

THE KEY TO A SAFER TOMORROW

# FIREWISE BULLETIN

JULY 2012

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## A Wildfire in February!? Are You Kidding??

by NCCFF Editor

As you may recall from our story in the March 2012 issue of this newsletter, the residents of Napa Valley's Soda Canyon had a rude awakening on November 1, 2011. This was a case of your classic wind-driven wildfire that, while terrifying, had a positive outcome – no one was injured and only one home and a garage were lost in the 90-acre blaze.

As I reported in March, the bright side of the story was the immediate community interest in wildfire awareness and survival preparedness. Little did the community know that a winter-season wildfire, on February 23 of this year, would once again test their resolve.

The second Soda Canyon fire was



Aerial view of the Soda Canyon Fire of Feb. 23. (Barbara Weare's home is at the bottom of photo and Rick and Gail Thornberry's home is upper center).

200 acres and came very close to several large homes. When I heard that defensible space and a prompt fire service response were mitigating factors in saving the homes, I made

an appointment to visit the fire scene with CAL FIRE Battalion Chief Mike Wilson, to talk with one of the homeowners to find out what measures he had taken to save his

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### SODA CANYON WORKSHOP – A GREAT SUCCESS!



Soda Canyon residents attending a wildfire workshop in early May.

Thirty-five residents of Napa Valley's Soda Canyon community participated in a May 5 wildfire workshop sponsored by Napa Firewise. The goal was to provide useful information on wildfire behavior, defensible space planning, vegetation management, tips on the use of fire-resistant building materials, and steps the

community could take in forming their own Fire Safe Council. The results of the workshop were encouraging—more than a dozen neighbors signed up as volunteers to help establish a wildfire plan for their community. For more information on the Soda Canyon Fire Safe Council, contact Napa Firewise at [info@napafirewise.org](mailto:info@napafirewise.org).



# Wildfire In February, continued

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home.

To my pleasant surprise, the homeowner was Rick Thornberry, a leading fire code expert with more than a passing interest in fire prevention and wildfire survival. As a professional fire protection engineer, Thornberry's job is to make homes and businesses fire safe and hopefully invincible. What better test than with his own home!

Thornberry explained how he arrived home at the height of the February fire to find a fire crew stationed in his driveway. The fire was advancing on his defensible space perimeter at over thirty miles per hour. Thick grey smoke obscured the flames and oncoming danger, so Thornberry left his home in the hands of the Napa County Fire Department and retreated to the safety of a neighbor's home.

In the light of day, Thornberry discovered that his defensible space planning had paid off. The fire was stopped at the edge of a 200-foot zone that surrounded his home. I asked him to elaborate on the specific mitigation actions he took in preparing for wildfire.

"First off, I can't thank the men and women of CAL FIRE and our own county volunteer fire departments enough for the quick response," said Thornberry. "I understand there were nearly 100 firefighters on the fire. It was 100% contained by the next morning."

Thornberry explained his defensible space strategy: "My first line of defense was a 200-foot safety zone around my home. That's 100 feet more than the law requires. And to tell you the truth, that's still not enough! My plan is to expand my safety zone another 100 feet, to 300 feet in all."

"I expected our home to suffer broken glass and other minor fire damage," said Thornberry. "There was none. This wasn't just luck – we were prepared! The siding and decks are all made from fire-resistant materials; the



*Rick Thornberry explains path of the February Soda Canyon fire to CAL FIRE Battalion Chief Mike Wilson.*

windows are double glazed; there is no exposed natural wood; the soffits are fire-resistant and the garage doors are metal and insulated. We had also installed "hardscape" (landscaping using stone, masonry and other fire-resistant materials) pavers in the parking area, and the house has an interior sprinkler system. We have three 10,000 gallon water tanks; our pool has a hydrant system; and our roof is a Class A with a 40-year life expectancy. In addition, we don't have exposed attic vents that might otherwise have attracted hot embers. All in all, we are ready for the next wildfire!"

As a postscript to this story, it is gratifying to note that since the Soda Canyon fires, the community, with financial and management help from the Napa Communities Firewise Foundation, is in the process of forming a Soda Canyon Fire Safe Council (FSC). The Foundation has hired a fire prevention consultant to assess the overall risk of wildfire to the community. The next step will be to create a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) to prioritize mitigation efforts that will help protect the community from future fires.

## ANN NELSON JOINS FIREWISE VOLUNTEERS

The Napa Communities Firewise Foundation Board of Directors is pleased to welcome Ann Nelson as its newest volunteer staff member. Ann's responsibilities include preparing minutes from monthly Board meetings and assisting in the development and implementation of wildfire workshops and special events. Ann brings over thirty years of administrative and managerial skills to Napa Firewise from a career with the Social Security Administration. Ann can be contacted at [anelson@cityofnapa.org](mailto:anelson@cityofnapa.org).





# Get your Personal Wildfire Evacuation Plan

by Roger Archey, NCCFF Bulletin Editor

The thought of actually planning for a wildfire can be daunting – especially when your family's lives are at stake. Where do you start? What do you need to know? Where can you go for help? These are basic questions you should be asking yourself. The answers can make all the difference in the world.

The good news is that there are many resources ready to help. Your local fire and police departments are likely to have plenty of basic information free for the asking. Online resources such as Napa Firewise ([www.napafirewise.org](http://www.napafirewise.org)), CAL FIRE ([www.fire.ca.gov](http://www.fire.ca.gov)), and Firewise Communities USA ([www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org)) are all in the business of providing you with help. While suggestions may vary slightly from publication to publication and website to website, the fundamentals are much the same. The critical need is to start developing a plan now! Don't wait for fire to be licking at your front door before you take action. A good example of the results of advanced planning can be found in this newsletter in our interview with Rick Thornberry. Check out "Wildfire in February, Are You Kidding??" Rick explains some of the basics that saved his home.

## WHERE DO YOU START?

Start by visiting the Napa Firewise website at [www.napafirewise.org](http://www.napafirewise.org). Click on "Defensible Space." Here you will find a wealth of information on everything from understanding basic fire behavior to fire-resistant plant choices, construction materials and landscaping techniques. There is even a list of fire-resistant plants. In Chapter 14 you will find the downloadable forms you need to build your own wildfire action plan.

## WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

Knowledge is key! You should have a basic understanding of wildfire behavior when you write up your plan. For instance: During high fire danger days such as those windy "red flag" alert days normally seen in late summer and early fall, monitor CAL FIRE's website and your local media outlets for information on nearby brush fires and wind conditions. If you live at the top of a canyon,

be aware that fire normally runs uphill much faster than on flat land. This means you may need to leave early in case of an evacuation order. Smoke can also dramatically change the landscape. Once-familiar landmarks can disappear in an instant. Add darkness as a factor and the game changes again. Be ready to implement your emergency plan at a moment's notice. Here are some handy tips that could save your life:

Write up your Wildfire Action Plan and post it in a location where every member of your family can see it. I keep a copy in a prominent location in the garage and another on my home-office door. Review your plan frequently with your family. This is even more important if family members are scattered at multiple locations. Do your children know what to do if they are home alone when the evacuation notice comes? Do they know where to meet up with you? Who to call?

## EVACUATION PRIORITY LIST

Before the need to evacuate arises, note the most important items to be taken with you. List only those that can be hand-carried and easily gathered. For example: Family heirlooms, important documents, cash, the family pet, computer files, clothing, prescriptions, disaster supplies, etc.

## EMERGENCY SUPPLIES

You may find yourself and your family isolated for a few days. The American Red Cross recommends every family have an emergency supply kit assembled long before a wildfire or other emergency occurs. Use the checklist below to help assemble yours. For more information, visit the American Red Cross website at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).

- Five- to seven-day supply of water (one gallon per person per day)
- Non-perishable food for all family members and pets (three to five days)
- First aid kit
- Flashlight, battery-powered radio, and extra batteries
- Extra set of car keys, credit cards, cash or travelers checks



# Ready before a wildfire strikes. Here's help!

- Sanitation supplies
- Extra eyeglasses or contact lenses
- Important family documents and contact numbers
- Map marked with evacuation routes
- Family photos and other irreplaceable items
- Prescriptions or special medications
- Easily carried valuables
- Personal computers (hard drives and disks)
- Chargers for cell phones, laptops, etc.
- Note: Keep a pair of old shoes and a flashlight handy in case of a sudden evacuation at night. In an earthquake emergency, watch for broken glass!

## Other Tips....

- Rotate your food cache every 6-12 months
- Donate your excess food to your local food bank
- Never let your gas tank fall below one-quarter full
- Have a designated location(s) to meet up with family members
- Call someone outside of your area to let them know your status
- Take an emergency preparedness class from the Red Cross or your local fire department

Cut and post in a prominent place

## IMPORTANT EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION

EMERGENCY..... 911 (fire, police, medical)  
American Red Cross..... 707 - 963 - 2717  
Humane Society..... 707 - 255 - 8118  
Pacific Gas & Electric..... 800 - 743 - 5000

### EMERGENCY CONTACTS

(Each family member should be aware of these contact individuals)

Local Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (Home) \_\_\_\_\_

(Work) \_\_\_\_\_

(Cell) \_\_\_\_\_

(E-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

Out-of-Area Contact Person(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (Home) \_\_\_\_\_

(Work) \_\_\_\_\_

(Cell) \_\_\_\_\_

(E-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

Remember to post this information in a conspicuous place and review the contact information at least every 6 months. A copy of this information placed in your car(s) can't hurt. The goal of developing a wildfire action plan is to get your family talking about wildfire and the steps each family member can take in preparing for this kind of danger. The stakes are high. It's all about reducing the fire risk and living safely in wildfire environment.

## JUNE 2 NAPA FIREWISE WORKSHOP COMMUNITY SPIRIT IN WORDS AND ACTION

by NCCF Editor

On a beautiful Saturday morning in June that should have been given over to leisure activities, twenty members of the Valley's Fire Safe Councils joined with County Fire officials to voice their concern about wildfire, and highlight what was being done at the property-owner level to prepare for a worst-case scenario.

The four-hour workshop was sponsored by the Napa Communities Firewise Foundation (NCCF) and featured presentations from four of the county's most at-risk communities – Berryessa Estates, Berryessa Highlands, Mt. Veeder/Dry Creek, and Atlas Peak. Also represented was the newly formed Fire Safe community of Soda Canyon, who had their own wake-up call with two significant wildfires in less than a year.

The program began with Darren Drake, President of NCCF and Napa City Fire Marshal, reminding the audience of the importance that volunteer participation plays in sustaining a grassroots fire prevention program. He then turned the program over to NCCF VP and Treasurer Stephen Gort, who reminded the audience that the goal of the workshop was to learn about the status and approaches used by each community in accomplishing the 2012 projects being funded by the Napa Firewise Foundation.

Some of the highlights of the presentations included the extraordinary effort waged by members of the Berryessa Estates Fire Safe Council in raising over \$130,000 in grants to complete a shaded fuel break around the community, and the monumental task of coordinating the removal of nearly a thousand piles of vegetation. Berryessa Highlands astonished everyone with their community outreach strategy and extraordinary project management and communication skills. Not to be outdone, the Atlas Peak Fire Safe Council showed photos of the before and after clean-up efforts along nearly three miles of winding Atlas Peak Road. Last but not least, the Mt. Veeder/Dry Creek Fire Safe Council showed how they could turn a derelict Girl Scout camp (the Cove) on Mt. Veeder into a showcase of natural beauty, fire safety and community pride. They also enthusiastically endorsed their new focus project, the renewal of three miles of Old Ridge Road, a vital firebreak and potential escape route for



*June 2 wildfire workshop for local Fire Safe Council members.*

portions of the community.

At the conclusion of the formal presentations the attendees shared common experiences in dealing with local, state and federal government agencies; frustrations and accomplishments in applying for grant funding; problems in recruiting volunteer helpers; and the difficulty in securing sustainable funding. The good news was that the lessons learned seem to invigorate the councils with a sense of optimism and encouragement. From this observer's point of view, it was encouraging to see just how much each community had in common, and how collaboration and unselfish caring for their neighbors can be a powerful tool for good.

I left the meeting with a positive feeling. These are the kind of neighbors you want to have if you live in wildfire country. If you are interested in volunteering with one of the Fire Safe Councils mentioned in this story, contact Napa Firewise at [info@napafirewise.org](mailto:info@napafirewise.org) and we will put you in touch with the right person(s).

Postscript: As we have seen recently in New Mexico and other western states, fighting wildfire takes tremendous resources – resources that are becoming less available as urban expansion into wildlands grows. Without seeming maudlin, it does strike me that our main hope is to share the responsibility for our safety with government, and not to expect government to protect us alone. As our fire service friends tell us, there aren't enough fire engines for every driveway.





Napa Communities  
Firewise Foundation  
P.O. Box 4151  
Napa, CA 94558

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**CONTACT INFORMATION**

**FIREWISE HEADQUARTERS**

Napa County Firewise  
1199 Big Tree Road  
St. Helena, CA 94574  
707-967-1426

Email: [info@napafirewise.org](mailto:info@napafirewise.org)

Web: [www.napafirewise.org](http://www.napafirewise.org)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/napafirewise](http://www.facebook.com/napafirewise)

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/napafirewise](http://www.twitter.com/napafirewise)

**FIREWISE CHIPPING PROGRAM**

Hotline: 707-967-1426

Mail: P.O. Box 4151, Napa, CA 94558

**NAPA FIREWISE BULLETIN EDITOR**

Contact: Roger Archey  
415.927.4207 or email at  
[rarchey@pacbell.net](mailto:rarchey@pacbell.net)



**Fire Season is here!**

Do you have a wildfire protection plan?  
Are you ready to evacuate on a moment's notice?  
Does your family understand the risk of wildfire?

**GET READY NOW!**

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