

## **NAPA REGISTER HOME & GARDEN SECTION FOR AUGUST 19, 2006**

### **Suggested Headline: Making Tough Decisions in Wildland Fire Country**

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A lot of people assume that when a wildfire starts it will quickly be controlled by the fire department. This is an accurate assumption 97% of the time; firefighters have the ability, equipment and technology to suppress most wildfires. But 3% of the time the fire burns so intensely, usually because of fuel conditions or weather conditions, that fire suppression efforts are ineffective. Fire department resources can also quickly find themselves overwhelmed during major wildfires when there are homes and people threatened. There are times when instead of aggressively fighting the fire, our resources must be directed to protecting life and property in the fire's path, in order to stop the fire's spread.

When the fire department arrives at the scene of a fast-moving wildland fire where structures are threatened, the first decision is to determine what can be saved and what must be left to burn. In a wildland fire when there are more homes threatened than resources to fight them, we are forced to "triage," to make split second decisions on where to deploy our resources so that they are the most effective. It's the same kind of decision-making rescue teams use in allocating vital resources in a disaster.

The question becomes, do we choose the home that has pine trees and brush growing adjacent to the house with a wood shake roof? Or do we choose the home that has a cleared defensible space where firefighters can safely navigate the driveway and protect the house? Or do we choose the home whose roof is already on fire?

Our choice is always to err on the side of personal safety when it comes to protecting property. This means homes with defensible space are much more likely to get our attention. If vegetation is properly modified and maintained, a wildfire can be slowed, the length of flames shortened, and the amount of heat reduced, all of which assist firefighters in defending the home. It is also important that defensible space be maintained on each side of the driveway. A minimum of ten feet on each side of the road is required to allow firefighters a way in and residents with a way out. We always look for homes with a noncombustible roof, readily visible address and emergency water storage for our fire engines.

So when do we decide the risk is too great? When there is very little to no defensible space around the structures; when there is dry grass all the way up to the structure or a large accumulation of heavy fuel too close to the structure; when driveways are too steep, too narrow, or too long to provide turnouts or turnarounds for our fire engines to navigate safely. And often, when homes are built with highly combustible wood shake siding or shake roofs.

What about the homes that are already burning when the fire department arrives? If resources are in short supply, which is quite often the case, priority will be given to the structures that are imminently threatened and not yet burning.

There is not a firefighter out there who makes the decision to save one home over another without hesitation and regret. But it is important for you to know that the most important person in protecting a house from wildfire is not a firefighter, but the property owner. And it's the action taken by the owner before the wildfire occurs that is the most critical. While making tough decisions is part of our job, you can influence our choices by being prepared with a defensible space plan. For more information about defensible space and Napa Firewise, I invite you to visit our website at [www.co.napa.ca.us/firewise](http://www.co.napa.ca.us/firewise) or call 707-967-1426.

*About the Author:*

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