

Published October 30th, 2019

How repositioning of fire resources saved homes in Moraga's Sanders Ranch

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy MOFD

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker did not mince words as he discussed the successful containment of the Oct. 10 Merrill Fire, which threatened 140 residences in southern Moraga in the middle of the night.

"The availability of prepositioned resources was critical to protecting homes and stopping the spread of this fire," Winnacker said.

Prepositioned resources are fire agency assets, including equipment, suppression personnel and dispatchers, placed on standby during heightened fire risks, such as after the forecast of an extreme weather event. The repositioning allows instant response to an incident, since the strike teams are already assembled and ready to roll.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection has long used prepositioning. The state allocated \$25 million annually for the prepositioning of local resources after a 2018 presentation to a senate committee by former Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman, who illustrated that, with wildfires becoming larger and more ferocious every year, the state's mutual aid system was not able to cope.

Carman said that at the start of the 2017 Napa and Southern California wildfires, ConFire had resources ready to go, but the district was unable to send crews or engines for hours because it had not received an official order. "That was as frustrating as you can imagine," Carman told the committee. "The system became overwhelmed."

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services funds and coordinates local prepositioning efforts. Once the National Weather Service issued an Oct. 8 warning for high temperatures, strong winds and low humidity, and the Pacific Gas and Electric Company followed up with a threat of a power shutoff for many Northern Californians, ConFire Deputy Chief Aaron McAlister, the operational area coordinator, sent a request to OES for the prepositioning of five engine companies, two water tenders, three chief officers, an extra dispatcher and a bulldozer. He quickly received an approval, which included the redeployment of several Cal Fire hand crews.

The prepositioning was set for 8 p.m. Oct. 9. MOFD prepositioned an engine company, a water tender and a chief officer, and the personnel moved into "wherever we could find the space," said Battalion Chief Matt Nichols, the Merrill Fire incident commander. The water tender crew slept on mattresses on the floor at Fire Station 44.

No one had long to wait. About five hours after the start of prepositioning came a dispatch for a vegetation fire in southern Moraga, threatening homes in the Sanders Ranch neighborhood. "When that fire took off, I was on the phone, the radio, the computer, pushing resources to the incident," McAlister said.

Prepositioned resources fought the Merrill Fire for six hours, as did the five MOFD on-duty engine companies, as well as mutual aid respondents from neighboring agencies, including strike teams from Alameda and Solano counties. Numerous officials confirmed that upwards of 150 suppression personnel fought the wildfire at the height of the incident.

By late morning the fire was contained and though threatened, no structures were damaged, nor was anyone injured. "We had things in place. We had the right formula and we were able to overwhelm the incident," McAlister said.

The deputy chief acknowledged the fire service personnel who challenged themselves and bought into the idea of doing things differently. He echoed the words of Winnacker on the effect the prepositioned resources had in the containment of the Moraga fire. "Those assets made a major difference," McAlister said.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)



