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Firestorm: Prepare Your Home FireWise home assessments offered by MOFD

By Lucy Amaral



Homeowner Keith Horrocks takes notes while MOFD Fire Chief Randy Bradley discusses what actions to take to make his home a more defensible space.

Photo Lucy Amaral

at protecting their home from wildfire. During a large-scale fire, there won't be time to turn on a sprinkler, move firewood away from the house or even take down decorations. "If the hills are on fire, and the wind is blowing toward your home, we are going to evacuate you," he said. "Residents must think about how their home is going to handle a major fire when no one is (on site) to help it."

Bradley said that there are about 22 firefighters on duty each day and 10,000 homes in the MOFD area. Even with outside support, during a major wildland fire, resources will be stretched thin. Creating a defensible space before it is needed will be key. "Chances are we are going to be up on the hill trying to stop the fire," he said. "Creating an ignition resistant neighborhood can dramatically improve safety and survivability."

To help in the process, MOFD is promoting the FireWise program. FireWise, a program managed by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), focuses on encouraging communities to adopt a long-term, proactive approach to protect their homes before a fire starts. In April, MOFD hosted a FireWise Workshop, training volunteers from Lamorinda to conduct home assessments. The course, prepared by the NFPA's FireWise Communities program, taught the volunteers how wildfires burn homes where open space and homes meet, trained to review a home's "ignition zone," and how to make suggestions to the homeowner.

Charlie Green, one of the trained volunteers, made it clear that the volunteer assessors were a support system for the community, not an enforcement arm. "We are at a home strictly by invitation," he said. "We offer suggestions that may help in case of a fire storm, to help prevent their home from actually going up in flames."

"We give a simple list of suggestions," Green added. "Then, it is up to the homeowner to decide what to do, (however) it is certainly to their advantage and the neighborhood's advantage to deal with these things."

Homeowners Keith and Susan Horrocks of Orinda invited MOFD to their home for a review of their 'home ignition zone'. Bradley and the assessors looked for the 'ladder,' the most logical path a large firestorm would take to reach one's home. At this assessment, the group noticed a row of pine trees that could move a fire to a lower hedge then ignite a wooden fence that was attached to the home.

While not every threat can be eliminated, Bradley said it is possible to do small things to make it more difficult for a fire to reach a home. Changes the group recommended for the Horrocks' home ranged from simply cleaning up some plant debris to working with neighbors to 'limb up' several trees that were leaning onto the Horrocks' property, and covering part of their roof.

MOFD has applied for two grants, totaling \$180,000, for education, evacuation planning and fuel reduction. Bradley said that once MOFD receives the grant money, they plan to issue \$5,000 grants to groups of five homeowners (who apply jointly) in the same neighborhood to help with the cost of fire hazard reduction.

Many of us would rather not think about what might happen in a major disaster, and it can be even harder to go about preparing for such an emergency. We tell ourselves, "It may never happen." Or, "it's too complicated." And probably most common: "We have time... we'll do it later."

When it comes to natural disasters, such as a wildland fire, that kind of thinking can be dangerous. Moraga Orinda Fire District's (MOFD) Fire Chief Randy Bradley has said that it's not a matter of "if" a firestorm will happen; it's a matter of "when." And, when it comes, it could be big, and fast. High temperatures, racing "Diablo Winds," and low humidity can combine with disastrous results. A tragic example of this combination is the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire storm. In less than 24 hours it consumed more than 1,500 acres, destroyed or damaged 3,469 living units, killed 25 people, injured 150 people caused \$1.5 billion in loss.

Bradley said that Moraga and Orinda share a number of similarities to Oakland. "The homes are about the same age, and the vegetation and topography are similar," he said. The thing going for the area, he added, is that the lots are bigger than the standard Oakland lot, so there might be less home-to-home ignition.

To be prepared, Bradley said residents need to change how they look

Bradley also said that part of the grant money will be used to fund more home assessment training programs and is working on a schedule for the training sessions. Currently MOFD has 15 trained volunteers available for home assessments, and so far 35 homes have been assessed.

What Can You Do?

MOFD's home assessment review, which is offered to residents at no charge, can provide a basic list of suggestions to make a home more resistant to fires. Below are some examples of potential hazards from the FireWise Communities website that assessors (and homeowners) might find. (Not a complete list):

- Use of flammable roofing materials
- Overlapping home ignition zones
- Placement of homes with respect to topography
(e.g., at the top of a bluff)
- Dense/unhealthy vegetation
- Locations of trees and heavy vegetation in relationship to homes
- Flammable vegetation in direct contact with houses
- Attached wooden decks
- Flammable vegetation in direct contact with the house
- Leaf needle build up on roofs/gutters
- Attached wooden fences/decks (Remember that if it is attached to the house, it is part of the house...to a wildfire)
- Flammable furniture/cushions on decks or porches
- Vinyl soffits

NFPA research shows that there are things individuals can do to improve their home's chances of surviving a passing wildfire. The FireWise website offers suggestions for successful FireWise modifications. These include but are not limited to:

- Use of fire-resistant native vegetation
- Fire-free space surrounding the structure
- Use of stone and/or other non-flammable building components for walkways and driveways
- Thinned vegetation.

More information can be found on the FireWise website

www.firewise.org/communities.

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