



STAYING CONNECTED AS WILDFIRES RAGE

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Each year, wildfires ravage parts of the Western United States, creating huge communications challenges for first responders, residents and communications carriers. During the 2009 Station Fire, the largest in Los Angeles County history, it took thousands of firefighters, support personnel, and the coordination between numerous government agencies to completely contain the blaze. Power was knocked out in many areas, impacting the wired telecommunications network and making it difficult for evacuated residents and rescue workers to charge wireless devices—critical for running base camps and evacuation shelters, maintaining contact with workers and accessing email and the Internet.

The influx of personnel causes huge spikes in demand. Often fires attack remote areas and canyons, away from population centers where wireless networks are strongest. Wireless coverage and capacity must be boosted so calls and data transmission can go through.

ADVANCED PREPARATION

“Preparation for a disaster starts long before the day it happens,” says Verizon Wireless Director of Network Operations, Lowell Handy. “If you’re worried about brush and weeds around your cell site the day of the fire, it’s too late.” Verizon Wireless does year-round preventive maintenance, clearing sites and ensuring that generators at cell sites and switches have adequate reserve time, fuel and backup batteries in case of power interruption.



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– Lowell Handy, Director of Network Operations, Verizon Wireless

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– William Maheu, Former Assistant Chief, San Diego Police Department

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– Merlin Green, Emergency Operations Manager, Loveland Fire & Rescue, Colorado

Preparation also means forging year-round relationships with public safety agencies and first responders to anticipate emergency requirements. "In the Station Fire, it took one phone call and we were in because we took the time to get to know them in advance," Lowell Handy says.

Loveland, Colorado, Fire Department Emergency Operations Manager, Merlin Green says, "You have to build the relationships early and have them in place before the disasters happen." He recalls receiving a cell phone call from his Verizon Wireless Government Account Manager while rushing to the Reservoir Road fire in September 2010. "She said, 'I know what you've got going. Would you like me to get our Verizon Wireless team up there to provide additional support in the field?' I said 'you bet'. It was an excellent call on Verizon's part to offer their services early on."

STRONG SIGNAL, STRONG PARTNER

Verizon Wireless has invested \$11 billion in its network in the Western United States, including more than \$6 billion in California alone since 2000. Its reliable network is supported by industry-leading redundancy and maintenance measures. In Southern California, for instance, Verizon Wireless has built a private fiber optic and microwave network to ensure redundancy, diversity and reliability. When fires strike remote areas or when capacity is tested by calling spikes, Verizon Wireless will often deploy portable cell sites or network repeaters to boost coverage and capacity even further.

The Reservoir Road fire struck a remote area with large peaks and valleys that cause communication gaps. Merlin Green recalls, "Verizon Wireless came up to our location and worked with the incident command post to find out our needs. They surveyed the area to find the best location to place a repeater to boost our cell phone coverage where the incident command post was." The repeater was quickly activated, enabling first responders to communicate by cell phone and have Internet access from their laptops.

In other situations, including the 2007 fires in Southern California, Verizon Wireless uses portable cell sites to enhance coverage. William Maheu, then Assistant Chief of Police for the city of San Diego, recalls that despite several cell towers being knocked out by the fire, he never needed a land mobile radio over several days of round-the clock work. "I used my cell phone to do everything ... I was able to make phone calls to everyone and the worst I had to do was to hit redial once."

DEVICES, CHARGING AND MORE

A reliable network is the first step. Agencies and first responders also need an adequate supply of fully charged devices. Verizon Wireless often donates emergency cell phones and data devices to first responders and government agencies during wildfires.

When needed, the company also deploys and staffs outreach tents at the command centers to support firefighters with phone calls, Internet and email access and phone charging. Typically these services are provided free of charge. Company volunteers often pitch in. During the Jesusita and Station Fires in California, for instance, Verizon Wireless provided emergency responders and relief agencies the wireless devices needed to run their base camp and evacuation shelters. In other situations, such as the September 2010 Fourmile Canyon Fire in Colorado, Verizon Wireless established a free mobile charging station, added extra staff and increased its inventory of phone and device chargers to help residents evacuated from their homes.

"At Verizon Wireless, our first concern is taking care of the community," says Lowell Handy, adding, "It's not just a business decision. I take a lot of pride in the fact that they give me the ability to do what we need to support our communities, the places where we live and work."



THE VERIZON WIRELESS RESPONSE

- YEAR-ROUND CLEARING OF BRUSH AROUND CELL AND SWITCH SITES.
- PORTABLE CELL SITES AND REPEATERS ENHANCE COVERAGE IN REMOTE AREAS.
- WIRELESS EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTERS PROVIDE FREE PHONE CALLS, INTERNET AND EMAIL ACCESS AND PHONE CHARGING.
- DONATED EMERGENCY CELL PHONES AND DATA DEVICES TO FIRST RESPONDERS AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES.

When wildfires rage, Verizon Wireless works to keep wireless service going and first responders connected.