

Meet The Unsung County Road Workers



When we eat a steak, we don't think about farmers who raise the beef. When we switch on the lights, we don't dwell on power generators—and when we drive on the roads, we don't think about who keeps them driveable, who fills pot holes, clears debris after storms, and returns them to service during and after fires.

They are the road crews of the county Department of Public Works. The workers you take for granted, even though they help get you to work every day.

Day or night, when a boulder falls on the road, when flash flooding creates a sump, when a fallen tree blocks traffic, they are there.

The crew of the Bonsall/Fallbrook Road Station, located at 2370 Pala Rd., Bonsall, are responsible for 250 miles of country roads in Bonsall, Fallbrook, Rainbow, Pala, Oceanside and Deluz.

The 35 acre station has 15 pieces of equipment including pickups, backhoes, loaders, chippers, rollers and stockpiles of DG (decomposed granite), asphalt, rock sand and patch. It has on hand 2,000–3,000 yards of recycled material from other jobs.

This fall and winter has so far proven to be higher than average in terms of rainfall. The first rain washes debris into the roads. You'll see the crew out cleaning culverts, dealing with downed trees and mud bars (sediment that flows onto the road), removing rocks and closing roads that

have become hazardous due to water running through dips.

That first big rain will usually create immediate problems, including causing oil to rise to the surface, making the road extremely slippery for hours.

This crew consists of two supervisors and eight employees—all rated to operate equipment.

Last December I interviewed four of them: Garry Evans, senior equipment operator; Brad Hill, Jeff Farrington and Pete Velasco, all equipment operators. Their supervisor, Pete Swenson, stepped outside so they could fully express themselves.

Pete Velasco has been with the department for three years. He is an equipment operator who started as a PWT (public works trainee). His main job is to operate a street sweeper. But he is rated to operate all the machines.

"I like keeping the roads safe for my wife and kids. It's interesting work and you definitely meet all kinds of folks!" he says.

Brad Hill has been an equipment operator for eight years. "I like the opportunity to be outdoors and to do public service. There's something different going on every day," he says.

Most construction companies don't work during winter. That's not true of these guys. As one told me, "We are like a construction company that works in the rain. When it rains—we get wet!"

So it bothers them when the public sometimes "growls" at them or makes their job harder.

Often motorists don't stop to think that the people they are swearing at under their breath—or not so quietly giving the finger to because they are causing a momentary delay—keep the roads passable. Without them—especially in winter—the roads would rapidly deteriorate.

Jeff Farrington has been with the Dept. of Public Works two years this month. "I like working outside, being part of a team," he says. "Something different is going on all the time. We work with a good bunch of guys. It makes it easy to come to work."

Gary Evans is the senior equipment operator and has worked for the department 18 years.

"I'm like the puppet master," he says. He and Pete Swenson are responsible for training the equipment operators and keeping them current on equipment that includes chippers, backhoes and chainsaws.

"We have two hundred and fifty miles to patrol. We try to look at every bit of road at least every two weeks. Routine work includes culvert cleaning, sidewalk and pot-hole repairs."

If a traffic light stops working, they fix it, or put it back into service with a battery back-up.

For two days in November the area was hit by extreme rainfall that began on a Sunday night.

At 6:30 a.m. on Monday the crews were called into 12-hour shifts. During inclement weather they are "on call" 24-7. Some roads were

closed by flowing water, rocks or mud. Trees were down.

During the next few hours, the crew placed 35 flooding signs and closed three roads. Most were reopened by 8 p.m. They answered a half dozen calls for trees blocking the roads. They opened blocked culverts.

Occasionally property owners will place sandbags to redirect flooding. This can cause flooding on county roads. If that happens, the crew will arrive and remove the sandbags. You are not allowed to block a public drainage.

The public cooperates 99% of the time. But there is the 1% who calls and doesn't understand that the crew only has so many people to respond to a call. Then it requires a little bit of diplomacy to calm them down.

If there is anything that all of the crew members agree on, it's that they would like the public to pay more attention to flagmen.

"Please look out for our work cones," one of the men told me. "If a sign says 'roadwork ahead,' there is a reason for it! They are there for our safety and for the safety of the public."

They put out those signs and barricades and close off roads—not for the fun of it—but because it's dangerous to drive on it.

"Some people think if they can just get around the sign that it's OK to drive through," says Evans. "We have had people drive around a road sign on a motorcycle and then drive their bike into six feet of water!"

Deluz, which abuts Camp Pendleton, and which is the most rural community whose roads they maintain, is the one whose roads go out the most. It has low-travel rural roads that continue on to Riverside County, but they are used.

On that rainy day in November that we mentioned earlier, they put out five signs in Deluz alone.

It's not unusual to be answering a call in Deluz and be called to the other end of the territory in Vista.

But for all that, this road crew is very

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crowd. People ran out of the crowd to have pictures taken with the horses. When you're stuck, you're stuck," she says. "You have to give credit to the people of Pasadena and the road crew. They take care of everything. They do their jobs. Everything is laid out for you. They made it totally easy. I give them a lot of credit."

The Tournament of Roses Parade is actually the finale of a week's worth of activities that includes the Equestfest 2009, which was held on the Tuesday before the parade. There was also a reception for the equestrians on Monday.

As with all parade participants, the Calizona Appaloosa Horse Club stayed in Pasadena the night before the parade—members were up long before the dawn, at 4 a.m., to be staged and put into the parade formation.

"We were up to enter the parade at about 7 a.m.," Herzman recalls. "Before you see us come around Colorado Boulevard, we have three blocks where we are going through camera crews and bleachers."

In between 4 a.m. and 7 a.m. she had to not only get her own horse and costumes put together, she had to do it for six other horses.

"I was running between horses quite a bit, putting war paint on the horses, and on the warriors."

That was the beginning before the beginning. The actual parade route is six miles long and takes an average of two hours to traverse—unless someone breaks down.

"It is total people the whole route, whether in the grandstands or sitting on the ground," she says.

The riding unit included eight women and two men. Horses were caparisoned and riders were decked out in Native American regalia of the Northern Plateau Plains style, specifically that of the Nez Perce tribe.

The Nez Perce are credited with developing the breed until just shortly before Chief Joseph tried to lead his tribe to escape from the U.S. cavalry in 1877.

Most of the tribe's horses were confiscated by the army. The breed was diluted until its recog-

nizable features were almost lost. Then early in the 20th century, more and more breeders became interested in the Appaloosa, and it made a comeback.

Herzman made seven of the ten costumes in the equestrian unit. They replicate costumes the Indians used on special occasions, such as festivals where they would honor their horses. She makes them with trade cloth (a wool cloth) elk skins and French and Czech beads. Each costume is worth between \$15,000–\$20,000—if you could buy it. She hand picks the elk skins.

"When I buy furs and hides I usually like to see them in person first. When I put the costumes together I have a look that I'm striving for," she says.

The costumes have all won first or second prizes at National Appaloosa Horse Club world championships.

She spends three to five years on each costume before she is happy with it. "It's like a living creature. You keep adding to it," she says. She started riding with the club in 1974 and began doing costumes a few years later.

The costuming is strictly a hobby, or as she calls it, "an addiction, obsession or whatever you want to call it. When the money is not going for the horses, it's going for the costumes. Some people have therapy—I have beadwork."

She has never considered doing it as a profession. She is one of a rare few who make the costumes. She knows a few others, but they are scattered far and wide.

"It's one of those things where—if you get into it as a business—the fun would go out of it. Then you have to satisfy everyone else for their needs instead of doing it because you like it. I could probably go into the business and sell everything I have, but that's not that appealing," she says.

Participating in the parade was the reward for many years of work.

"It was something totally different—to be able to get out there and show them off in the Native American costumes," she says. "It was a once in a lifetime deal, even managing to get selected for it. That was a long

process."

They submitted their application to be in the parade in May. In August they were told they would be in the line-up.

Herzman lives in Bonsall right off Gopher Canyon Road on an acre with her horses and barn.

She does parades to promote the Appaloosa breed beyond the show ring. "A lot of people who don't have horses like to look at them, to see the Appaloosas in their costumes. Parading is more eye-appealing to spectators if it gets more colorful. That's how they envision the horses. They want to see the mystique of the horses."

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close knit and loyal to each other.

"I go around to a lot of road stations in the county," says Michael Drake, the public affairs officer for the Dept. of Public Works. "You find a lot of camaraderie here. These guys are family."

"We are public servants and the community is a real concern," adds one of the men.

All of the road crews throughout the county support each other. If another crew needs help, the other crews give it.

At 2 a.m. if a tree goes down in the rain, the Bonsall/Fallbrook crew will get the call. If it happens on Christmas Day, they will show up to move the tree.

If you see a tree or other obstruction on a county road, call the county operations office at 877-684-8000. The after-hours or holiday emergency number is 888-565-5262.

Issues can also be reported via the department's Web site: www.sdcounty.ca.gov/dpw/roads (click on the "roads home," then on the Service Request Form link in the middle of the page next to the photo. These messages are immediately delivered to the DPW service desk with a backup copy coming to Drake's office.

You'll find information on road conditions, particularly during an emergency, by visiting www.sdcounty.ca.gov/dpw and "click" on "roads."

You can arrange to get Twitter updates from DPW by visiting twitter.com/sdcountypdw/

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