

Fighting fires with rental cars (and trucks)

How Enterprise supports first responders battling California wildfires



Enterprise Business Rental Sales Executive Lisa Holmes at the McClellan Airfield where she delivered vehicles to the pilots of the super airtankers, used to put out the wildfires throughout California.

On Oct. 8, 2017, as many Californians drifted off to sleep, one of the most destructive fires in the state's history ignited in Northern California. High winds following a dry, hot summer set the stage for devastation. Within minutes, intense, fast-moving fires began raging across much of Napa and Sonoma counties

While the blaze barreled through neighborhood after neighborhood, leveling homes and businesses to piles of ash, Business Rental Sales Executive Lisa Holmes was in full-on firefighting mode.

With her police scanner and first responder radio by her side at her home two hours away in Sacramento, Holmes knew it was go time. While she lacks official firefighter training, she is well known among Enterprise employees and California's first responders for coordinating the rental needs of those on the front lines battling wildfires — no matter where in the state they occur.

Fighting fires from the ground

“Enterprise has three separate operating groups in California, but we learned over the years that designating one point person among them to coordinate during emergencies allows us all to better support and serve,” says Randy Gregg, Business Rental Sales Director – Sacramento. “That way, if the fire moves

across Group lines, first responders, forestry members and government officials can call Holmes directly instead of having to worry about which Group or branch they need to be renting from next.”

Put simply, Holmes helps connect all the dots, finds the closest branches to supply the best vehicles at a moment’s notice and makes sure transactions run smoothly so firefighters can focus on what’s important — putting out the fire.

“During crisis situations when seconds matter, we don’t want first responders wasting time trying to find a branch that has a four-wheel drive vehicle or is open late,” Holmes explains. “They call me directly, and because we have such a great team internally across the state, I know that whatever I promise them, we’ll be able to deliver.”

With about 60 customer accounts specific to fire departments, Holmes remains on call seven days a week during fire season – May to October – and this year was no exception. During October alone, California’s wildfires burned more than 245,000 acres, took the lives of more than 40 people, and destroyed nearly 9,000 homes and businesses.

Serving the front lines

At the peak of the disaster, there were nearly 600 Enterprise vehicles on rent helping firefighters and support staff at Cal Fire and the USDA Forrest Service. It’s easy to see why Holmes jokingly describes herself as a one-woman MERV — Enterprise Holdings’ mobile emergency response vehicle U.S. operating groups can call on for assistance when natural disasters strike.

“I usually go wherever I’m needed,” says Holmes. “During major disasters, I set up at a base camp and run interference between there and our nearest branches.”

That’s exactly what Holmes did as soon as it was safe to cross evacuation lines into areas affected by the Tubbs fire. She and San Francisco’s Group Truck Manager Danny Leahy headed for the Sonoma County base camp at the Santa Rosa County Fairgrounds to see how they could help.

“The Cal Fire chiefs, exhausted and focused on the emergencies before them, were visibly relieved to see Lisa,” Leahy says.

Holmes helped them forecast the size, type and amount of trucks they might need in the days to come – and even assisted the Truck team to drive the vehicles out. With her help, Enterprise trucks assisted Cal Fire teams with getting the vehicles they needed to move assets around and access off road areas as efficiently as possible.

“She’s inspiring and efficient, and her leadership is invaluable to me and undoubtedly to Cal Fire,” added Leahy. “When disasters strike there are a lot of unsung heroes among the local community, and in my opinion, Lisa is certainly one of them.”