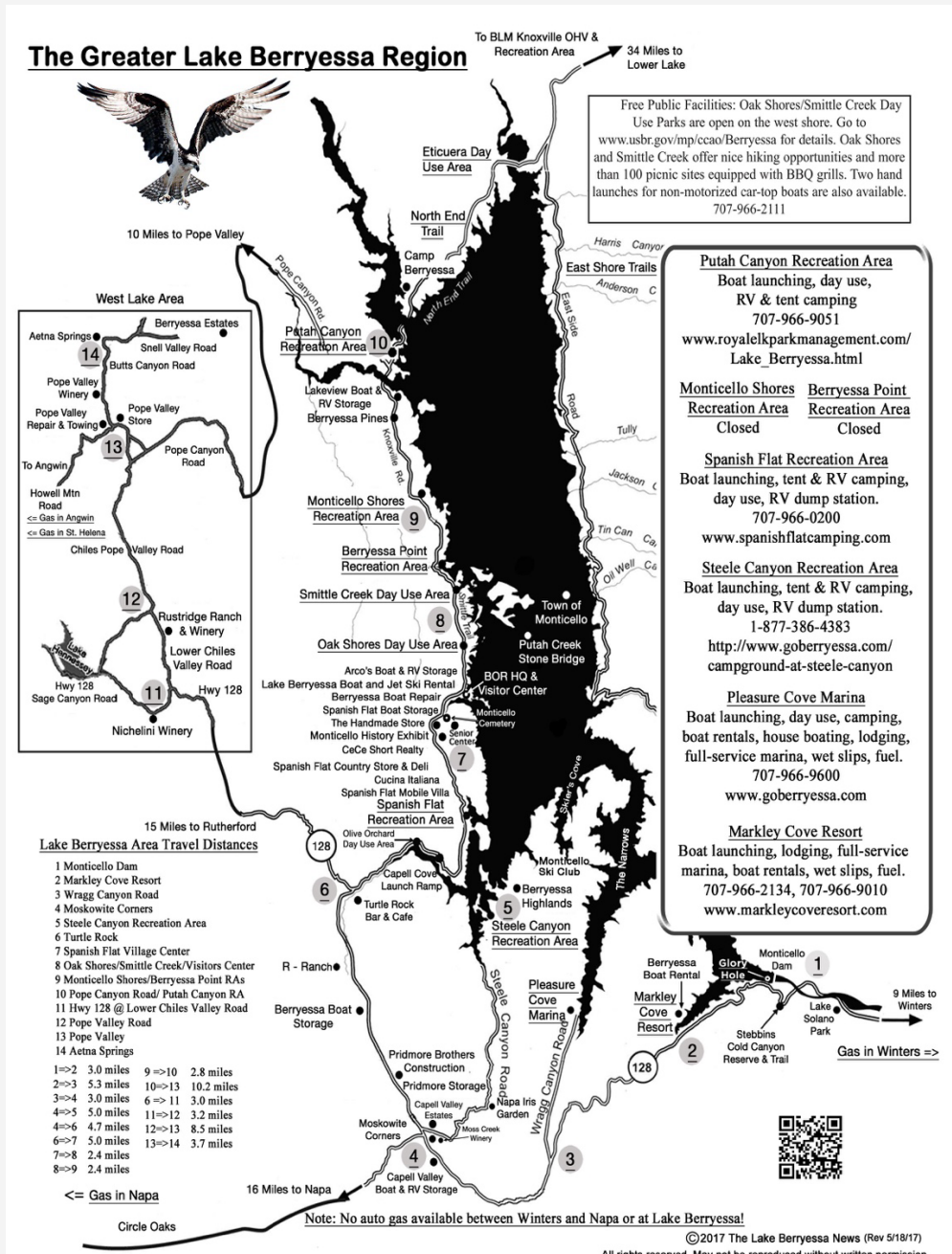


# The Great Lake Berryessa (Atlas) Fire of 2017

By Peter Kilkus

The official name was the Atlas Fire and it never reached the shores of Lake Berryessa, but its immediate threat dramatically pulled the Lake Berryessa community together for more than a week. All Lake Berryessa residents were affected. All Lake Berryessa residents worried about it. And the whole Lake Berryessa Region was united by it. That's why I took the liberty of calling it the Great Lake Berryessa Fire.

The map on the Lake Berryessa News web site below shows what we consider the Greater Lake Berryessa Region graphically.



It extends beyond the edge of the lake itself to nearby communities with access to the lake and upon which the lake has a direct impact - like Capell Valley, Berryessa Estates, Pope Valley, and Circle Oaks.

We knew Sunday that the winds would be wild all night and had an uneasy feeling. Soon after the fire started on Atlas Peak at 10 PM Sunday, we smelled smoke. When the power went out at about 3 AM we knew there was a serious problem. That was soon verified by the news media, by government sources, and by the huge clouds of smoke rising into the sky.

The next two days were stressful because we knew the fire was creeping our way. The worst part was waiting, because you could see it coming. Finally, on Tuesday afternoon we were told to evacuate the Berryessa Highlands even though the fire was 6 miles away. But it was heading towards the Corners which was our only way out. Without power we also had no internet access so I couldn't update the Lake Berryessa Facebook page or web site. I agreed to leave, but Evan stayed behind to do what he could to protect our property and report the status of the fire as it moved towards the Highlands.

When we got to the Corners (Hwy 121 at Hwy 128 and Steele Canyon Road) the fire was coming over the top of Sugarloaf heading right down to the intersection. Smoke was so thick we could barely see the helicopters dumping Lake Berryessa water on the fire. Due to the firefighters hard work, that part of the fire was stopped in its tracks.



<https://youtu.be/HXltfz9JgTo>

But later Tuesday night the raging fire bore down on the Capell Valley community only a few miles from the Corners and Lake Berryessa. The Pridmore family, alongside a dedicated crew of neighbors and friends, had stayed behind to save their homes. Swirling gusts of wind had whipped hundred-foot flames into a semi-circle around the valley. The group used bulldozers and water tenders to cut fire lines and douse homes in water and were successful in beating back the flames, not just on Tuesday night but for days after. Their efforts, alongside teams of firefighters, saved all but one home in the valley. They also slowed bit didn't stop the fire as it burned upward over the ridge between Lake

Berryessa and the Berryessa Highlands. You can see the battle in a KCRA report on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/jwm8CEk0uUQ>

Evan began using his AT&T cell phone to broadcast to the Lake Berryessa community for the Lake Berryessa News via Facebook Live. Although power was out, AT&T had brought in a generator to power their local tower.

Here's a typical broadcast describing the use of the Global Supertanker to control the fire creeping towards the Berryessa Highlands.

<https://youtu.be/HXlIfz9JgTo>

For a week, the Lake Berryessa News' Facebook page was a fount of images and reports from around Lake Berryessa, starting with dramatic nighttime footage of flames along a ridgeline and later documenting the closing-off - and eventual reopening - of roads and neighborhoods.

I spent the next six days in motels in Davis using my computer as a remote relay station, translating Evan's Facebook Live updates into YouTube videos and posting them on our Lake Berryessa News web site and what turned out to be a crucial communication tool Nextdoor Berryessa

Several newspapers wrote about Evan's efforts.

Due to the magnitude of the disaster, normal news agencies were only able to cover it in summary stories. But our Lake Berryessa News updates were specific to our region and were critical to the residents who had no other ways to get news of the fire and the effect on their homes. Our motto is "Without the Lake Berryessa News, there would be no Lake Berryessa news."

The difference between escaping from a rapidly advancing fire, as so many did, and the Berryessa Highlands evacuees watching the fire slowly but inexorably coming toward them is the sense of dread and helplessness. Evan's regular video updates and calm voice were instrumental in helping people cope with those feelings - as so many said publicly. Facebook Live was an easy and quick way to show the neighbors their homes were still there, because no words could do that. Using Facebook Live, he streamed real-time video of the flames from atop a ridgeline. For seven days, he narrated and posted videos, providing context and updates to residents on edge about the fate of their homes.

The full unedited set of reports is available on You Tube titled "Berryessa Fire Update".

And because he had stayed behind, his responsibilities grew. He began feeding others' pets — dogs, chickens, birds, cats — and keeping an eye on them.

Power to the Berryessa Highlands came on Sunday night and on Monday, October 16 we were finally allowed back home with power, water, internet, and spoiled food in stinky refrigerators. Fortunately, due to the hard work of firefighters and volunteers, only a few homes were lost in our region. That 747 global supertanker (official bird of Lake Berryessa) made a huge difference in saving so many homes.

But the real heroes of the fire were the firefighters themselves: Here are a couple of videos from inside the local volunteer fire trucks the first night of the fire. Try to put yourself inside those trucks. How would you feel?

<https://youtu.be/R2Vbf77tB98>

<https://youtu.be/UPddTvmb94>

