

NAPA REGISTER HOME & GARDEN SECTION FOR SEPTEMBER 16, 2006

Suggested Headline: Fire Season Is Not Over Yet!!

By Gabrielle Avina, Napa County Fire Marshal

[Firewise contact: Roger Archey, Balzac Communications & Marketing, 707.255.7667 or rarchey@balzac.com]

[593 words]

School has started, and for many people the summer break is over – but for firefighters the busiest part of fire season is just beginning. Red Flag warnings are issued for Napa County and surrounding areas every year, especially during the months of September and October. Historically, it is during these Red Flag warnings when we have our largest and most destructive wildland fires.

Most everyone can remember the 2003 fire siege in Southern California where fire after fire killed 24 people, destroyed 3,710 homes and burned 750,043 acres. Closer to home we have had the Oakland Hills fire, which killed 25 people, destroyed 2,900 homes and burned 1,600 acres; and the Atlas Peak fire, which burned 23,600 acres and destroyed 161 structures. All of these fires – and almost all of the catastrophic fires in California history – happened under Red Flag conditions.

Red Flag warnings indicate that the risk of wildland fires is much higher than normal. Typically in Napa County our summer days are cooled by the moist sea breezes of the Northern California Coast. But during Red Flag warnings we have warmer temperatures, lower relative humidity and strong winds that typically blow from the north or east. These weather conditions occur when high pressure builds inland and forces air flow from the high areas of the west (think Nevada and the Sierra) down across the Central Valley and over the coastal areas toward the ocean. This airflow is warmer, drier and windier than our routine summer weather – and these weather conditions can make wildland fires extremely difficult, if not impossible, to control. Typical fire control measures can be ineffective during these conditions, limiting firefighters to protecting what is in the fire's path while they wait for a change in the weather.

When a Red Flag warning is issued in Napa County, the CDF looks at the risk and determines whether or not to add additional firefighters or engines to the line to be ready for a worse-than-normal fire. Frequently CDF will staff reserve engines, hold additional firefighting personnel on duty, or request that resources from another area of the state stage in the area so that there are enough resources if a fire occurs. It is not uncommon for a strike team of fire engines or hand crews to drive from Humboldt County to the area of the Red Flag warning to stand by until the severe weather has passed.

Citizens can heed the Red Flag warnings by not using wildland recreational areas when they are posted off-limits, and by not smoking or having open fires near dry grass and brush. Ninety-nine percent of our fires in Napa County are caused by people or equipment, so managing *ourselves* is the best way to prevent fires from starting. Be certain not to mow or use power equipment! And have your family evacuation plan handy, to use as a teaching tool at breakfast or dinner with the family. A quick five minute discussion is easy to do and can be invaluable if the worst does occur.

It is important to remember that fire season is not over just because the kids have gone back to school. In Napa County, these dry windy periods can last anywhere from a few days each fall to 14 days or more of Red Flag warnings. Fire season ends when the winter rains begin – and if we get the typical weather of September and October the worst may be still to come.

For more information about Napa Firewise, I invite you to visit our website at www.co.napa.ca.us/firewise or call 707-967-1426.

About the Author:

Gabrielle Avina is the Fire Marshal for Napa County and has worked for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in the Sonoma-Lake Napa Unit for over 15 years. She can be contacted at: gabrielle.avina@fire.ca.gov.

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