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Fire Prevention: Do Your Homework

By Sophie Braccini

The Station fire that has burned more than 160,000 acres in South California (71% contained as of September 10, 2009) is a good advertisement for wildfire prevention measures. In Lamorinda the fire season to date has not been worse than previous years but Moraga Orinda Fire District Fire Marshal Mike Mentink offers a reminder of what could happen: "This year the fuel (grass and bushes) is particularly dry which can make for very rapid fire spread, especially if the heated Diablo wind coming from the east is blowing," he explains, what we saw in Oakland was the loss of hundreds of homes over a 30 minute period. Even the five minutes it takes us to respond to a call can generate a lot of damage." Mentink says the very first level of defense is in the hands of the homeowners and is called fire prevention landscaping and home retrofitting. What are the dangers? "There are three ways for a house to catch fire," says Mentink. The first danger is from flying embers. "When the wind is blowing in our area, embers can be carried by the wind for up to two miles," he says. "Flying embers can collect in vulnerable places of a structure, like under a deck, and restart a fire hours after the main event took place," adds George Laing, Fire Inspector with Contra Costa County Fire, "flying embers are the number one cause in the spread of wild land interface fires." "Second is the vegetation," says Mentink. "If branches or bushes touch a home, flames can attack the structure. There needs to be a defensible space around a property so that firefighters can access and defend it." Mentink likes to remind residents that lives come before material goods and firefighters will not risk their lives to defend an empty house. "Every firefighter deserves a round trip," says Laing. The third culprit is radiant heat. Chances are, if your neighbor's house is burning and is close to yours, the radiant heat might affect your structure; there again a large defensible space will facilitate the firefighters' work. Enter the new high fire hazard maps. "As far as homes are concerned, a class-A roof is the single more important improvement that can be done," says Mentink. For the rest of the house, construction requirements for building an ignition resistant home can be a guide. This includes such things as double pane windows with tempered glass on one side, non-combustible gutters and ignition retardant siding. This type of home building is required only in areas that have been identified as "high fire hazard" by the State. The maps defining these areas are now being approved in Lamorinda. "We worked closely with the state to validate their recommendation," says Laing, "these maps are computer generated using the fuel, weather and topography to determine the level of risk. It does not include elements such as the state of the roads that can have an impact on the evacuation capabilities." Laing reports that his Fire District is working with the Lafayette Planning Department on the map adoption process. Mentink oversees the adoption process in Moraga and Orinda. In Orinda, the map is expected to be approved by the Fire Board at a hearing, probably in October. Moraga adopted its map during a public session of the Town Council. "It is our objective to contact all the homeowners' associations in these areas and work with them to mitigate their risk," explains Mentink. The consequences of the new maps for homeowners will not be just that phone call from the MOFD. The very high fire danger status will have to be disclosed when selling the home and if new construction is considered it will have to abide by fire prevention building standards. "In Moraga the only new area is the non-constructed Indian Valley property," said Mentink. The property owner, the Bruzzone family, challenged the State rating but couldn't have the maps amended. MOFD plans to conduct outreach regarding evacuation procedures. "If worse comes to worst, some neighborhoods will be asked to evacuate," says Mentink, "families need to have a plan in place, know how to contact each other, decide on a place to meet, make decisions about their pets, know what to take with them and be ready to get out within less than five minutes." If you want to start preparing, help is available: MOFD Open House on October 10th at Station 41, 1280 Moraga Way in Moraga; CERT training - neighborhood groups are being organized around CERT trained volunteers (<http://lamorindacert.org/>); Lamorinda Wildfire Forum, Wednesday October 7th, 2009 at 7pm in the Orinda Library Auditorium. The forum will focus on preparing for evacuation as well as things neighborhoods can

do together; RSVP to canyonfire@vfemail.net. The Fire Marshal's list of things you can do this weekend to protect your home: Move the wood pile at least 15 feet away from structure Remove vegetation that's close to the house Trim trees Remove dead debris from under shrubs (some, like oleander, contain oil that ignites easily and is plagued with abundant dangerous dead material underneath) Clean gutters now, don't wait for the rainy season Remove anything that can generate heat, such as patio furniture Additional resources: Links to download copies of the Fire Hazard Severity Zone Maps for Lafayette, Orinda and Moraga: <ftp://frap.cdf.ca.gov/fhszlocalmaps/contracosta/Lafayette.pdf> <ftp://frap.cdf.ca.gov/fhszlocalmaps/contracosta/Orinda.pdf> <ftp://frap.cdf.ca.gov/fhszlocalmaps/contracosta/Moraga.pdf> State guidelines for vegetation management: http://www.fire.ca.gov/CDFBOFDB/pdfs/Copyof4291finalguidelines9_29_06.pdf Diablo Fire Safe Council <http://www.diablofiresafe.org/> Personal Wildfire Plan from the county of Ventura http://fire.countyofventura.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=9hQO1rR_ezw%3d&tabid=231

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