

## **Berryessa Estates – A Community Under Siege**

By Roger Archey, Napa Communities Firewise Foundation

The signs are often subtle but the message is loud and clear—rural communities across California and the West are under siege from wildland fire. Berryessa Estates, a blue-collar, 60's-era planned community in the northeast corner of Napa County, is no exception. In fact, it's a model for what could go drastically wrong given the right fire weather conditions.

On a recent Sunday, I was invited to meet with John Hallman, president of the Berryessa Estates Fire Safe Council, and Gail Bickett, the Council's secretary, to discuss what it takes to mobilize a community against the threat of wildland fire and the challenges their community faces for the future.

If you didn't know where you were going you could easily miss the turn-in-the-road exit leading to Berryessa Estates off Butts Canyon Road. And for many of the 500-plus residents of this community, the remoteness and isolation are what they had in mind.

The narrow one-way in and out road leading to the Estates takes you through classic California grasslands and beautiful stands of majestic oaks. As you get closer to the community, the conditions change dramatically. The terrain gets steeper and the vegetation thickens with an abundance of Digger pines, manzanita, chamise and chaparral. These are all significant fire-hungry plants and very common to many California communities.

I asked John Hallman to explain his growing concern for his community: "As you can see when you drive in here, the homes are smack in the middle of nearly 60 years of vegetation buildup; we are at the end of a dead-end road and our closest volunteer fire department is over 20 minutes away. We really are in a siege situation when it comes to fire suppression—every second counts. Our best chance of survival is to be proactive and prepared. We know it's only a matter of time before the big one hits again. The last major fire here was in 1957. I truly think we are living on borrowed time."

Gail explains the challenges the community faces in organizing a community fire awareness program. "I hate to say it, but our greatest challenge is finding the time and energy to tackle the task of getting prepared. For many in our community the thought of land clearing and defensible space preparation is overwhelming. We live in a community of hard-working commuters and retired folks on fixed incomes. We don't have a fire prevention budget and must rely primarily on the local resources we can muster. That's not to say we don't get some support from the county, government agencies like the Bureau of Land Management, CAL FIRE and the Napa Communities Firewise Foundation. They are a great help but we need much more."

John goes on to say how they are trying to mobilize the community, one person at a time. “At present we have a small number of neighbors we can count on. We need many more. To help organize our efforts we formed a Fire Safe Council. The Council is modeled after a national organization and provides structure and best practice examples we can follow. However, as you might expect in any volunteer organization, the majority of the load is carried by a few. We acknowledge this fact of life and try to lead by example. This said, on any given day or weekend you will find one or more members of our Fire Safe Council building defensible space around homes and common easement areas. It’s become an essential way of life.

“I am guardedly optimistic when I look to the future,” says John. “I see the fire preparedness efforts of other Napa communities like Circle Oaks and Tucker Acres as a model and know we can do the same. We will continue to preach defensible space and wildfire awareness. Let’s hope our community is listening and more neighbors step forward to help out.”

###

*John Hallman is president of the Berryessa Estates Fire Safe Council. He works as a self-employed electrical contractor and vineyard property manager.*

*Gail Bickett is secretary of the Berryessa Estates Fire Safe Council. She works as a wine educator at Sutter Home Winery in St. Helena.*

*Roger Archey is a communications consultant to the Napa Community Firewise Foundation and contributor to the Napa Register.*