

## **NAPA REGISTER HOME & GARDEN SECTION FOR JULY 22, 2006**

### **Suggested Headline: Wildland Fire Myths in Napa County**

By Gabrielle Avina, Napa County Fire Marshal

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As Napa County Fire Marshal, I frequently get questions about wildland fire that give me cause for concern. There are several myths being perpetuated I would like to address.

Myth #1: We don't have a wildland fire problem in Napa County.

I am here to tell you that we most certainly do have a wildland fire problem. Fire season opened in the Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), which includes Napa County, on June 12, 2006. So far this year Napa County alone has burned 143 acres, and since January, we have responded to 160 wildland fires that have burned over 400 acres.

The season generally starts somewhat slowly, and as we move into July and August, fire frequency and fire intensity increase. As the season progresses from summer into early fall, the dry northeast winds start to blow and we get our larger catastrophic fires. If you have been watching the news lately, you know that we are already fighting large catastrophic fires in other California counties.

Our fire history in Napa County is rife with wildland fires. Since the 1940s, when we started documenting wildland fires in the county, over 260,000 acres out of the county's approximate 500,000 acres have burned. That's over half of the county in the last 60 years. This means wildland fire is part of our fire history and certainly part of our future. The question is: are we planning for the future?

Myth #2: The wildland fire problem is actually improving.

It's safe to say that the history of wildfires in Napa County extends farther back than our recordkeeping. Lightning-caused wildfire has been part of the Napa landscape for thousands of years. Before we established communities in the county, the cycle of fire was fairly consistent – the forests and brush burned during the summer and fall and replenished themselves during the winter and spring. Once our Founding Fathers settled here, fire became a problem and the natural cycle began to change. Fire suppression became the mantra.

In the early 1900s, following decades of devastating human-caused wildland fires, state and federal land resource management agencies formed and formalized a national approach to wildland protection – fire eradication. The goal was to exclude or suppress all wildland fires. Those exclusionary policies removed fire from the environment and in doing so changed the fire landscape of California, not necessarily for the better.

Today, after a century of suppression, we are left with an “unnatural” amount of fuel in our wildlands. Adding to the complexity of fire management, our wildlands are being transformed to build homes, locate businesses, and provide recreation. The role of the firefighter has become more complex. Our role now is protecting people and property, with less time for managing the fire ecology. Our resources are stretched thin.

The bottom line is that wildland fire has become a serious statewide issue and a threat to our way of life. On the positive side, there is something we can do. We must recognize the limitations of government to provide total fire protection and begin taking personal responsibility to plan and educate ourselves and our families on what it takes to live in wildland fire country. This means understanding the fire threat where we live; preparing an emergency plan should a wildland fire approach; reducing fire risk by developing a defensible space landscape plan for our home and property; forming or participating in a neighborhood fire awareness program such as Napa Firewise, and most importantly, not becoming complacent and thinking the fire threat will go away. It won't.

Myth 3: People living in high fire-risk communities know they are at risk.

The truth is that many people living in high fire-risk communities often don't fully understand their level of risk; they believe that all they have to do is call 911 and a fire truck will be at their door. If only it were that simple.

Fire risk is determined by many factors: location, geology, fuel types, road access, fire department response time, water supply, defensible space, wind and weather patterns, etc. Understanding these fire factors is part of being aware.

Taking the knowledge of risk one more step: in a major wildland fire, fire resources are stretched very thin. Property and personal survival are often determined by how well people are prepared. This means knowing your neighborhood fire risk; understanding the risk to your home and property, and most importantly, having an emergency plan with options.

Your plan should include defensible space planning. Defensible space is sometimes referred to as a “safe zone” 100 feet around your home where vegetation and other fire fuels have been removed or reduced to provide a safe

haven for firefighters defending your home, and a safety option for your family in case you can't evacuate.

So as you can see, truly understanding the fire risk to your community is more than meets the eye.

In subsequent stories we will be providing you with information on how to develop defensible space, plan for emergencies, evaluate your home for fire hazards, use landscaping as a fire prevention feature, evacuate safely, and also how to become involved in our own community Firewise program. This all leads to being prepared for the next big fire in Napa County. It's only a matter of time.

*About the Author:*

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