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FACING THE FIRE - CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS OF WESTERN  
FIREFIGHTERS IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

By

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Bachelor of Science in Environmental Biology, Towson University, Towson, Maryland,  
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Professional Paper

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## Facing the Fire - Challenges and Triumphs of Western Firefighters in a Changing Climate

Chairperson: Nadia White

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The American West sits at a dangerous position in the age of climate change. Wildfires burn hotter, longer, and cover more area than ever measured. Decreased snowpack, early spring run-off, a glut of built-up timber in parks and public lands, and longer droughts all build upon one another, and it just takes one spark to start a raging wildfire that devastates a community. As such, a firefighting force is needed to deal with this changing landscape.

However, that force is dwindling, especially at the federal level. A reported 20% of wildland firefighting positions are vacant, and the Bureau of Land Management is hoping to double their permanent positions by next year. Recruitment and retention are falling flat, with many federal firefighters reporting a ‘revolving-door’ of coworkers. Pay is not sufficient to support the lifestyle necessary for seasonal work, depression and suicidal thoughts are 32 times more common than the average person, and housing is flimsy or nonexistent. People are flocking to state and municipal work, and the federal government is in need of a way to retain their force.

In the state and municipal world, fire seasons are leading to tough decisions and big changes. The recent Caldor Fire in California (and a sliver of Nevada) was the second fire to ever cross the Sierra Nevada, and the second most destructive fire of 2021. It also nearly torched the tourist town of South Lake Tahoe, but for a combination of quick action and a miracle of nature.

Together, the combination of worsening fire seasons, the poor conditions of the work, and the inconsistency of benefits is brewing a storm for the future. The goal of my Master’s Portfolio is to raise awareness about the shocking treatment of federal firefighters and effectively communicate the pressing danger of wildfires in the face of climate change. This reporting showcases the human side of those who combat these threats to communities and wildlife, and the duality of the modern firefighter. There are days of triumph and days of hardship. My hope is to reflect those conflicting emotions within my reporting.

HED: New Legislation Aims To Ease Firefighter Burnout and Stop an Exodus

RUNTIME: 4:57

BYLINE: Mak Sisson

HOST LEDE: Fire seasons have become fire years. As federal wildland firefighters spend more time traveling across the west to combat a growing number of forest fires, advocates for the crews say they need better pay and health coverage to keep firefighters in the field.

Mak Sisson brings us this story.

###

Lucas Mayfield spent 18 seasons with the US Forest Service, fighting fires as a part of an Interagency Hotshot Crew. He worked his way up from a rookie to a Detail Superintendent among the crews that chainsaw and dig lines to suppress the hottest part of wildfires.

0:16

*(Working for the United States Forest Service and in particular as a Hotshot is the most gratifying job that I will ever have. It is the foundation of me as a person.) Mayfield 0:10*

Mayfield chose to resign in 2019, halfway towards retirement eligibility. The mental toll and unpredictability of the job strained him and his family too much for him to continue.

0:11

*(This job and the demands that are placed on Federal Wildland Firefighters led to seasonal depression, anxiety, and the thoughts that my family would be better off with a life insurance check.) Mayfield 0:13*

Mayfield shared his story during testimony before Congress in October 2021 in which he said more needs to be done to protect a workforce that is on the frontlines of climate change. Certain problems faced by federal firefighters were addressed in the bipartisan infrastructure bill recently signed by President Biden, including misclassification and

lack of insurance. However, the legislation only temporarily increases the pay for seasonal workers and does not ensure mental health leave.

That's why Mayfield gave this testimony in support of a bill named after a Wyoming smokejumper who died on the job.

The Tim Hart Wildland Firefighter Classification and Pay Parity Act would increase federal firefighter pay from \$15 to \$20 an hour. It would also create a mental health education program and support network for firefighters and establish a database on cancer rates among federal firefighters. Tim's Act also asks for a greater pay increase with a guarantee of money past the end date provided by the infrastructure bill and housing stipends for those working in the field so they don't have to sleep in the dirt after a shift.

The bill is cosponsored by a bipartisan group of Western representatives and has the backing of numerous advocacy groups for wildland firefighters. Congressmen Daines, Rosendale, and Tester have supported or drafted bills with similar language to Tim's Act. All are currently working to find ways to support federal firefighters, according to their spokespeople. The US Hotshots Association, National Federation of Federal Employees, and Wildland Firefighter Foundation have also voiced their support for this bill alongside other advocates.

Pete Dutchick is another former wildland firefighter who worked for the U.S. Forest Service. He now works for the advocacy group Grassroots Wildland Firefighters and says firefighters have to make a hard choice about whether to keep working in a profession that's so dangerous.

( We love our jobs, we love protecting public communities, we like being part of something greater, but it is incredibly difficult to balance.)

Providing better health coverage and compensation to firefighters is increasingly important for a dwindling federal firefighter force. A spokesman for the Forest Service said that this year, California only saw 31 of its 44 hotshot crews fully staffed. Only half of U.S. Forest Service fire engines in the region are fully staffed and able to run seven days a week, according to the agency's latest records.

Jessica Gardetto, a spokesperson for the National Interagency Fire Center, says that the Bureau of Land Management has been utilizing funds from the Department of the Interior to expand temporary jobs into permanent personnel. BLM hopes to expand their numbers from about 1300 permanent positions to 2800, a 115% increase, and increase temporary employees from 1250 to over 4500. This large increase in fire personnel the BLM hopes to hire is a preventative measure to respond to the increase in large scale fires in the west.

(At this point, the BLM isn't experiencing a wildland firefighter shortage, but we're also hearing about challenges, you know, from the field level and from our partner agencies. So that's why all the agencies have really been undergoing this workforce transformation effort and have been really focused on this for 10 years or more.)

Partner agencies dealing with shortages include the Forest Service, which did not meet its hiring goal in the Pacific Southwest this year or the last. Firefighters are reportedly heading to jobs at the state and municipal level for better pay, safer work, and more reliable benefits.

(Federal wildland fire personnel are the people that protect our communities. They protect our natural resources. So it only makes sense to ensure that they are well supported, have meaningful careers, and that are able to take time off and enjoy their families at the same time.)

The decision to raise pay can have ripple effects outside of federal firefighters. Montana wildland firefighters will see an increase in base pay to \$15.50 this upcoming season in response to the federal government's pay increase. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation applauded the move as a way to retain firefighting personnel and lessen the burnout of the fire season.

The Tim Hart Act was referred to the Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry on November 3rd. Another hearing is pending at an undetermined date. For MTPR, I'm Mak Sisson.

Title: A Rat, A Car, and A Fire: How Do We House Federal Firefighters?

Host intro: Wildland firefighters live in surprising conditions on the job and off: in truck beds, the backs of cars, even in abandoned buildings. It's not easy for some to find an affordable place to live during unpredictable seasonal work. And that takes its toll. Mak Sisson talked to firefighters from multiple states across the West about their unique challenges in states already experiencing widespread crises when it comes to affordable housing.

(Run Time: 5:08

Outtro: For the University of Montana and Montana Public Radio, I'm Mak Sisson.)

MAK: The month Rachel Granberg spent in 2015 squatting in an abandoned government building was not intentional. It was her rookie year in the beautiful Blue Mountains in northeast Oregon. The Forest Service had initially provided housing. But in November, the Forest Service shut it down for the winter, leaving Granberg without a place to live for the last month of her season. Note: Though she still works for the Forest Service, her words do not represent the agency.

RACHEL [tape]: I ended up squatting in a gym slash storage building at a district work center. And I think I was there for a couple of weeks before they realized I was sleeping on a folding table in the back room, tucked behind the gym.

MAK: Granberg now lives in East Wenatchee, Washington, and works as a senior Forestry Technician with the Forest Service. She tries to make light of sleeping on a table in November 2015, but the conditions were pretty gnarly. She opted for the table to get away from mice and used a Gatorade bottle full of boiled water to keep her feet warm.

RACHEL [tape]: I did not have running water, or bathroom facilities. I was like, cooking ramen in my little camp stove with a window open, and going to the bathroom outside slash strategically going to coffee shops. And then I had a gym membership. So that's where I was able to, like, you know, take a shower, and take care of other things.

MAK: Granberg's story is one she's discussed a lot with other firefighters, and they'll throw in some of their own. Firefighters live out of their cars and trailers and camp out on the side of the road, even when they're not actively fighting a fire. Michelle Hart, wife of wildland firefighter Tim Hart, remembers her husband's methods for scraping by.

MICHELLE [tape]: He ended up living out of his truck for the three years that he was in Grangeville. And I remember calling him that night, and those hot summer nights sometimes will get up over 100 degrees, and he'd be sleeping- trying to sleep in the back of his truck. And he had it better than some of his other smokejumper bros that were sleeping in the passenger seat in their car.

MAK: In Michelle's garage sits Tim's 2007 GMC Sierra with a maroon cap over the bed. He welded two solar panels to it. The panels charged a battery he'd use to power a small camp stove or a heater. He stored food in a cooler that fit into the backseat. He also made what he called the 'patented sleep system' –basically, slats of two-by-fours...

MICHELLE [tape]: ...And I knew that our relationship was going really well when I came home from work one day and found that he had built an extension onto his sleeping



platform that was removable. I knew that was a pretty big deal that he had built this, like, extension just for me onto it.

MAK: Tim died last summer while fighting the Eiks Fire in New Mexico. The pair had just bought a house in Cody, Wyoming, the year prior. While Michelle still has his signature truck parked in the garage, she doesn't drive it anywhere. And she doesn't know if she can handle selling it. Tim loved his job, but the compounding poor conditions and bad pay strained their relationship and Tim's sleep schedule. This, too, was not uncommon. Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, an advocacy organization, surveyed the spouses of wildland firefighters. Nearly half reported that their partners were experiencing inadequate or poor quality sleep during fire season.

MICHELLE [tape]: He loved the people he worked with, but he wanted to be gone as much as possible, so he wouldn't have to do that. So I think that says, you know, *enough* about how it was for him.

MAK: Michelle saw the toll unstable living conditions were taking on Tim and on them as a couple. They talked about him leaving after the 2021 season and trying something else. Others are also opting out or just not opting in. Grassroots Wildland Firefighters reported that 20% of the Forest Service's permanent firefighter positions are currently sitting vacant. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore stated that the organization had only reached 90% of its overall hiring goal this year, while in some regions only reaching 50%. The organization believes that addressing the needs of existing firefighters will [combat this exodus](#).

These needs are at the center of the Tim Hart Wildland Firefighter Classification and Pay Parity Act. Michelle Hart worked with Grassroots Wildland Firefighters on this bill. It would improve federal firefighter pay, benefits, retirement plans, and mental health resources. There's also a section for housing stipends for firefighters, so they can find a place to stay in the towns they're sent to without worrying as much about it cutting into their personal savings.

MAK: It feels like a step in the right direction to Michelle and supporters of this legislation. The Forest Service has not made any official announcements about improving housing conditions for federal firefighters. In a written statement, they commented that any decisions concerning the establishment of new housing or the maintenance of existing housing is managed by staff at the local forest level.

Typically, the Forest Service can't use private rentals for their employees, but during emergencies like last year's historic wildfire year, they used AirBnB and other sites. It remains to be seen whether this option is used again in 2022.

MAK: The 65 billion dollar Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed by Congress in 2021 and signed by President Biden includes money for recruitment and retention of firefighters, but the specifics aren't worked out yet. The Tim Hart Act is currently stalled, waiting for a hearing with the Congressional Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry. For the University of Montana and Montana Public Radio, I'm Mak Sisson.

## Walking Across Coals: How the Caldor Fire kindled lessons for one South Lake Tahoe chief

By Mak Sisson

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Every morning at 6, Clive Savacool clocked in to work and studied the Caldor Fire. As South Lake Tahoe's fire chief, he was half of the team that would decide when - and if - to put the town on alert and prepare to evacuate.

The blaze had started on Saturday, Aug. 14, in El Dorado National Forest, 35 miles to the south of South Lake Tahoe. At first, it was just a blip of activity – a fire that Savacool thought might get extinguished. And even if it didn't, a fire from outside the Tahoe Basin had never come into it – ever.

But by August 18th, the blaze had grown from 6,000 acres to 53,000 acres. The leading edge swallowed nearby Grizzly Flats, and southwest winds drove the fire toward swatches of dry timber and brush further north.

On the 19th, Savacool ruminated. The fire grew another 15,000 acres.

On the 20th, he called the city manager, Joe Irvin. The two discussed what activating the Emergency Operations Center would mean: crisis mode. The city would get in touch with the school district to arrange bus transportation for residents without cars.

Accommodations in shelters would need to be made for dogs and livestock. An evacuation wasn't inevitable, but it was on the table.

Savacool went to the city council chambers that night, his phone pressed into his ear to keep in contact with Irvin. He pulled plans and documents related to the Emergency Operations Center out of filing cabinets, thinking over the possible actions and consequences.

Savacool had put this plan together earlier that month after the Tamarack fire scorched through Markleeville, a town southeast of South Lake Tahoe. He wanted to be ready for the worst.

Was it too early to sound the alarm? Could he afford to wait?

The decision would affect businesses, families – livelihoods and lives. And, as Savacool would learn, it would kindle lessons for him, whether the town was scorched or saved.

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A lot was at stake for Savacool. He'd only been the town's fire chief for 18 months though he'd spent his lifetime fighting fires. He had collapsed on the scene while fighting a grass fire in Pittsburg, California, in March 2014 and spent days in the hospital. His doctor informed him that 20 years of exposure to particulate matter had left him with career-ending lung disease.

Savacool strikes the image of a California firefighter, even if he technically can't go back out into the field. He wears his brown hair cut short, boasts strong arms, and deep-set lines cut across his forehead and cheeks. He always wears a thick black belt with a gold buckle when he heads out for work. He drives a red and black Chevy Tahoe, though he's also an experienced motorcyclist with a wall of old logo-covered racing suits in the back of his garage.

His wife, Kristen Simoes, is a reporter for KCRA, the local television station. She met Savacool four years ago, when a mutual friend at a city government conference introduced them. She wasn't looking for anyone to date at the time, but the two had a common thread: wildfire. Simoes covered it, and Savacool lived it. The two married three years later, making a new home for Savacool, Simoes, and Simoes' two daughters. The couple had driven the oldest to her freshman year at Boise State University the week before the fire started to threaten the town.

Simoes knew her husband's decision would raise a ruckus. His department's vocal support of vaccination clinics throughout the pandemic had proved divisive. No matter how he called it, there were bound to be objections.

On August 20, models of the fire indicated a 1% chance of it getting to Lake Tahoe. Another 130,000 acres stood between the town and the blaze.

But Savacool and Irvin thought drought and weather conditions made it too much of a liability to wait.

Their fear was not unfounded, even with the incredibly low possibility. Fire has become an unpredictable beast as climate change has exacerbated its spread and severity over the

past 35 years. A [recent study](#) by researchers led by U.S. Forest Service ecologists saw that fire weather seasons have lengthened across one quarter of Earth's vegetated surfaces. Wildfire seasons in the American West are now over a month longer than they were 35 years ago. A variety of factors contribute to this: an earlier snowmelt, hotter, dryer summers, and the timing of spring rains. California fires have especially grown more and more destructive; the state's 2018 fire season was the most destructive on record for all of 20 months, before it was surpassed by a four week period in late summer 2020.

All of these factors have been linked to global climate change. Long periods of dry heat sap moisture from the vegetation in grossly overgrown forests, and a single spark can be enough to set off a blaze. Climate change also makes fire weather more unpredictable. Unusual, random short-term weather patterns are heightened by the long-term effects of climate change. The Tamarack Fire, which scorched a 105-square-mile trail south of Lake Tahoe, burned through timber and chaparral in early July, aided in its path over a rocky ridgetop by high winds and dry fuels. That fire destroyed 23 structures and caused \$8.7 million in damages before it was fully contained in early October.

On, August 21, they activated the Emergency Operations Center. Emails spread like the fire itself, appointing a deputy to lead the fire department in Savacool's place and assigning responsibility to five leaders of the command post. They would work alongside Savacool to coordinate a plan to evacuate.

Then came the criticism: He was calling it too early.

Members of the command post pulled Savacool into meeting rooms to voice their concerns in private. Residents shared criticisms online. One posted false pictures of him and Texas Senator Ted Cruz on vacation in Cancun during the fire, leaving the town to fend for itself. This was a reference to the very real vacation that the senator took during the series of winter storms that ravaged Texas earlier this year.

But Savacool and Irvin had put their foot down. By August 27, winds drove the fire rapidly into the Lake Tahoe Basin. On the 29th, Savacool pulled one of several all-nighters in the command post, debating with other members whether to delay evacuation orders. Some wanted to wait until the afternoon of the following day.

That was too risky for Savacool. The combination of smoke and the long row of cars on Highway 50 would leave people stranded on the road in the dark, and darkness during an evacuation leads to bad decisions. So he pulled the trigger on the evacuation the following morning, striving to ask forgiveness rather than permission from the command

post. On August 30th, the city of South Lake Tahoe evacuated, and Savacool moved himself to a smoky hotel room with single pane windows.

While his wife stayed in the city to report on the evacuation, he watched the smoke rise to the south. The fire was only 15% contained and about eight miles from the city. The projections simply hadn't accounted for this, and he wondered how much closer it would get. Just a month earlier, the Dixie fire became the first recorded wildfire to cross over the Sierra Nevada range. The Caldor fire became the second. He went to sleep in the worst air conditions on the planet, hacking and coughing beside his wife through the night, thinking about how much worse it was for his fire battalion.

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The blaze came closer over the following days. Fire Captain Nate Hagenbach remembered traveling out into the wilderness for 30-hour shifts, driving into residential streets as propane tanks, brought to a fever pitch by the heat, exploded like bombs. The flames scorched up the mountain to the local ski resort, reducing a metal storage enclosure for large machinery to nothing -- no walls, no metal skeleton, like it had never existed at all.

In the days after, morale dipped. The fire didn't come back down into the community; it skittered around the eastern side of the city, where small groups would drive past homes to make sure no embers had breached city limits. Firefighters took pictures of the homes of their neighbors to keep them updated. Fire crews thinned the nearby forests and stripped rows of land of flammable material, reducing the ability for the fire to burn. But anyone not on assignment started to feel anxious and idle.

Savacool, meanwhile, worked long days in the hollowed-out hall of the casino. He would arrive at six for the morning meeting. With almost every hour came another meeting and another topic: How would they manage the repopulation of the town? What aid would be applied for, should the town be scorched? His last meeting was at six or seven at night, after which he would drive around to his neighbor's houses and send pictures of the still-standing structures.

A skeleton crew of staff had been left behind to cook for the Emergency Operations Center. He ate almost every meal, thankful to the chef placed there to cook for them, though the command post was also prone to indulging in the unhealthy snack foods left in the casino. He joked with his command team that they might catch scurvy instead of lung disease from the smoke.

One afternoon, he saw the fire crew come into the center. They'd been working for 60 hours straight, came off the line at seven in the morning, went to bed, and came to relax after waking up. They hadn't eaten dinner yet, and Savacool ran a quick suggestion by his command post.

That evening, the fire crew got to eat a command-center-sized helping of fried chicken. Savacool and the others made do with bags of chips.

He spent some days back home, doing laundry and making coffee in his own Keurig. Hotel coffee wasn't his preference, and neither was coughing his way through a night of smoke. Air purifiers in the casino helped, but he hated watching everything get coated in ash as the fire burned around the side of the city.

The fire grew to 221,000 acres, blazing across three counties in southern California and becoming the third largest and second most destructive fire of the 2021 season. Moderate weather gave some hope, but any stray gusts would blow the fire across the basin again.

Savacool talked regularly with his wife about the pressure he felt. What affected him was that this was his city. He had just taken the position, and now he had his feet to the literal coals forming eight miles from his door.

He watched, and waited, and went to meetings, and listened to his battalion chief say that his crew felt useless when an inferno stood just across from their station. But the thinning worked. The fire didn't move erratically. No gusts of wind came to carry the fire into the city, in what some called a miracle.

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Savacool remembers September 5 with a smile. Repopulation day. The order went out quietly. He didn't want another pile-up of cars streaming back home. But the city of South Lake Tahoe came back to life.

After residents returned home, there was cause for celebration. People created signs thanking the firefighters for defending their homes. Fire engines paraded through town. A witness remembers seeing women hug a firefighter and come away covered in ash.

For Savacool, the work wasn't done, and celebrating felt hollow. He wished he had checked on his battalion more often during the crisis. His one grand gesture was to bring food out to the front lines after raiding the refrigerator of an evacuated restaurant.

Protecting the town had felt like helping to deliver a baby, something he has done in the past as an EMT: He was glad it went well, but the whole time he was waiting for something to go catastrophically wrong, and he really hopes he never has to do it again.

The city had escaped the flames. The fire was deemed fully contained in October, where it sat in a fire perimeter sputtering itself out until the 21st. But the evacuation hadn't gone without a hitch.

The city's evacuation map was outdated and used unclear terminology to describe areas that residents knew by other, colloquial names. This made the RedAlert warning texts – the messages the Emergency Operations Center sent to townsfolk – confusing for people who were trying to leave. Cars were left gridlocked for four and a half hours on the evacuation route, which could have led to battery failure or an impatient driver cutting across.

Among firefighters, survivor's guilt cut through every interaction for weeks. They were all alive in South Lake Tahoe and their homes and businesses were unscathed, but Grizzly Flats, a township to the south, lost hundreds of structures. The fire burned over 1,000 structures in total, and only a cinder managed to land on a wooden balcony in South Lake Tahoe. Savacool's biggest regret was his decision to take a day off on the Saturday before the fire accelerated into the basin. His best friend was getting married, and the fire had looked like it was depleting in energy. The day after, he remembered, was the worst day of all.

When the town returned to normal, Savacool avoided eating out in public because he knew someone would cut through the line and pay for his meal. It was flattering, but after a while he felt awkward accepting the generosity. He had just been doing his job.

After the fire, he started to plan. He gathered surveys from the firefighters on what worked and what didn't, striving to listen in a way he had not during the disaster. He placed a preemptive step in the evacuation plan: a call to the local tow-truck companies to send a fleet in increments onto the three major highways leading out of the city. He created new hand-outs to go into mailboxes, detailing the preparations families should make before leaving and returning to the city.

And after seeing how wildlife responded to the fire, he included details in the evacuation order about how people should respond if they found a bear had entered their home or car while they were gone.



Yes, this happened. There were more than 70 bear break-ins, and those were just the ones that people reported.

Savacool also hadn't considered the consequences of shutting down the town's only hospital with an emergency room. Hospital personnel and patients had all evacuated in accordance with the town order. To reopen, the facility had to be inspected by a representative from the state's Department of Public Health. When Savacool discovered this, he reached out to the California health department.

He got put on hold. "It might take a while. Two to three weeks, maybe?" said the receptionist.

They didn't have weeks. A city was about to repopulate with no emergency room. The next step was to coordinate with the California Office of Emergency Services, who communicated directly to Governor Gavin Newsom. Savacool asked one of his staff to call the office. A state inspector quickly came down to the hospital, checked the facilities, and gave them back their certification.

The news that the hospital could repopulate was a relief, but Savacool admonished himself for not checking the requirements first. A whole section of his new plan is dedicated to keeping a skeleton crew in the hospital as long as possible, so the town doesn't face a potential crisis like that again.

More news about the Caldor Fire emerged in the coming months. A father-son duo, David Sott Smith, 66, and Travis Shane Smith, 32, were arrested under suspicion of causing the Caldor Fire through reckless arson. Witnesses reported seeing the two men driving an off-road vehicle into a wooded area near where the Caldor Fire started. They appeared in court on December 12, where their defense attorneys entered a 'not guilty' plea to all charges. Both are currently out on bail and awaiting another hearing in May, where a judge will decide whether there is enough evidence to send the case to trial.

Savacool's new plan is still evolving. It's under review by the senior members of the Incident Command Team. And he's more than ready to edit it again.

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Nearly three months after the evacuation, the city came together for a tree-lighting ceremony in the shopping center on the east side of town. It began with a thanks to the firefighters who had worked so hard to save the city, featuring messages from the mayor, Tamara Wallace, and local Congressman Tom McClintock. A three-minute compilation

of news footage of the blaze ended with a bold red message of thanks to the firefighters and police.

When it was time for Santa to arrive, the announcer told the crowd that his entrance would be a bit different this year. A fire truck, sirens blaring, brought him and Mrs. Claus to the crowd. The two praised the firefighters and asked the crowd to welcome another change from the usual routine. The truck's ladder rose, and firefighter Jake Reginato, taking the place of the typical elf, began climbing, the crowd applauding him as he went higher and higher. He ascended the final step, and Santa asked the crowd to repeat a rhyme.

“Firefighter, with all your might, make this mighty Christmas tree light!”

The tree bloomed into white fluorescence, bathing the crowd in light. Below it, surrounded by his troupe of firefighters, was Savacool, standing in the shadow of the fire truck as he stared up at the glowing tree.

When the ceremony ended, a few smiling, bundled-up residents stopped him for a photo. Then he stepped back into his truck and drove away. Even on a night filled with celebration, he knew that there would likely be a call to the station.

And the work was never done.