

Cowboy 911 rescues animals after wildfires

By Caitlyn May
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Brandon Blakesley's first interaction with Cowboy 911 was on Facebook.

The group, which now has 21,000 followers on its page, was using the social media platform to reach out to potential volunteers and donors in an effort to maximize their missions to California, where they rescued livestock and other animals after the Camp wildfire in Paradise destroyed entire communities.

"My goal is to try and inform people ways they can get involved," Blakesley, a Cottage Grove resident said during a phone interview. He had made another trip to California with his three working dogs and his trailer and said the effects of the fire still lingered in the community.

"Going through the heart of the community, you know, this community that was built so well is stripped of everything it once had," he said. "There's neighborhoods I went through and there's maybe one house that survived on the road."

The Camp fire tore through more than 150,000 acres in Butte County, Calif., in the 18 days that it burned before being declared 100 percent contained on Nov. 25.

Nearly 14,000 homes were destroyed along with 4,800 other structures, killing 88 people. At one point, more than 1,000 were reported missing.

That number has since dropped to 25.

Cowboy 911 was started by Justin Jones after he ran into an elderly couple with a flat tire. Instead of waiting for help, Jones told local media outlets he thought of all the nearby community members who would have gladly offered help and eliminated a long wait time.

When the Camp and Car fires started, community members turned to Cowboy 911 and the group



PHOTO C/O BRANDON BLAKESLEY

Cottage Grove resident Brandon Blakesley and his three working dogs recently made another trip to California to help Cowboy 911, a community-based group, search for animals in need of rescuing in the wake of the recent wildfires that have swept the state.

has since then rescued thousands of animals.

"People had 30 seconds to a minute to get out of their homes," Blakesley said, "So, yes — it only takes 30 seconds to a minute to write their phone numbers on their horses. But for some people, it was 30 seconds to a minute to get their children out of the house."

Blakesley, who moved to Cottage Grove in 2012, has rescued all types of animals in his handful of trips to California from horses to dogs to lizards, exotic birds and tortoises. His most memorable rescue was a pair of horses up on a hill when the smoke was still so thick it hindered his vision.

"It was a horse with no eyes and a mare and that horse followed that mare all the way down," he said. "That mare was a seeing eye dog for that horse and they

were best friends."

The animals Cowboy 911 rescues in conjunction with North Valley Animal Disaster are housed at the Chico Airport and the Butte County Fairgrounds. Residents missing animals can call a hotline and volunteers work to match animals with their owners.

"It's neighbors helping neighbors," Blakesley said. "And a neighbor can be a neighbor whether they're 10 minutes away or 10 miles away or 10 hours away."

Locally, Wagon Wheel Feed and Grain in Creswell is working with Blakesley to gather donations for the animals that Blakesley says can go through 40,000 tons of food a day. According to the feed store, it is accepting credit card numbers of those who want to donate but don't make the trip to Creswell. For those who do,

they can drop off donations at the store or purchase feed at the store to be shipped to California.

Donations are being sold for the cause at wholesale, rather than retail price, according to the store.

"To some people, maybe they can't have children but these animals are their children, they're family," Blakesley said. "And it's the toughest time, the holiday season so I just want to let people know how they can help."

For more information, contact Blakesley at 541-206-8591.

To donate, contact Wagon Wheel Feed and Grain at 541-942-4386.

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