

## To the Rescue!

BY JIM BAKER



### Facing the Flames

**Wildfires don't deter animal control supervisor from saving hundreds of pets, livestock**

**T**odd Stosuy (pronounced "STO-see") doesn't mind having his feet held to the fire—in fact, that's when he does his best work.

Stosuy, 32, proved that in rather heroic fashion during a series of three wildfires (dubbed Summit, Martin, and Trabing) that raged in May and June of 2008 in Santa Cruz County, Calif.

Stosuy is the supervising animal services field manager for the Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority, where he's been employed since 2003. The agency has a staff of 35, including four animal control officers and Stosuy.

Last spring and summer, when the wildfires burned, Stosuy not only helped coordinate his agency's response to the disasters—dispatching ACOs to save animals from burning homes, pens, and corrals—he also braved the flames himself.

Stosuy played a key role in evacuating about 875 animals, including 325 pets and 550 horses and other livestock, according to the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.

"Each wildfire was different, but my main role in each one of them was removing animals from harm's way," he says. "And we didn't just do it for dogs, cats, and horses—we did it for everything. We had officers going into houses pulling out birds, pulling out snakes, pulling out fish. Basically, my instructions to the officers and volunteers were, 'Anything that's alive, you're taking.'"

He got plenty close to the action in the disaster zone.

"Some of the roads I was driving up, there was actually fire licking at the vehicle ... Sometimes I had to back down the road and then run up [on foot] so that the truck didn't catch on fire," Stosuy says.

He had some close calls, one in particular during the Trabing fire that yielded a dramatic rescue story.

"I went into the house, could see cat bowls on the floor, so I knew there were cats in the house. ... I was able to locate one cat in the kitchen, grabbed him, then put him in my truck [and]... continued walking in the house. I could determine there were possibly three cats [living there], based on the pictures that were on the refrigerator. ... I couldn't find the other animals, and the fire was getting closer and closer, and I could actually see it coming up to the house, so I just opened as many doors and windows as possible and got out. And as I was driving away, I could see the house starting to catch on fire," he says.

But there was good news amid the bad. "I did find out later by talking to the owners of the house that the cats [Stosuy couldn't locate] actually did escape and were fine. ... They found them later, uninjured. And I also got their dog. They had their dog in the front yard," he says. The owners of the home, which burned to the ground, came to the evacuation center and reclaimed the cat and dog that Stosuy had saved. Mission accomplished.

Henry Brzezinski, general manager of the Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority, praises Stosuy's rescue efforts during the wildfires, describing him as a valued colleague. "I've worked with a lot of folks in the industry, and he's definitely a high-caliber employee," says Brzezinski, a veteran of 26 years in the animal protection field. Stosuy, a board member of the National Animal Control Association, acknowledges that his actions went beyond the call of duty. And he's fine with that.



SHMUEL THALEN/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Todd Stosuy, of the Santa Cruz County (Calif.) Animal Services Authority, calls to a dog on the loose as the home of the pet's owners burns to the ground. Stosuy put his life on the line evacuating animals during a series of wildfires in the summer of 2008.

He'd like to see other ACOs learn from his experience, and do likewise. "I know what I did was dangerous, I know what I did was a little out of the ordinary, but with proper training, fire gear, policies and procedures, I think we can empower officers across the country to be trained in how to go into a disaster and save animals' lives, so that we're not just doing a body count at the end," he says.