

Wildland Fires: Protecting Your Home

Larry Cargnoni

Captain Barry Stallard, Wildland Captain of the San Jose Fire Department, presented an overview on protecting one's home from wildfire to District 8 residents at a recent meeting of the District 8 Community Round Table. With the Summit Fire fresh in residents' minds, it was a timely reminder to create a defensible space around one's home and to create a family emergency plan.

Spring 2008 was one of the driest on record, leaving vegetation with moisture content more consistent with that of July and August rather than May and June. "San Jose has experienced 12-13 grass fires this year already," stated Stallard. "There aren't enough resources to protect everyone and home owners must take steps to increase the probability their home can be saved during a wildland fire."

Stallard told the residents that creating a 100 foot defensible space around one's home is critical. Not only does a 100 foot buffer increase the odds that a home can be saved, it's the law in many communities. District 8 residents watched a short movie that illustrated several maintenance and landscaping tips to creating a defensible space.

Removing leaves, needles, and other debris from gutters, roofs and eaves, trimming trees and bushes away from chimneys, roofs, and siding, and having good screens over roof and crawlspace vents are just some of the crucial maintenance steps to take. "Homes burn from the roof down" says Stallard.

Residents should consider planting native landscaping that is less likely to burn, using plants that have high moisture content; deciduous and succulent trees are "more fire resistant" than evergreen trees, says Stallard. He reminded the community to clear away dead and dry brush from the property and to vary the type and height of landscaping to minimize the advance of fire.

More importantly, says Stallard, is to have an emergency preparedness plan. Prepare now for the unexpected. "Don't try to go back into a burning structure" he said. "Don't try to run through fires like they do on TV." Most people die of smoke inhalation and become disoriented in seconds. People should maintain copies of important papers, pictures, and anything else of value away from the premises.

Prompted by a question from Bonnie Mace, Stallard stated that home owners associations and communities should have an early warning, communication and evacuation plan. He said that residents need to plan now on how they would exit their property and locale. Stallard communicated that the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council is available to meet with community members and homeowners, evaluate their safety situation, and provide recommendations. The Santa Clara County FireSafe Council can be reached at 408-975-9591.

Resident Sherry Gilmore asked if the airborne particulate from the Summit Fire was damaging to one's lungs. Stallard replied that the combustibles from a wildland fire are natural, unlike the burning of a house hold that contains furniture, carpet, and other items that give off noxious fumes. He stated that the particulate effects of the Fire will go away eventually.

Vikki Lang asked if the "12-13 San Jose fires were arson." Stallard replied that the causes were not known, but that common causes includes careless discarding of cigarettes, kids playing with matches, and BBQs getting "out of control".

The Santa Clara County FireSafe Council maintains a website that contains many fire protection safety tips, including the online-guide "Living with Fire in Santa Clara County", educational information for kids, and pointers to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. The website is www.sccfiresafe.org.

The next District 8 Community Round Table meeting will be held on July 8 at the Evergreen Branch Library from 7-9 p.m. For more details on the D8CRT, visit www.d8crt.org. Larry Cargnoni is an officer of the D8CRT.