

DISASTER RESPONDERS TO RECEIVE SPECIAL ECLIPSE AWARD

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HORSEMEN RISKED LIVES FOR THEIR HORSES AT SAN LUIS REY

It started as a minor brush fire first spotted in the late morning of Dec. 7 in northwest San Diego County. Fanned by unusually strong Santa Ana winds, with gusts of more than 60 miles per hour, within 30 minutes the fire consumed 50 acres. Within the next hour it spread to 500 acres. By early afternoon, the blaze expanded westward to the San Luis Rey training center, where about 450 Thoroughbred racehorses were stabled.

As the fire encroached, horsemen did what they could to protect their barns, dousing roofs with water from hoses. Training center staff smothered flames with dirt as spot fires popped up.

Vans were summoned for emergency evacuation,

but most found they could no longer access the training center, or could not make it in time. The 2017 California wildfire season had been the worst on record, including five of the 20 most destructive fires in the state's history, and drought conditions left much of the land unusually prone to ignition. Between the wind and the dry fuels, the fire was gaining in size and strength by the minute.

The trainers, assistant trainers, foremen, and grooms on the scene faced agonizing decisions as the fire moved across the property in a scattershot fashion, from hillside to barn roof, sometimes by way of blazing palm trees, depending on where the windswept sparks might take.

Should they leave the horses in their stalls a little longer, in case help arrives, or should they let them free to fend for themselves, despite the many risks of allowing animals that have been contained and supervised their entire lives to run wild? And how long should the humans even stay to care for these horses when their way out could be cut off?

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