

Firefighting mars the earth. California crews are fixing it

August 15 2018, by Jonathan J. Cooper



In this Friday, Aug. 10, 2018 photo, Jack Hattendorf steers a road grader to repair a dirt path near Lakeport, Calif. Even as flames continue chewing through forestland nearby, Hattendorf and others are working to repair the damage wrought not by flames but by firefighters trying to stop them. (AP Photo/Jonathan J. Cooper)

Jack Hattendorf steers his road grader back and forth across a dirt path cutting through blackened earth.

With each pass, he smooths and tamps down the soil to remake a dirt road that fire crews tore apart days earlier to stop flames that would become part of the largest wildfire on record in California.

Even as flames chew through forestland nearby, Hattendorf and others are working to repair the damage caused not by flames but by firefighters trying to stop them. They seek to restore private lands, protect the environment and water supply, and prevent erosion that can lead to mudslides like the one that tore through a community outside Santa Barbara in January, killing nearly two dozen people.

"Suppression repair" begins almost as soon as the fire moves through and the ground cools off—a massive but often overlooked part of firefighting.

"We just follow behind when it's all done and controlled and fix everything that we can," said Tim Meyers, a forester for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection who is overseeing suppression repair at the twin fires known as the Mendocino Complex.

Crews control wildland blazes by corralling them inside containment lines, built as quickly as possible by bulldozers and hand tools to clear flammable brush and slow or stop the spread of fire by eliminating its fuel. When the fire is extinguished in one area, a team with an array of heavy equipment goes in looking for things to repair.



This photo taken Friday, Aug. 10, 2018 near Lakeport, Calif. shows dirt paths created by bulldozers in an effort to contain part of the largest wildfire on record in California. Firefighters are battling the largest wildfire on record in California, while foresters and other experts are working to repair the damage. Crews are smoothing out dirt roads and replacing fences to mitigate the damage caused not by flames but by the firefighters racing to extinguish them. They seek to restore private lands, protect the environment and water supply, and prevent erosion.(AP Photo/Jonathan J. Cooper)

They replace barbed-wire cattle fences, gates and crushed culverts; smooth out dirt roads torn apart by heavy equipment; flatten the berms created by bulldozers and put hiking trails back in shape.

When necessary, they work with Native American tribes to repair damage to archaeological sites or clean the pink liquid that suppresses flames out of waterways.

If there's something they can't fix—say, a bulldozer plowed through an ornate gate outside someone's driveway—the property owner can file a claim for compensation.

One day late last week, 19 bulldozers, four road graders, six excavators and about a dozen water tenders were assigned to make repairs at the Mendocino Complex Fire, Meyers said.

Suppression repair is mainly led by foresters and other Cal Fire officials with a background in managing natural resources. They also train seasonal and permanent firefighters, Meyers said, and get help from dozens of contractors operating heavy equipment.



This photo taken Friday, Aug. 10, 2018 near Lakeport, Calif. shows a dirt path and dusty berms left behind when a bulldozer passed through private land in an effort to contain part of the largest wildfire on record in California. Even as

flames continue chewing through forestland nearby, crews are working to repair the damage wrought not by flames but by firefighters trying to stop them. (AP Photo/Jonathan J. Cooper)

"Some of it's not as glamorous as the firefighting, but it's just as needed," Meyers said.

Dawn Bodley didn't mind that bulldozers carved a containment line through her backyard. The fire swept through her property, but thanks to firefighters who stayed and fought, her home and garden were spared.

"I think those are special people," said Bodley, 62, who lives on a former ranch outside the city of Lakeport. "I don't know how they do it. They run into fire to protect other people's property, not even their own."

Not everyone is pleased with how the firefighters went about their work. One rancher said bulldozers tore apart grazing land and knocked over trees with no apparent strategy.

The rancher who refused to give his name because he didn't want to be identified criticizing firefighters said the repair crews have done good work, which he appreciates, but was irritated so much damage was done in the first place.



In this Friday, Aug. 10, 2018 photo, Jack Hattendorf steers a road grader to repair a dirt path near Lakeport, Calif. Even as flames continue chewing through forestland nearby, Hattendorf and others are working to repair the damage wrought not by flames but by firefighters trying to stop them. (AP Photo/Jonathan J. Cooper)

Full containment of the largest-ever California wildfire that's burning about 120 miles (264 kilometers) north of San Francisco still is weeks away, but suppression work is in full gear and could last months.

Among the most important tasks: building dirt humps across bulldozer scars to direct water away from the bare, dusty path. That prevents sediment from clouding streams and rivers, which is harmful to endangered fish. It also helps to control erosion—a serious concern after fire wipes out the vegetation that holds soils together.

The mudslides that buried parts of the wealthy community of Montecito in January were triggered by rainfall that came quickly after the [fire](#) and before suppression repairs were done. The work can't prevent that kind of erosion, Meyers said, but it might slow it down.



This photo taken Friday, Aug. 10, 2018 near Lakeport, Calif. shows a dirt path left behind when a bulldozer toppled trees in an effort to contain part of the largest wildfire on record in California. Even as flames continue chewing through forestland not far from here, crews are working to repair the damage wrought not by flames but by firefighters trying to stop them. (AP Photo/Jonathan J. Cooper)

With California facing larger and more destructive wildfires because of heat and drought blamed on climate change, [repair](#) work is beginning

earlier to ensure more manpower and equipment are available, he said.

Keith and Melissa Barnhart, who manage a mobile home park that firefighters used as a base, said they were impressed with how well the crews cleaned up. The main evidence of the effort is pink liquid dropped by planes to slow flames that coats the trailers and buildings.

"It's pink, but we're happy," Keith Barnhart said. "We'd rather see pink than black."



In this Thursday, Aug. 9, 2018 photo, Dawn Bodley, 62, sits in her home near Lakeport, Calif. Fire swept through Bodley's property but firefighters saved her home. Firefighters are battling the largest wildfire on record in California, while foresters and other experts are working to repair the damage. (AP Photo/Jonathan J. Cooper)

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