

# Into the Inferno

**Local firefighters talk about their experiences battling the Thomas Fire in Southern California in December and why they went to help**

By Scott Laird

Last December California had one of the worst wildfire seasons in their history, including the massive Thomas Fire that raged between Ventura and Santa Barbara, while Oregon held its collective breathe last summer as firefighters battled the Eagle Creek Fire in an attempt to save Mutnomah Falls and the scenic Columbia River Gorge.

Local firefighters from Columbia County were deployed last year as part of strike teams to help fight fire in both those regions.

Ben Davis is a professional firefighter with Columbia River Fire and Rescue. He is also a Vernonia resident and member of the Board of Directors for the Vernonia Rural Fire Protection District (VRFPD). Columbia River Fire and Rescue provides emergency services for St. Helens, Columbia City, and Rainier. Will Steinweg is the paid Training Captain at VRFPD. Both these men were deployed to Southern California as part of a strike force from Columbia County and spent 14 days fighting the Creek Fire just north of Los Angeles, the Lilac Fire near San Diego, and the Thomas Fire. Earlier in the summer Vernonia Fire Chief Dean Smith spent time helping fight Oregon's Eagle Creek Fire.

The massive Thomas Fire became California's largest wildfire in history, burning 281,893 acres while destroying 1,063 structures and damaging 280 others.

Just how do local firefighters end up in Southern California fighting fires?

According to the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office, California initially made a request for mutual aid in early December. Oregon Emergency Management then contacted appropriate agencies around the state and assembled 15 strike teams, made up of a total of 269 personnel and 75 equipment apparatus, to mobilize and head to California to assist in containing and fighting the fires.

It's all part of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a national state-to-state mutual aid system that can only be enacted by a state's governor in the event of emergencies.

Columbia County's strike team was made up of 17 personnel from various agencies, including Davis and Steinweg. After assembling in Scappoose on short notice (Davis says activation notice for wildfires can be as advanced as 24 hours, or maybe just an hour), the team traveled in a 22 hour caravan to the Creek Fire. After a day of rest the team spent shifts of 24 hours on, 24 hours off for the next 14 days. They spent several days at the Creek Fire, were moved to the Lilac Fire, and finally ended up being deployed to the Thomas Fire.

At the Creek and Lilac Fires the Columbia County strike team acted as a "quick response" group and were sent to initially attack fire flare ups.



At the Thomas Fire the strike team were engaged in structural protection. They cleared burnable debris and brush from around homes, cleaned out gutters, and moved wood piles. They set up sprinklers on all the homes on one street and all those homes were saved. They also did some active firefighting where they had an opportunity to work alongside professional wildfire fighting "hotshot crews," digging containment lines, helping set back burns, coordinating with helicopters dropping fire retardant and water, and doing other clean up.

Davis and Steinweg talked about the difference in fighting structure fires compared to fighting wildland fires. "We're all taught about the fire triangle which says the three things you need for a fire are heat, fuel, and oxygen," explains Steinweg. "In structural firefighting you try to take away the heat. In wildland firefighting, you take away the

fuel. It's a really different mindset."

"In structural firefighting we're taught from the beginning, 'You have to put the fire out. You have to attack it.'" adds Davis. "If you apply that same mentality to wildland fires you can get people hurt or killed. It's more about figuring out where you can stop it rather than attacking it head on. We try to direct the fire around the structures we're trying to protect."

In fact, a firefighter from California was killed in the line-of-duty while fighting the Thomas Fire while the Columbia County strike team was there. Neither Davis nor Steinweg has been

part of a fire that had a line-of-duty death, and found the experience very sobering. "It really brings home just how dangerous it can be and how quickly the conditions can change" said Davis.

At the Thomas Fire camp was set up at the Ventura County Fairgrounds where, following their shifts, firefighters took turns trading bunk space set up in tractor trailers that housed 40 firefighters each. Davis says that at one point there were about 8,600 firefighters in the camp who had trav-



eled from Washington, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, and even Texas and the Dakotas. "The logistics of providing food, housing, showers, laundry facilities, and equipment for that many people is just mind boggling," says Davis. "And they're setting it up in a matter of hours."

Davis says sometimes local residents don't understand why Oregon will send local resources away to other states or areas in Oregon to help fight fires when our own fire danger might be high, especially during the summer months.

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