

Sober Lessons from the Wine Country Fires

by Laurie Guitteau

The Wine Country fires sobered all of California. Wildfires are part of California's landscape, our history, our life. We expect them every year. But total devastation and the horrific loss of life in the midst of Northern California's lush wine country, death and destruction in a planned, urban development that would never be called "fire prone," that is not what we expect. The tragedies of the previous month force all of us to look anew at our surroundings.

This tragedy has sparked a serious discussion among fire scientists, fire officials, city governments, health-care administrators, and emergency managers. The Los Angeles Times called it "a wake up call for disasters to come." The impact of this fire on hospitals, nursing homes, the frail and the elderly, and first responders provides important lessons for future disasters, which are sure to come. We can only hope that as the news fades, the resolve to learn from this does not.

According to the L.A. Times, our own Max Moritz, a fire specialist with the University of California's Cooperative Extension and a Mission Canyon resident, said, "From its core, our whole approach to fire behavior modeling, we are not talking about burning in urbanized environments. The fire hazard zones need to be recast with more consideration for the impact of wildland fire on developed areas."

Much can be learned from this tragedy, and we who live in the extreme high fire hazard zone need to encourage serious study and implementation of the lessons learned. The Mission Canyon Association will continue to push for improvements in emergency preparedness and will monitor progress here in Santa Barbara. We intend keep our residents informed and also provide information on what we each must do to be fire safe.

The lesson for Mission Canyon coming out of the NorCal tragedies is clear. Since the Jesusita Fire in 2009, many of us have become complacent. We have had our fire; it won't happen again for a long time, we tell each other. Napa reminds us that no one is



An aerial view of the recent destruction from the Tubbs fire in the Coffey Park neighborhood of Santa Rosa.

SOURCE: US Department of Defense 2017

exempt from disaster. This newsletter revisits what we can and should do to avoid loss of life and perhaps loss of property. Each homeowner needs to be proactive and prepared. As was seen in Napa, first responders are people just like us, and they can only do so much. We each need to be responsible for our own safety.

To the fire-resistant tactic of defensible space around your house, fire experts are now advising "home hardening" against ember intrusion. Suggestions are made below in *How to Harden a Home*, but you can do your own research, too. We suggest you start by asking the firefighters at Station 15 to come up and evaluate your home and property. They will give you an honest assessment of your vulnerabilities and what you can do to mitigate them. Because of Station 15's advice, we installed a sprinkler system activated by temperature on our wooden deck, and it saved our house during Jesusita. You can reach Station 15 at **(805) 681-5515** to set up an appointment.

How to Harden a Home

One thing most people do not understand is that during a wildfire, the home normally burns from the inside out. Yes, the inside out. The challenge for the homeowner is to

make sure the fire does not get inside. And that's not easy because fires are sneaky, and strong winds can hurl embers more than a mile, stuffing them into small crevices and then fanning them into fire. Firefighters and fire scientists agree that embers are the major danger to homes in a wildfire, and blocking ember intrusion is Number 1 on the home-hardening checklist.

Vents are the biggest culprit. One of the loveliest homes in Mission Canyon looked unscathed after the Jesusita Fire, at least from one side. The interior had been gutted by an ember that blew through a vent. Keep embers out by covering any and all vents with 1/8-inch to 1/4-inch metal mesh. Fiberglass and plastic mesh can melt and burn. Vents in the eaves or cornices need to be protected with baffles to block embers.

Use wire mesh to keep from starting a fire. Chimneys and stovepipe outlets should be covered with a noncombustible screen. Use metal screen material with openings no smaller than 3/8 inch and no larger than 1/2 inch to prevent embers from escaping.

Here's an easy one: Is your roof fire resistant? The answer's probably "yes" since that has been code in Santa Barbara for many

Lessons (cont. p.2)

Lessons (cont. from p.1)

years. Your roof is the most vulnerable part of your home for obvious reasons.

Next, keep your roof clear of debris: oak leaves, pine needles, anything that could catch a spark. With terracotta tile roofs, be sure that the tiles are blocked so that debris cannot work its way into the tiles. Debris may be a bigger challenge for tile roofs since there are so many nooks and crannies. Embers love nooks and crannies.

Keep rain gutters free of leaf debris by screening or enclosing them. But, even with screens, gutters can easily fill up with oak leaves or other small debris. Up here in the canyon, you should regularly clean your gutters. A gutter with any amount of leaves is an open invitation to a flying ember, even a spark.

If you have a deck, do NOT store combustible items underneath. Fire generally travels upward or uphill, and the area beneath a deck is a fire's sweetest dream. It's one of the most vulnerable places in a home because fire can and will sweep under there. The ideal is to plaster the underside of the deck, protect it with some other ignition-resistant, noncombustible material, or enclose it. While that might not be in this year's budget, clearing everything from under the deck costs nothing.

The same is true of the eaves and soffits of your house. Ideally, they are plastered or covered with a noncombustible, ignition-resistant material.

Windows are a serious problem in a fire. They burst from the heat, often before the fire has even arrived, leaving delicious access to all of the wonderfully flammable things in your home: drapes, carpet, clothing, furniture. Large, singled-paned windows are the most vulnerable. If possible, replace single-paned windows with dual-paned windows with one pane of tempered glass. If you cannot afford to do that, have plywood pieces cut to the size of your most vulnerable windows to nail in place in case of fire. Keep



Some tips for hardening your house against fire (clockwise from top left): 1) Make sure all house vents have screens, roof to foundation. 2) For roofing tile, make sure ends are blocked. 3) Clean gutters of all debris. 4) Get rid of anything flammable under the deck. 5) Do not attach wood fencing to house. 6) Remove flammable plant material from wire fencing.

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them in an accessible place so that you can work quickly.

We mentioned fences in defensible space considerations, because a wooden one that goes right to a house can destroy it. Chain link fences woven with palm fronds or bamboo are an open invitation to embers! Generally, where a fence touches a home is below the wooden eaves; they are a welcome mat for fire. Ideally, replace your fence with Hardie board or other fire-resistant material; there are many on the market now. If you cannot afford to do the entire fence, how about the part closest to the house? Also examine the vegetation close to the fence; this could be a good subject during a Station 15 inspection.

Patio covers are another area of concern. They should be made of a fire-resistant material, just like your roof. And like your deck,

the underside is very vulnerable. At least, be sure the patio cover will not be a conduit for fire to the house.

Oh, the garage! It's likely full of combustible material if it's a well-used garage. Try to store the most flammable liquids away from ignition sources. Install weather stripping around the door to prevent embers from blowing in. Have a fire extinguisher and tools such as a shovel, rake, bucket, and hoe available for fire emergencies.

Yes, some of these suggestions take money, money you may not have. Don't be discouraged. Mission Canyon is full of old houses and fixed incomes. Do what you can. Many of these precautions can be acted upon without huge expense. Again, this is where Station 15 can advise about your worst vulnerabilities and the most economical way to mitigate them.

Homes and the Wildland Zone

by Laurie Guitteau

Mission Canyon has two distinct neighborhoods. The typical wildland-urban interface zone, on upper Mission Canyon and Tunnel roads, has homes close to the national forest but mostly separated by an acre or more. Closer to Foothill Road is Mission Canyon Heights, more densely populated yet within a mile of national forest lands.

Mission Canyon and Tunnel roads lie in a box canyon with only one exit. That sin-

gular exit is one of the four exits that serve Mission Canyon Heights, which itself has narrow, winding roads that serve 500 homes on ocean-view hillsides. The Heights' rabbit warren of streets could become very dangerous during a smoke-filled evacuation.

Close-set homes in the Heights creates the hazard seen in the Coffey Park Fire in Santa Rosa, that of fire jumping quickly from house to house. The Heights was lucky during the Jesusita Fire. With the help of a wind shift and dedicated local firefighters, only a

few homes were lost. That may not be true the next time. Rule Number One: If you are told to evacuate, do it.

A first principle of wildfire is that life is more important than property, both for residents and firefighters. A human cannot outrun a wind-driven wildfire, neither on foot nor in a car. Sadly, many lose their lives trying to escape. It is not just the flames: Fire takes the oxygen; smoke kills. And sheltering in place is extremely risky. Australians had been trained to do that until 173 lives

were lost during a terrible fire season in 2009. Those who went through Santa Barbara's fires will affirm that smoke and flame make even a familiar road a hazard.

After early evacuation, the next rule is to prepare. Here in Mission Canyon, you must accept that you live in the wildfire zone. During a fire, you will not be allowed back in to your home. Keep documents or possessions you cannot afford to lose in a safety deposit box or a secure place outside the fire area. If your computer is your life, back it up offsite.

How will family members communicate when cell towers and the electricity grid fail? Make a family plan; review it often; practice it. Designate an emergency meeting place for

your family members or an out-of-town contact person. Imagine a world without smart phones!

And now imagine the fire on your doorstep—what do you grab? Under stress, few of us can think straight; we end up grabbing the silliest things, leaving behind the important ones. Make a list of critical items: medications, documents, valuables. Finish the list with your family, then keep it where everyone can put their hands on it quickly. Maybe an emergency box that you can simply grab and run would work. Valued family mementos should be in one place for a quick swoop into a box on the way out the door.

Emergency escape routes from Mission Canyon are worth pondering and even practicing for the 2 a.m. call that Napa just went through. A wrong turn could be a matter of life or death. We discuss alert systems at the article titled *Early Fire Alerts*. And this might be a time to discuss emergency evacuation with your neighbors, especially if they are elderly or do not drive.

Review your insurance policies annually. Those of us hit with losses in the Tea and Jesusita fires learned that rebuilding costs are much higher than anyone dreamed. Get realistic advice on the cost to rebuild so that your insurance coverage is adequate.

Is the Area Around Your Home Defensible?

by Laurie Guitteau

How many times have you had the lecture on Defensible Space? It's like the safety briefing on the airplane where everyone keeps looking at their smart phone and ignoring the flight attendants. Well, it pays to pay attention. Homes surrounded by defensible space survive in greater numbers, if only because that heat-free zone gives firefighters a measure of safety while they work to save your house.

In addition, Mission Canyon has a wonderful resource, the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. Executive Director Steve Windhager is an expert on fire behavior, and under his direction, the Garden has recovered from the destruction wrought by the Jesusita Fire. No plant is fireproof, but some are better than others. The folks at the Garden can help you choose and design wisely. The key is how your vegetation is located in relation to your home.

What is defensible space? Basically, you want to create an area around your house that is clear of hot-burning flammables, someplace a firefighter or engine can safely make a stand and train a hose on your roof. The "Ready Set Go" program, available at fire stations and sbcfire.com, gives all the details about defensible space.

Another way to think about it is to look at your property, remember that all vegetation and wood and plastic structures can catch fire when hot enough, and imagine how your house might be affected during wind and firestorm. Does a huge eucalyptus tree hang over your roof or touch it in places? Are juniper bushes right up against your house? Is firewood stacked under the eaves? How fast would those beautiful wispy, dry grasses in your front garden catch fire? Are those flowering oleanders along the wooden fence safe? With embers flying and the wind blow-

ing hard, the answer to each question is: Fix this now!

Fire-resistant ornamental plants or hard-scape, formed with concrete, rock, or gravel, are preferred closest to the house; those beautiful dry grasses are not! Farther from the house can be taller bushes or trees, but you want to avoid "fire ladders," or plants beneath a tree that can blaze up into the canopy. A wooden fence can act as a fire ladder for both trees and house eaves. All vegetation should be kept trimmed and clean of dead matter, the latter a special problem with ivy, rosemary, or juniper. Less is more; keep space between your plants.

Don't forget those plants that creep out into the road, which is your exit to safety and firefighters' entrance during a blaze. Vegetation almost fully blocks some roads in Mission Canyon Heights again, after MCA gained grant money to clean up the worst offenders several years ago. On private roads, residents should ensure trees and vegetation are trimmed up off the street.

Trees form much of the beauty of Mission Canyon. For fire's sake, keep them clear of dead branches, with limbs trimmed up to

avoid flammable plants underneath, which should be kept trimmed low. The fire department recommends that trees be limbed up six feet or higher if there is flammable vegetation below. Even pines and eucalyptus, with their flammable resins and oils, can survive a fire if kept clean and trimmed. Interestingly, some arborists think large oaks "weep" moisture with a fire's heat and may help a home during a fire, but only if they are meticulously groomed.

Look critically at your land, all of it, with embers in your eyes.

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MCA's Board of Directors meets the first Tuesday of each month, at 7:30 p.m., at the S.B. Natural History Museum's MacVeagh House. All residents are welcome to attend.

*Chair of committee



The scorched area below this window is evidence that the bush next to it caught the side of the house on fire. A fire crew arrived just in time!

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Wine Country
Fire Lessons!
Hardening Your Home

“Look critically at your land, with embers in your eyes.”

Early Fire Alerts

The most horrific stories of the Wine Country fires center on people having no idea they were in danger until their house was actually burning. Too many people died because there was no warning.

How can we avoid that, especially if a fire begins at night when everyone is asleep?

Santa Barbara does have an early warning system. All phones can be registered on Aware and Prepare for notifications by text, cell, and old-fashioned landline phone. Simply go to the website awareandprepare.org and follow the directions to register for emergency notification. At present, only 12,000 people are signed up for these notifications. Make sure you are one of them.

Reverse 9-1-1 has been in effect in Santa Barbara County for several years. For it to be most effective, you need a landline. Yes, that is against the trend these days, but all local emergency responders confirm that a landline is currently much more reliable in case of an emergency here in Santa Barbara. Preferably, it should be a landline

that is hard wired. Landlines with Cox or other companies that depend on the internet may be compromised during an emergency. The same is true with cell phones.

Electricity is often the first thing to disappear during an emergency along with cell phone towers. A hardwired landline depends on neither of these. In addition to this, 9-1-1 calls are routed properly more often using landlines than when using cell phones. City and county emergency responders are currently working to improve our 9-1-1 system, but that is going to take time and money. Meanwhile, a hardwired landline is your safest alert system.

In addition, have contact numbers for all of your closest neighbors so that you can be sure that they have been alerted. Keep these numbers in an obvious place so you have them when you need them.

If you are depending on cell phone alerts, be sure that on especially windy, hot nights, you keep that cell phone near you so that you can hear it if the alert comes.

—Laurie Guitteau

Red Flag Day Nightmares

On a hot, windy Saturday in October declared a Red Flag Warning day, 39 vehicles were counted parked on the road between Montrose and the Y at Tunnel and Mission Canyon roads. For those of you who don't live on Tunnel Road, the Tunnel Trail has become a popular hiking spot for what seems like the entire world. Because of the worry over getting everyone out during a fire, parking is prohibited on Tunnel Road starting at the Red Flag notice near Montrose.

Instead of discouraging hikers from coming into the canyon during dangerous conditions, it has created a monster. Imagine 39 cars, all parked facing uphill, trying to turn around at the only exit from Tunnel Road and the exit of choice for many on Montrose and Cheltenham. It's a disaster waiting to happen.

MCA is asking to have all parking on the road prohibited during Red Flags. The proposal is under study. Let your MCA Board know what you think or suggestions you may have. Write to webmaster@missioncanyon.org.—Laurie Guitteau