**Critter Corner**

**Special FIRE Edition!**

*Rachael Komulainen, Park Animal Keeper*

The day was like any other – busy! There is always a long list of things to do in the barnyard. As I arrived at the office around 2 p.m., Miguel Amador, our lead maintenance staff, informed me that there was yet another fire. Just a few days prior, there had been a fire started off of the 14 freeway, near the Newhall exit. This time, though, he said the fire was coming from the 5 freeway. Oh, that’s a long ways away…. I thought to myself. However, I wanted to go to the back of the property—behind the museum on the hill—to see the exact distance. As Miguel and I started driving up on the Kawasaki ‘mule’ (one of our golf-cart style transportation vehicles), we could see the huge plume of smoke from the upper bison viewing area. “Wow…it is close!” I remarked.

We continued driving all the way up to the back of the property, along the dirt roadways, until we got to the end of the Park’s property. At that point, there is a home/property of some folks that border our property. The fire was completely out-of-control and heading our way! We watched it quickly climb an entire ridge in a matter of minutes. Norm Phillips, Hart Park Superintendent, was notified immediately, and the decision was made to keep all staff (past their end of shift times), so as to facilitate emergency procedures, if needed. Then, Jessica Tresierras (barnyard staff) was called back into work to help out. As I watched the progression of the fire getting closer to the Park, I continued to organize stock trailers for evacuating animals and a location to evacuate to. Jessica, along with another maintenance staff member, Misael Ramirez, began crating all of the smaller barnyard animals, in evacuation preparation. It is a lot of work to pull all of the crates from the barn’s back storage room, prepare them (with hay or straw on the floor), haul them down to the barnyard, and then catch each and every animal and catalog them for our records. Jessica and Misael did an awesome job! As I monitored the fire’s progress, made all of the necessary arrangements via phone calls, and kept Norm informed of the progress, it was a blessing to have such a capable and compassionate crew taking care of the animal preparations. In regards to the bison: they were okay, too. Their enclosure is around 22 acres in size. At the floor of the enclosure (near the senior center), there are large dirt areas, where they would be safe from fire. Also, there is the concrete flood control area that borders their enclosure. If need be, they could be moved into that area, which would be even further away from any potential fire.

After a few tense hours, with the wind shifting back and forth, the fire crews were able contain the fire line and keep the fire away from the park and surrounding properties. The park continued to be Command Center, though, and their equipment and staging area remained in our park for a couple more days.

The fire was CLOSE! It certainly had its scary and stressful moments but…it was a great drill to see our evacuation policies in place. The best laid plans are just that—plans. When you actually face the emergency, there are always variables that are unknown at the time of planning. For instance, our first choice to evacuate to was Placerita Canyon Nature Park because it is the closest sister L.A. County Park that can accommodate the bulk of animals we would need to move. However, the day of the fire, they had their own issues with air quality due to smoke. So, we were advised by their staff not to evacuate there. Therefore, I had to figure out the next best alternative—which happened to be Castaic Animal Shelter. It is these types of unknown factors that make up a true emergency situation. Nothing is ever entirely by the textbook. I, personally, have such huge gratitude and appreciation for: all of the staff that assisted that day; Karen Stepp and Castaic Animal Shelter (for their animal trailers and evacuation site--had we needed them); and all of the emergency personnel (i.e. sheriffs, firefighters, etc.). This whole situation is a reminder that fire is a very real threat, especially in our drought conditions. We all need to be mindful of setting up emergency protocol to best protect everyone and everything that is important to us. Be safe!