

A smoke-engulfed sky hangs over one of three command center camps set up by Traffic Management Inc. during the Woolsey Fire. These sites facilitated work coordination and supply distribution while serving as rest areas for workers.



FROM DAY ONE UNTIL THE JOB IS DONE

Traffic Management Inc. plays vital role in wildfire response and recovery efforts

by Steve Freeman

The company that ensures safe work zones underwent one of its greatest tests yet during the end-of-year Woolsey Fire in Southern California.

Traffic Management Inc. (TMI) of Signal Hill, California, specializes in planning and coordinating situations where large traffic impediments and closures happen, due to big infrastructure projects, road repairs and large events.

Much of TMI's work is related to construction and infrastructure projects. Its 1,400-plus employees are spread across 27 offices—mostly in California—to assist public and private entities with services that include: traffic

control, planning, permit procurement, equipment rental, barricades and temporary lighting installation to achieve work site and traffic safety. Its customers range from developers and event organizers to public utility companies and government and law enforcement agencies.

Los Angeles County and Ventura County officials, first responders and utility companies called on TMI soon after the Woolsey Fire started southeast of the Simi Valley on Nov. 8, 2018. By the end of the first day, it was already a large-scale crisis because winds of up to 60 miles per hour ignited foliage quickly. Called in on day one, TMI quickly dispatched team members from five of its offices.

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**Andrew Miller, Marketing Manager,
Traffic Management Inc.**



The Woolsey Fire emergency lasted 13 days and charred large swaths of Los Angeles and Ventura counties in the process. It spread over 150 square miles and burned an estimated 97,000 acres—an area roughly the size of the city of Bakersfield, California.

According to a Jan. 4, 2019 incident report by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the blaze damaged or destroyed over 1,800 structures. It also caused the evacuation of approximately 300,000 people from nearby cities, such as San Fernando, Burbank, Malibu, Agoura Hills, Thousand Oaks and West Hills. Sadly, three people were killed. The human devastation would have been much worse if the wildfire hadn't affected mostly national park acreage.

SAFETY IN ACTION

Raul Vasquez, TMI's branch manager for Ventura County, was the chief

coordinator for TMI's work to aid emergency responders and firefighters. TMI was an active participant both during and after the wildfire, which created an extreme emergency scenario that demanded immediate safety efforts to protect impacted communities. The work started Nov. 8 and the fire was completely contained by Nov. 21,

after which TMI continued to help with utility pole restoration efforts through Dec. 14.

“It was a ghost town everywhere you drove,” Vasquez says. “Safety was a major concern because even if some homes weren't burned, we had to keep away looters.”



Traffic Management Inc. was launched 25 years ago by brothers Chris (left) and Jonathan Spano. Today, with 1,400-plus employees, these company owners run one of the nation's largest traffic management companies.

In response to the devastating Woolsey Fire, Traffic Management Inc. dispatched 160 team members to ensure the safety of residents, emergency response workers and repair crews.



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Raul Vasquez, Branch Manager for Ventura County,
Traffic Management Inc.

TMI did not fight the fires, but it was involved in many other ways. As is common for the company, “we were really among the first ones to show up and the last ones to leave,” says Andrew Miller, marketing manager. “We were there to protect and make sure it was safe for local residents, emergency personnel and, eventually, the utility companies to work in the area.”

Vasquez guided the efforts of three separate teams based in Malibu, Moorpark and Oxnard—up to 160 people—that worked around the clock. In addition to operating out of the command centers, TMI crews set up and maintained road closures, removed debris, partnered with utility agencies so they could restore power, and performed safety checks.

The crews interacted with the five entities overseeing the crisis response and recovery, including the Los Angeles County Fire and Sheriff’s departments, the California Highway Patrol and CAL FIRE.

After fire swept through an area, and then was contained to some degree, the new danger was downed power lines. TMI spent several weeks securing work zones, allowing utility crews to put up 2,300 new utility poles that were lost in the blaze.

“We secured work zone areas and kept them safe, and allowed power to be restored for the communities, which helped get them back on their feet quicker,” Vasquez says.

Of TMI’s crew members, 100-plus worked as traffic controllers at any given time. This addition tripled the number of traffic controllers that authorities could provide for the fire zone, which included Ventura Freeway, Pacific Coast Highway and U.S. Highway 101. Traffic work was vitally important because of evacuations, first, and then because residents returned far earlier than warranted to check on their properties.

A DIGITIZED NERVE CENTER

A shared, yet secure, cloud-based communication and project management system enabled TMI to work with authorities and its own deployed employees—despite the complexities of wildfire environments surrounding them all.

The internet-based system, called Traffic Management Software or “TMSoft,” offered information sharing for those inside and outside the crisis



With scorched earth all around from the Woolsey Fire, Traffic Management Inc. maintains a road closure so that utility companies can repair and replace power poles.

areas. Users shared changing equipment requirements, driving directions, traffic control setup changes, crew needs, documents and location maps that showed existing or new conditions. This allowed authorities and TMI employees stationed at the emergency response nerve center to manage on-the-ground resources and dispatch as needed.

Additionally, TMI accomplished remote checks on vehicle inspections with the help of dispatched crew members who fed information and photos into iPads.

UNMATCHED

Much of the skills and experiences racked up by TMI in its nearly 25-year history came back to serve the company well in its Woolsey Fire assignment.

“Our ability to do the job was related to our size, our training and our planning,” Miller says. “We were able to group everyone together to successfully handle this emergency.”

Founded in humble beginnings by brothers Chris and Jonathan Spano, the privately owned minority business has grown to be one of the largest traffic management companies in the nation.

TMI’s core competencies include establishing safety program partnerships and engineering and designing the traffic management plans.

The extensive training TMI’s employees receive contributes to the company’s high level of expertise. TMI vigorously stays informed on current regulations and best practices. Since the state of California requires companies conducting traffic control to be licensed contractors, TMI was one of the first companies in California awarded the C-31 contractor license. This licensure requires employees to take an exam on construction law, business organization and traffic control. They must also adhere to rules and regulations set by the state and local municipalities.

For many staff members, training also takes place during real-life scenarios such as the Woolsey Fire.

And that story has continued long after the embers were out. In terms of reconstruction of the area, TMI still has 25-plus crews assigned to help various entities with the environmental cleanup and vegetation efforts. This, in turn, helps to make the devastated area safer for construction crews to come in and start rebuilding the communities impacted by the fire.

The intensive field experience during the Woolsey Fire certainly accentuated the importance of the company’s motto: TMI is “Serious About Safety.” 🦉

As a communications professor and a reporter and editor for decades, Steve Freeman enjoys telling the stories of fascinating companies.