

NEWS PHOTOGRAPHER

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These are hard days

And we are witnesses: Wildfires of historic size. Brutal effects of COVID-19. Protests unending and emotional. While looming over all, an election like no other.



September 28, 2020: Houses burn on Mountain Hawk Drive in Santa Rosa's Skyhawk Community as the Glass Fire rolls in from Napa County. Eleven homes burned in the area, but firefighters saved hundreds of others.

Kent Porter, *The Press Democrat*

NPPA member since 1983

WILDFIRE INSOMNIA

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Living and working at the center of wildfires
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By Tracy Barbutes

Winds kicked up on a recent afternoon to about 25 mph, arriving from the north. The National Weather Service issued a red flag warning over much of Northern California, my county included. The warning means there's a combination of extreme dryness, warm temperatures and high winds: conditions where any spark at the wrong time and place can lead to a wildfire.

This also means I'll sleep lightly, if at all. During fire season, I wake repeatedly to wind gusts, the smell of smoke or pine needles plinking onto the deck. While awake, I scroll through assorted fire and weather apps and check Twitter for updated information. I think about my less-mobile neighbors and escape routes. My camera gear and evacuation bags are ready to grab on the way out the door. If conditions are unusually stressful, I'll wonder if I will have enough time to grab everything and if I will be a viable journalist, communicating news while evacuating. The imagination runs wild at night.

According to [Cal Fire](#), there have been over 8,200 wildfires that have burned over 3.9 million acres in California since the beginning of the year. As of early October, over 53,000 residents have evacuated across the state. There have been 31 fatalities statewide and nearly 8,000 structures have been destroyed. The stats increase daily.

California isn't alone in the destruction. According to the Statesman Journal in Salem, [Oregon, wildfires](#) have burned nearly 1 million acres across that state, and at least 10 wildfires were still burning at the time of publication.

There's no shortage of statistics or remarkable imagery being shared of property being consumed by flames; eerie, Mars-like skies; firefighters in various stages of combat or weariness; as well as remnants of homes and communities in ashes.

What you're not seeing, though, is what it's like to live in a community under constant risk of fire. While other photographers retreat to the safety of their homes in other parts of the state, the threat and stress exist around the clock. Fire affects most aspects of our lives.

I was recently on scene at the Moc Fire shortly after it ignited a few miles from



my home. After photographing for several hours, I heard on the radio my neighborhood was being evacuated. My dog was home alone, and my evacuation bags sat by the door. It was an adrenaline-filled 10-hour day, including documenting, editing, filing and evacuating.

For more than 30 straight days this summer, I lived, worked, ate and hardly slept under oppressive wildfire smoke. As the Creek Fire burned to the south,

and multiple fires burned in every other direction, the EPA's air quality values in our region tipped out well over 500, which is hazardous and beyond the upper limit of the Air Quality Index (AQI). The red flag warnings kept coming.

While scrolling through social media at 3 a.m. a few weeks ago, I came upon Kent Porter's post referring to "wildfire insomnia." On Sept. 8, he tweeted, "I've decided to keep my fire gear on for the rest of the

summer." I knew immediately I needed to reach out to this stranger enduring a similar fate.

As Kent and I commiserated recently about wildfire insomnia, a term he likely coined, he laughed, "I've told friends I hibernate during December, once the rains come." He said he sleeps about four to six hours a night during the peak of fire season. (Follow him on Twitter [@kentphotos.](#))

We shared similar stories about how we experience wildfires, as journalists and as people who have lived in wildfire country for years. We no longer see our surrounding landscapes as pristine beauty, but instead as fuel. On hikes, we note escape routes. We park our vehicles so that we can quickly exit when necessary. We're both fairly sleep-deprived.

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August 20, 2020: *Inmate firefighters work near the Moc Fire burning along Hwy 49 near Moccasin, California. The fire threatened San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy hydropower plant nearby.*

Photo by Tracy Barbutes, independent photojournalist



September 17, 2020: The Bobcat Fire burns through the Angeles National Forest in Los Angeles County, north of Azusa, California. In early October, it had consumed nearly 115,000 acres.

Photo by Kyle Grillot, AFP

NPPA member since 2010



September 15, 2020: Keith Davis, a member of Washington Task Force One Search and Rescue squad, praises search and rescue dog Asher while conducting operations in Blue River, Oregon, in areas affected by the Holiday Farm Fire. One death was confirmed in the fire that burned more than 173,000 acres in the McKenzie River watershed, making it the largest fire in Lane County, Oregon's history. Photo by Andy Nelson, *The Register-Guard*, NPPA member since 1994

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Independent photographer Kyle Grillot began covering fires with the La Tuna Fire in September 2017. He and his partner recently moved from downtown Los Angeles, where there was effectively zero fire threat to their home, to Wrightwood, California. Kyle told me recently, “I don’t get to go home and be safer. I come home from a fire, and then the wind blows, and I look around and see where I should have cleared more or where the woodpile should be moved. Even the rain is stressful. We want rain, but not too much, too soon.”

Too much rain, too soon, may cause devastating debris flows as it has throughout California’s wildfire history.

Kent Porter, who contributed to the 2018 Pulitzer Prize-winning team for fire coverage at Santa Rosa’s *The Press Democrat*, used to cover about a dozen fires a year. Now he documents three to four a week. “In the past month, I’ve covered an 800,000-acre fire, a 10-acre fire, a 1,000-acre fire.” He’s covering the Glass and Shady fires as I write this.

Kent continued, “The paper treats me really well. They’re good about getting us the gear and training. They’re very progressive with wildfire coverage and safety.”

It’s quite obvious when talking with Kent, or viewing his social media, he’s passionate about his work and his role as a photojournalist. When he’s not photographing fires, he’s sharing wind and weather forecasts and his vast knowledge of fire behavior on social media. He does make the time to hike, fish, cook, listen to music, head to the coast or just hop in his truck and drive around. But he’s rarely without his camera gear and PPE.

The self-described adrenaline junkie and weather geek personally knew hundreds of people affected by the Tubbs Fire, which incinerated neighborhoods within the city of Santa Rosa. He said, “The Pulitzer tempered the loss. We were all suffering community grief. When you’re covering your community on fire, it’s a huge responsibility to do it with honesty and integrity. It’s a fine line of showing a home being consumed by flames and sharing news. The *Press Democrat* staff is very conscious about community.”

Indeed. The paper partnered with a local credit union and raised \$32 million for those affected by the Tubbs Fire, all of which was distributed into the community and to local nonprofit organizations.

Andy Nelson, a staff photojournalist with Eugene, Oregon’s *Register-Guard*, has covered numerous fires throughout his career. He said that his home is vulnerable to fire from mid-July until mid-October. “I live in the hills around Eugene and have tall Douglas firs in my neighborhood and (near) my home,” Andy said. “The potential for fire in my neighborhood is always there.” Though he and his family had go-bags ready for the recent fires, they’ve never had to evacuate.

Andy continued, “Covering the Holiday Farm Fire was more personal than any other fire I’ve covered. I was sensitive to what I shot and how I shot it. We didn’t want to be the first source of people to find out if their house had burned down, so we tended to shoot businesses that had been affected. We also know which structures that survived could be a sign of hope to people in the midst of tragedy. It’s important to be factual in the coverage



September 13, 2020: In Eugene, Oregon, evacuees receive badly needed clothing, food, and other supplies at the evacuee center established at the Masonic Center Eugene Lodge across the street from Autzen Stadium Sunday afternoon. Due to the overwhelming response of the Lane County community, so many donations were received the operation had to be moved from the Springfield High School Silke Field to the larger, more secure location. Photo by Dan Morrison, NPPA member since 2005

but empathetic, too. Many of us are living in areas that are seeing enormous impacts from natural disasters and are being personally affected. When you live in the West, in the forest, you feel like it’s only a matter of time. When will it be my time? When that moment comes, I’m going to have to balance that drive to cover the story and the need to take care of myself and my family,” Andy said.

After covering the 2015 Valley Fire, in Lake County, California, Kent’s first really big community fire, he experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He had grown up in the region, and it was traumatic to document places with which he had emotional ties. “I was having nightmares after the Valley Fire. It was really tough to watch your own community burn.”

Through the Employment Assistance Plan (EAP), he saw a counselor who specialized in firefighter and police PTSD. The sessions helped and continue to do so. He encourages others to seek counseling if needed. “Covering big fires is bound to affect you,” he told me during our chat. “It’s a thing that’s forever marked in your

brain. It will bite you big time if you don’t deal with it. The sooner you come to terms, the better off you’ll be.”

University of Oregon journalism professor and freelance multimedia journalist Dan Morrison and his wife packed evacuation bags during the Holiday Farm Fire. “Deciding what to take and what you must leave behind is gut-wrenching,” Dan continued, “My first priority was, of course, to make sure my wife was safe, but as you know as a journalist, your first reaction is to run to the fire, not away from it. I’ve been covering dangerous situations from before I even met her in 1982, so she knows the drill. We slept lightly for a few nights.” The AQI reached 550 at one point, and the smoke lingered in the valley for days. He said, “It was otherworldly. Much like Stephen King’s ‘The Mist.’ We kept waiting to see a dinosaur appear.”

Referring to wildfire smoke and air quality in Southern California, Kyle told me, “Every day I look out over the hills and look into the valley and determine what I’m going to do for the day. Should I be outside or inside today?” The irony of buying and remodeling a home in a fire-

prone area in Southern California isn’t lost on him. “When do you stop putting up drywall?” He added, “I’d be fine if I never cover a fire again — but that’s implying that there would no longer be fires.”

I asked Kent if he ever considered moving away. I told him I frequently joke that if I leave the Sierra foothills, I’ll move to a houseboat, preferably in, or adjacent to, a rainforest.

Kent said he’s thought about it but that ultimately, his home is in Sonoma County. “I love the community. This is where I grew up. I can’t leave my family. I love it here. I owe my career to the people who live here. I’m really appreciative of that. In 33 years, I’ve photographed a lot of people. Everything is within a two-hour reach of here, including world-class wine and athletics. It’s my community, and I love it.” ■

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Kent Porter's fire gear

Kent Porter has covered his share of wildfires. A staff photographer at the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, he and the newsroom won the Pulitzer Prize in 2018 for breaking news coverage of the wildfires that killed 40 people and destroyed 6,190 homes in the region, including in the city of Santa Rosa, California.

Kent's gear is always prepared and ready these days. Here's a tour.

Brush helmet with goggles, shroud, a helmet light, a bandana (I like red) to help filter smoke and heat, Nomex brush jacket and pants.

Gloves, two pairs: one light pair for fires that are in mop-up and overhaul stage, and a heavier pair for active fires with lots of heat. I rotate out a green pair (not pictured) of Nomex pants if I'm headed into multi-day coverage because the pants really start to smell.

From the bottom: I carry a shovel, chainsaw and rope (not pictured) in my vehicle in case a tree comes down across the road, to either: a) drag it off the road b) cut through what can't be dragged. c) The shovel is for getting unstuck when the vehicle is ... stuck

Clockwise from left: Wolfpack gear that includes a 102-ounce water reservoir and a fire shelter. I carry a spare fire shelter (the yellow pack) inside my vehicle in case a colleague needs one while they are on assignment with me.

A flat of bottled water with high protein snacks such as energy bars and beef jerky. I will often stock up with fruits and vegetables if it's an overnight assignment.

I'll use two cameras (shot this picture with the other body) a 300mm 2.8, a 70-210mm 2.8 zoom and a 16-35mm 2.8 wide. More often than not, I travel light when I'm walking up a hillside and use the two bodies with the two zooms.

Gatorade or some sort of energy drink to replace electrolytes.

A fanny pack for the smaller brush fires that are pretty much done that replaces the shelter.

I carry a blanket in case I need to sleep in the vehicle overnight. Contrary to popular belief, it gets cold at night at a fire.

Fire boots with at least eight inches in height to cover the ankle.

*****Tried-and-true,** I carry just the minimum weight while shooting a fire. If it's a campaign fire with a lot of walking and driving, I'll go through most of the water and Gatorade during the heat of the summer.

*****I also wear** a long sleeve white cotton shirt under the jacket to help prevent radiation heat burns.

NO-NOS: If you have to use a fire shelter, you are in way over your head. The fire shelter is a last-ditch effort to save your life, but you need to carry it if you are on an active fire line.

Gloves are important. If you use your hands to break a fall and stick your hands in white ash, it's a trip to the hospital with at least second-degree burns.

Wear the gloves.

The boots are important. Stepping into a burned-out stump hole can often lead to burns or sprained and broken ankles with hiking boots. Rattlesnakes are a constant worry in NorCal and the boots help in that regard.

