

Food Banks Face Even More Challenges As California Wildfires Increase Demand, Hinder Delivery

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*A vineyard west of Lake Berryessa in the LNU Lightning Complex fires on Thursday, August 20, 2020.
Andrew Nixon / CapRadio*

By Nina Sparling

When the Loyalton fire forced Interstate 70 to close in Sierra County in mid-August, Tammy Muldoon started to plan. She runs the High Sierra Family Resource Center, which distributes food to the community twice a month. But the highway closure kept the regular delivery from the Food Bank of Northern Nevada from making it to town. Muldoon had to cancel the mid-month food distribution in August.

“We’ll have to put that off until the first Friday in September,” she said.

The fire is just the latest challenge. Muldoon saw the number of people coming to High Sierra for food twice a month grow from 60 families a week to about 150 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across California, food banks and food pantries have been seeing similar increases in demand. With fire season clearly under way, that number is likely to increase. And it’s happening at a moment when resources are already stretched thin.

“We thought we were at capacity two years ago. And then here we are,” said Allison Goodwin, the director of programs at the Redwood Empire Food Bank, which serves much of Northern California.

After the Santa Rosa fires in 2017, the food bank saw a rise in the amount of food they moved in a year — but nothing like the rapid increase that the pandemic sparked. For the past two years, Goodwin says she saw some 18 million pounds of food move through the numerous distribution sites that Redwood Empire supplies.

This year, that number is already closer to 25 million pounds of food.

Pandemic-driven unemployment has pushed more and more people to rely on food banks and food pantries across California. Estimates suggest food insecurity rates have skyrocketed.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, Redwood Empire spent \$1.2 million on purchased food, as opposed to donated, so as to be able to feed everyone in need. Goodwin says the food bank typically spends that much money on food over the course of a year.

Relief from the United States Department of Agriculture, through the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, kicked in a steady supply of food, easing financial pressure to a degree. The California National Guard has also been packing boxes of produce and shelf-stable goods for the past several months.

But Goodwin says the financial picture this year is unprecedented.

“The typical streams of income have completely changed,” she said.

Philanthropic giving has taken a hit during the pandemic-induced recession. Thankfully, individual donations, which make up the majority of the organizational budget, have held steady. The food bank has kept many critical volunteer workers, too.

That’s a pattern that Joel Sjostrom has noticed, too. He’s the president of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, which has seen a comparable increase in demand.

The fires add pressure: Weeks and months after firefighters have extinguished the blazes, people who have lost their homes or have been uprooted may continue to turn toward food banks.

Sjostrom knows the current support from the California National Guard won’t last forever, and that the food bank will have to turn to other resources to keep up with growing numbers of people in need.

“It has been enough to continue to allow us to increase our distributions well over 50%. But we're going to need more funding for the long haul,” he said.

And now, the fires have thrown a wrench in day-to-day operations, Goodwin added. She started receiving Nixle alerts early last week as the LNU Lightning Complex fire grew in Napa, Sonoma and Solano County near Lake Berryessa.

Redwood Empire had to cancel several of its usual food distribution sites as people evacuated.

“It was like, ‘Oh, we're not going to be able to go to Monte Rio, Guerneville, Sebastopol, Jenner, Sea Ranch, Bodega.’ That's what we do on a Wednesday,” she said.

The Salvation Army and the Red Cross are providing food at temporary shelters and evacuation centers for the time being. But Goodwin thinks a lot about what happens when people leave those temporary shelters and need to eat.

“With every pandemic, every disaster, more and more people go like, ‘OK, so I've never asked for help before. I'm not even sure where to start.’”

She expects to see the number of people turning to the food bank to stock their pantries and fridges increase in the weeks and months to come. Temporary evacuations may have disrupted a few days of distribution, but Goodwin has learned this year how to be flexible and meet ever-changing, ever-growing need.

“We've gotten really good at this disaster thing,” she said. “Arguably, we're prepared and sort of always ready.”