



Fire Districts

Public Meetings

Moraga-Orinda Fire District

Board of Directors
Wednesday, April 15, 7 p.m.
Moraga Library Community Room
1500 St. Mary's Road, Moraga
For meeting times and agendas,
visit www.mofd.org

ConFire Board of Directors

Tuesday, April 14, 1:30 p.m.
Board Chamber room 107,
Administration Building,
651 Pine St., Martinez
For meeting times and agendas,
visit <http://alturl.com/5p9pu>.

Emergency response information
and training:

Lamorinda Community
Emergency Response Team (CERT)
www.lamorindacert.org

Flame Out, Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell



Trees that once overhung this home were removed and a clean, open landscape was developed. Leaves are not allowed to collect in the roof valleys and rain gutters.

Photos Dennis Rein, MOFD

Here we go again.

"I always hate to say it's going to be a bad fire season because we have all heard that same thing for so many years. But I am going to say it anyway," said Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman. "I worry a lot about the Lafayette area of our district, with all of the wildland-urban interface area and high-

value properties." Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy hardly disagrees. "We're sending out our weed abatement notices even earlier this year to give people more time to clear out the problem areas," he said. Robert Marshall, ConFire fire marshal, said the district will push earlier weed abatement this year as well.

Indeed, the fuels are dry this year, thanks to this fourth consecutive year of severely limited rainfall. "Hot, dry summers are the norm here," said ConFire's George Laing, fire prevention captain. "In April, things start drying out. By July, the brush fires begin. In August, the trees start to burn. The real fires hit in September and October. This year, we've had several brush fires in the district already."

While both Lamorinda fire districts carry the responsibility of protecting property from fires, the most important person that can protect property from a wildfire is the property owner. One of the time-honored methods of property protection is to surround the property with defensible space – the space between the property and the wildland fire area that creates a buffer to slow down an on-rushing fire. According to Laing, the easiest and most basic thing that a property owner can do is to control and abate the weeds.

MOFD requires, through ordinance, a defensible space of 100 feet from a structure but not beyond the property line. "Call us," said Dennis Rein, emergency preparedness coordinator. "We'll come out to your home and do a free assessment of your property." Marshall said that ConFire offers Lafayette residents that same courtesy. The goal in each district is to allow firefighters to stop fires spreading from open space areas to homes and properties.

This year comes with an added wrinkle, thanks to the recent state-mandated 25 percent water cutback. Residents will have to reduce water usage, but at the same time keep their outdoor plants from drying out and creating a fire hazard. Susie Bernhard of McDonnell Nursery in Orinda suggests plants that require low to mod-

erate water, yet remain fire resistant, like yarrow, coreopsis and lantana. "They won't burst into flames," she said.

"The community deserves a lot of credit for its vigilance and caution," said Healy. He specifically praised the lack of fireworks, and the fact that people are not cutting their lawns during periods of high fire danger. MOFD fire marshal Kathy Leonard noted that the Wilder developers brought in over 1,000 sheep to graze the vegetation away. Regarding Lafayette residents' prevention efforts, "I give them a B-plus," said Laing.

Healy said that, since 1988, a vegetation fire has not destroyed a home in the district. It will take a concerted effort of the entire community to extend that streak another year.



Oak trees have been thinned, dead material cleaned out of the trees and ground, and fuels that could carry fire to the tops of these trees have been removed.

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Springtime on the Suburban Ranch

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One of the Sperry's recently branded calves.

Widowed in 1986, the Moraga elementary and middle school teacher of 37 years married Sam Sperry, a municipal bond attorney, five years later. Together with Frazell, they continued to work the ranch on weekends. "We were the ranch hands and Gordon was the manager," Sam Sperry said. And since everyone had full-time jobs, working the ranch "was more like a hobby," he added.

There's always something to do when you live on a ranch. Most of their time is spent mending fences, fixing or replacing water pipes, and weeding. One of the biggest problems in the area is water, which comes from springs. The ranch is located outside the town boundaries, so the 18 houses on their road are on both private water and private sewer systems. The Sperrys have reserve water tanks and use grey water to water the fields, but last year, for the first time, Susan Sperry stated that they had to truck in water. "Cows drink a lot of water in the summer and not having enough also affects the grass, which the cows eat. We've had to reduce our herd because of the lack of water," she said.

The Sperrys currently have eight cows and one bull, in addition to six calves. They're expecting another two calves to be born within the com-

ing weeks. "We were only able to brand four of the calves," Sam Sperry explained, "because one was too small and slid through the machine and one – our rambunctious, hyperactive girl – was too fast, broke down the gate and got away." She didn't go too far – just far enough so they were unable to catch and brand her.

The calves are usually sold on consignment through an auction house in mid-summer, but the cows and bull are full-time residents at the ranch. To regulate the months of birthing calves, the bull is kept in the barn from September through the first of January. During that time, Susan Sperry noted, they bring him hay twice a day. The bull was born on the ranch and, she said, is "pretty frisky. He's been known to jump the fence. One time, he got out and my 5-year-old grandson and I used the 'Hansel and Gretel' method to lure him back." They put out some alfalfa, drove about 20 feet, put out more alfalfa and kept repeating the process. The bull followed the alfalfa and made his way home.

The Sperrys, a warm, affable couple who laugh easily, live less than three miles from central Moraga, although it seems like a world away. It's easy to understand why they love it so

much. Riding with Sam Sperry in their four-wheel drive off-road vehicle to the top of the property as he points out the ranch's features, his pride is apparent. The views of Mt. Diablo, downtown Walnut Creek and Concord and even the South Bay, are breathtaking. "It's a lovely place to live," he said, "but not without its challenges."

Both Sperrys are now retired and enjoy having their very own family compound, with four of their eight grandchildren as next door neighbors. They still mend fences and are always on the lookout for pipe leaks and, of course, they still brand their calves every year. As Susan Sperry said, "I go for walks with my friends who tell me about the books they're reading and the great restaurant meals they've enjoyed. I tell them about snaking out a sewer line or chasing a calf."



A calf enters the chute on its way to be branded. Photos A. Scheck