. We saved our most prized possessions, our family. The stuff can always be replaced, but our family cannot." Though some birds lost their battle with those terrible fires, there

were hundreds more that are safe and have returned to their own 'living quarters' and are enjoying the beautiful California weather once again.

It was evident that most of the aviculturists had an evacuation plan in place and, for the most part, these plans worked. Every disaster I have worked on behalf of AFA has been different and unpredictable. The same was true here. I was told these fires were different from those just a few years ago. The fires were driven by unrelenting Santa Ana winds that were clocked at times in excess of 90 miles per hour! "When the flames are blowing horizontal and at such great speeds, no evacuation plan will work", stated one victim. "There was no time to save even the little things that mean so much to us, such as family photo's, etc."

Another person recounted, "There was no time to remove our birds, so we turned the cages upside down to keep the birds out of the smoke and fire. It's all we could do. The fires were raging so high and fast that by putting the cages on the ground, the fires sped right over them and the birds were saved". Yet another person observed that if they had turned the birds loose, they would have flown to the highest trees and perished. "We did what we could to save them and it worked".

As I noted above, the fires were unpredictable. One aviculturist stated that the fires could be seen two mountains away, so they were certain they had time to collect their belongings. Then, within minutes, they were 'running for their lives'. When the flames reached the top of the mountain, a spark would be 'thrown' across the canyon to the next mountain and start another fire. Some thought they were safe as the fires were moving past them only to have the winds shift direction ever so slightly, such that they found themselves directly in the path of a raging fire.

From the top: What several saw when looking out their windows. • There were 8 firefighters who, while fighting the fires, got caught on a mountain point when the fires came up all around them. As a last resort, they got into their foil-type body suits and were all safe once the fires passed. All of them then went back to work fighting the fires! • A tent city set up near the stadium. • One of the remaining homes in this housing development burning. • A relief site set up outside Ramona, CA. The hills all around this area were blackened from the fires. • The CEDE Poultry farm in Ramona, CA. totally destroyed. This was a huge facility!
Photos courtesy of Fred Smith & the Associated Press.

RELIEF

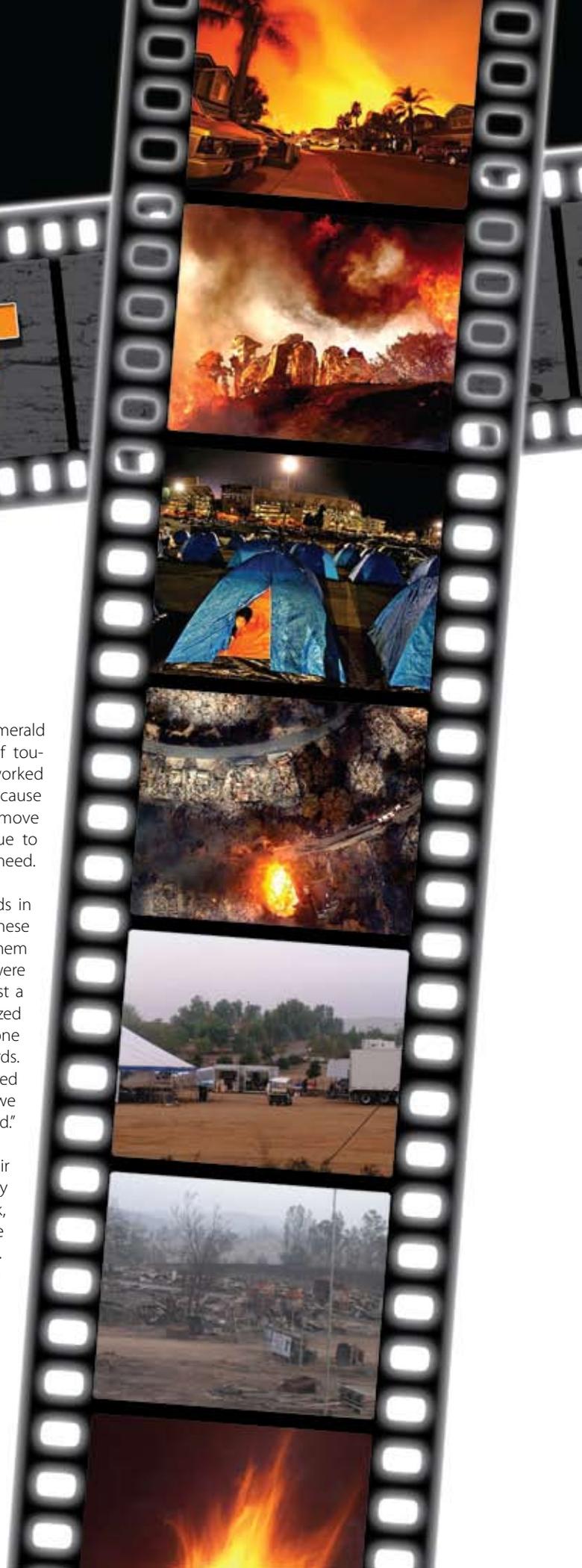
by Fred Smith

As many as 30 persons came from Sea World and other areas to Emerald Forest Gardens to help Jerry Jennings remove the largest collection of toucans in the world to a safe location. As many of us who have worked with softbills know, they can't be kept in pet carriers for very long because they stress so easily. Nevertheless, the volunteers managed to move 384 birds - mostly toucans - to safety. Of those, only 15 were lost due to stress! We applaud those who dropped everything to help others in need.

I spoke with a couple who had one of the largest collections of lovebirds in the country. They had been breeding and studying the genetics of these birds for years. When they went to bed, the fires were so far away from them that there was no basis for concern. Within a few hours, however, they were awakened from their sleep by the local Sheriff and told that they had just a few minutes to evacuate. There was no time to collect any of their prized birds because the fires were moving so fast. Their home was saved, but one bird building and part of another were lost as well as hundreds of birds. When I visited with them and asked if they needed any feed, they responded "Well, we just received our standing order of feed for one month, and we only have about 25 % of our birds left. I guess we don't need any feed."

The most common problem the aviculturists faced was where to take their birds once they cleared the fire area. They also did not know how long they would be away from their house and cages—would it be for a day, a week, or longer? Remember, it is very hard to feed and water some birds that are being kept in carriers, especially if they have to be maintained for very long. At our town hall meetings, we discussed the need for each bird owner to work on an evacuation plan including where to go during an evacuation. Even this can be very hard, depending on the type of disaster and what areas are affected. Many times we have to make decisions on the spur of

**For more information about the
AFA Disaster Relief Program contact Fred Smith
at 863-858-6739 or fredsmith@netzero.net**





the moment. Looking back and saying a decision made on this basis was, perhaps, not the best decision that might have been made doesn't change anything, even though we may have made the best decision that we could have at the time. However, planning in advance enables better thought-out and more reasoned decisions.

What the Southern California area needs is rain! They need lots of it, but in small amounts at a time. As I traveled the roads and saw the dry foliage in some places and nothing but dirt and ashes in others, it was obvious that a large amount of rain could cause huge erosion problems; a looming disaster of another sort. Looking up at the side of the mountains and seeing fields of large boulders embedded in a soil matrix made me think what would happen if the dirt around them washed away! These large rocks, some as big as 6 feet across, would roll down those hillsides at great speeds, devastating everything in their path.

I have since received several e-mails from those in the fire areas. One I received that stands out in my mind was from Lisa and Gamini Ratnavira of Fallbrook, California. Lisa stated that she had been out "measuring grace today and it is 6/10 of a mile". I knew as soon as I read it what she meant. The fires had been stopped 6/10s of a mile from their studio and Nature Walk! They were very grateful for the 'grace' given them.

As I traveled into some of the most devastated areas (such as the town of Ramona and the surrounding areas), I saw a place where a home once stood. All that was left was a chimney and the remains of a family car. Where are the family members now? I thought. What are their basic material needs? I asked. Then a realization came to me; what they most needed was to know that someone cared! I needed to let them know that we, as aviculturists from other parts of the country, shared their pain. "Stuff" just didn't really matter at this time in their life; they needed the comfort of feeling someone's arms around them. Each one of us needs to keep the California fire victims in our thoughts and prayers as they try to regroup and begin to put their lives back together. If a person comes to mind that you know was in the fire area, send them a card or call them and let them know that you care for them and will be remembering them during this difficult time. It will make a positive difference for all concerned.

My heart breaks when I think about all the birds that perished. However, it is a consolation to me that, as the scriptures state, "God sees every sparrow that falls and his heart breaks". We are not alone in our sorrow.

I want to publicly thank those who worked with me on the Disaster Relief Team. They were: Genny Wall, Southern California Regional Director; Margrethe Warden; Mary Ellen LaPage and Christiana McKnight. These ladies were very helpful to me and I thank them!

It would be great if no more disasters occurred in our lifetime. However, we all know that somewhere and sometime, another catastrophe will occur. When it does, be assured that the AFA Disaster Relief Program will be ready to provide all the assistance and support that we can. 🙏

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