

NAPA REGISTER HOME & GARDEN SECTION FOR OCTOBER 14, 2006

Suggested Headline: Wild Fire Evacuation – Are You Ready?

By Gabrielle Avina, Napa County Fire Marshal

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Are You Ready?

If you live in Dry Creek, Circle Oaks, Berryessa Estates, Angwin, Deer Park or Berryessa Highlands, to mention a few high fire danger communities, the memory of the recent Yountville fire should still be fresh in your mind. In the case of the people who live in Dry Creek, the threat was real and the danger was very close to home. My question today is: would you be ready if you had to evacuate your home?

When a community is in the path of a fast moving wildland fire, it is the responsibility of local law enforcement and fire officials to order and execute an orderly evacuation. This includes going door to door and making face-to-face contact whenever possible.

While law enforcement is directing evacuees out of harm's way to pre-arranged safe areas, fire officials are doing what they can to suppress the fire before it reaches populated areas. Emergency responders all work according to a plan. The question is, Do you have a plan too?

Have you and your family talked about what you would do in the event you are asked to evacuate? What if the family were separated by work or other events? What about your pets? What if there is an elderly person in the house who requires special care?

If you are like most of us, evacuation planning is not a priority until it happens. But I have a better idea. Pull your family together for thirty minutes this weekend and share the following discussion points. It just might be the most important family meeting you will have. And remember, fire season is not over yet.

Here are a few points to discuss:

- Recognize when it's time to go: Small fires happen almost every day in the summer in Napa and no one evacuates. But we're preparing for the big one – look for large columns of smoke, the kind that goes thousands of feet in the air and can be seen from miles away. You will

probably hear more sirens than you've ever heard before. These kinds of clues should kick-start your evacuation plan.

- Find your family: If they're home, gather them up. If not, call them and advise them of the situation and have a pre-arranged meeting place selected. If you can't get through, notify the local Red Cross where you will be if family members call. If people get lost and separated from one another, the Red Cross works hard to reunite families. Also designate a third party who lives far enough away to not be affected by the fire as your family contact point. Let them know when you've evacuated and where you are going (if you know).
- Gather your important stuff if you have time: Get the medications, money, documents, photographs, glasses, and personal effects loaded in the car. How much you take will depend on how long you have – if the fire is closing in, spend no time on this. If you have hours, then select what you need more carefully.
- Prepare your home: Go to our Firewise website at <http://www.co.napa.ca.us/firewise> and click on About Firewise, then select "*When Wildland Fire Approaches - Emergency Check List*," to get the information you need.
- Animals: Especially the large, livestock kind. These take time to move, so you need to take action early if you have large animals. We recommend that you evacuate your animals before you need to leave. Take them to a boarding facility or friend's house long before you feel imminently threatened. If the fire comes too fast, then simply turn them loose; their chance of survival is better if they can move and are not corralled.
- Evacuating yourself: The drive out may be tough if the fire is close by. Turn on headlights, keep the windows rolled up and keep calm. Stick to the main road and watch out for other frightened drivers and fire engines coming the opposite way. People do odd things at stressful times like this, so be ready for anything. Your car can take some heat and flame against the vehicle but not more than a minute or two. Remember to hold your breath if you are driving through flame. If you can't get out on the road, return home, or to a nearby house, and ride it out inside.

For additional information on planning for an evacuation and creating a family disaster plan visit http://www.fire.ca.gov/php/fire_er_beprepared.php

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

About the Author:

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