

Preparation Key to Fire Safety in Lamorinda's Wildland-Urban Interface

By Jennifer Wake



Smoke from recent California wildfires turns the sun pink as air quality decreases Photo Jennifer Wake

Although smoke has dissipated and air quality has returned to a healthy level, wildfires continue to burn throughout California. Recently, several Moraga-Orinda Fire District (MOFD) firefighters joined California Department of Forestry (CalFire) and other battalions to battle the Butte Lightning Complex Fire, while the remaining MOFD staff kept a vigilant watch on our own hills.

When a red flag alert was called by the MOFD two weeks ago, CalFire responded saying they would be there if they were needed, but “don’t count on it anytime soon.”

“They didn’t have anyone to send,” MOFD Battalion Chief Ed Borden said. In the event of a first alarm situation, in addition to MOFD’s own equipment and personnel CalFire supplies six engines, two tanker aircraft, a helicopter, two bulldozers, a hand crew, and an extra CalFire chief.

The recent wildfires, however, put such a strain on CalFire that requests were put in a holding queue until equipment and personnel became available.

Fortunately, even with these challenges, the MOFD has the train-

ing and equipment to reach any area covered by the District, says Borden – even those more difficult to access roads and hills in Canyon and Orinda.

Crews are given monthly training classes on overall safety, tactics working with CalFire and air tankers, basic company evolutions, pump and roll, and extended hoselay (a method of deploying hoses along firelines during suppression every 100 feet or so. As the line progresses, more hoses and valves are added).

“Extended hoselay is a staple in this valley,” explained Borden. “But it takes a lot of people and a lot of time. During wildland season, we send multiple units to any full alarm.

We also have four ‘Type Three’ engines that are smaller, have 4-wheel drive with high wheel bases and rugged suspension for those more precarious roads. We also have a water tender that carries 1,250 gallons used to supply our engines and shuttle water to the site before returning to fill up again.”

Experts watching the recent firestorms believe climate change is playing a part in the increased number of fires, while the trend of building homes in more remote areas that are prone to fire make each year’s

wildland season all the more dangerous. As more building occurs in outlying areas, more fires will likely threaten homes and lives, and continue to strain CalFire.

Since the Oakland Hills fire of 1991, where 3,200 homes were destroyed and 25 people were killed, districts made changes to how fire companies communicate and how efforts are coordinated among its personnel.

For the past 10 years, firefighters from seven counties have gathered for an annual wildland training drill. Last year’s drill in Dublin included more than 500 firefighters who came to practice progressive hoselays, mobile attack where you rapidly drive a fire apparatus while attacking a fire, real time burns and hand tool attacks.

This year, however, due to the extensive number of active wildfires, the training was canceled. “We had to cancel it this year because everybody was out fighting fires,” Borden says. “It was the first time in 10 years this was canceled.”

With large portions of Lamorinda considered part of a growing wildland-urban interface – areas where structures intermingle with un-

developed wildland vegetation – strategic planning and training are vital.

Part of the MOFD’s strategic plan includes working with the City of Orinda to improve the City’s water supply infrastructure. Although the number of critical projects in Orinda remains the same as last year (47 listed with inadequate fireflow), MOFD Fire Marshal Mike Mentink says the District is collaborating with the City of Orinda to repair critical water safety systems. In the meantime, fire suppression will be accomplished with the existing hydrants and water supply, augmented with ‘water-shuttle’ operations.

“The problem has been there for a long time, and it will take a long time to tackle,” Mentink says. “These are very expensive projects and that’s all part of the collaboration.”

In addition, the MOFD and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, which serves Lafayette, have been working closely with Lamorinda homeowners in high fire-risk areas to reduce combustible materials surrounding their homes to expand defensible space, and promote the use of fire-retardant building materials when building new structures or remodeling existing ones.

Through the Firewise program, which began last year, Lamorinda residents have been able to view their properties to get a risk assessment of their fire danger, and make changes to reduce higher risk ratings.

For now, Lamorinda residents should continue to pay attention to potential fire hazards and stay extra vigilant during red flag days. As of Sunday, July 13, there were approximately 450 fires of sizeable interest still burning in California.

For more information about the Firewise program, visit <http://www.mofd.org/Firewise-Main.htm>.