

# NW TUESDAY

## REDMOND FIRM LIGHTS UP JAPAN



### The Restless Native

By Ron Judd

Seattle Times columnist

Like everyone else, Steve Llorente's first thought upon hearing of the devastating megaquake in Japan was of the victims: People clinging to life with no supplies.

Unlike everyone else, his second thought was about expedited freight shipping.

Llorente is vice president of Industrial Revolution, a Redmond company that manufactures the UCO Candle Lantern, a compact, brilliantly simple source of light and heat that has become a staple of outdoor lovers around the globe.

What Llorente suspected that day has come true: The little lantern has become a highly sought consumer item in Japan, where rolling blackouts in Tokyo in the wake of the March 11 earthquake have left many in the dark and cold.

Workers in Redmond — yes, the lights are manufactured here in the United States — have been working nights and weekends to meet demand for the lanterns, which are being shipped by air, rather than the usual pokey container ship.

The company's 15 employees — all of them, in this all-hands-on-deck emergency — have cranked out 17,500 lanterns bound for Japan in recent weeks, with 85,000 replacement candles to go with them. Another 3,000 lanterns are expected to be shipped Thursday.

That's as many as the company usually sells in Japan, always a strong market, in six months.

"It's been a scramble," Llorente says. "But it's good to see our products being



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Operations manager Dino Trittis shows the light an UCO Candle Lantern gives off.

put to good use."

The company initially offered to send candle lanterns for free, as emergency supplies. They're still trying to facilitate that. But distributors in Japan told them the best way to help in the short term would be to ramp up delivery through the normal distribution chain, because stores can't keep them on the shelves.

It's not surprising. The Candle Lantern, which collapses to coat-pocket size, provides both light and heat in a convenient package. The little lanterns burn a custom-fitted candle, kept at a constant height by a spring, for nine hours or more.

A glass globe prevents the flame from being snuffed by the wind — and casts a warm, glowing reflection that has warmed the hands and calmed the nerves of many a cold traveler, or disaster survivor, since the lanterns were first made here in 1981.

Since then, millions have been sold through outdoor retailers such as REI. And it's a safe bet that the handy lanterns have become staples of many an earthquake emergency kit.

Llorente believes part of the throw-back product's appeal is the warmth it provides. Aside from providing light, a candle lantern can quickly warm a confined space while reducing condensation, providing an aesthetic comfort you don't get with a battery light of comparable size.

UCO Candle Lanterns are popular with backpackers, fishermen, car campers, survival junkies and star watchers. Customers writing product reviews on REI.com, where an REI-branded version sells for \$19.95, report using their original lantern for 20 years or more.

The little lantern's biggest year, before now, was 2000, amid Y2K fears, "when

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everyone thought the lights were going out,” he notes. This year, with emergency supplies flying off shelves, could be bigger.

Workers assemble about 50,000 Candle Lanterns a year (a batch takes about three days) at a Redmond industrial park, shipping them to 39 countries. Company officials estimate that more than 2 million Candle Lanterns are out there.

The light is one in a long line of Seattle-designed products — like Therm-A-Rest mattresses and MSR portable cooking

stoves — that first wormed their way into the hearts of outdoorsy people around the globe, and now serve double duty as survival gear.

Consider them Seattle’s small, indirect gifts to the afflicted.

Redmond’s UCO Candle Lantern squad will keep working overtime to get lights to Japan until demand has been met. And it stands ready to ship supplies directly to devastated areas, if those details can be arranged through relief agencies, Llorrente says.

“We’re still poking at that question,” he says. “We’ve been doing everything we can to get them what they need.”

The lights, he knows, are a small thing given the mass devastation.

But in a true crisis, small things often loom large. And if the UCO Candle Lantern has proved anything over its nearly 40-year life span, it is this: In the dark and cold, a little light goes a long, long way.



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*Industrial Revolution, a Redmond company, makes the UCO Candle Lantern, a simple source of light and heat.*