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## PG&E equipment the cause of Lafayette Tennis Club fire

By Nick Marnell



Lafayette Tennis Club a total loss after Oct. 27 wildfire Photo Nick Marnell

Major fires the last Sunday of October pushed the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District to its limits and caused the evacuation of thousands of residents in Lafayette, all part of possibly the busiest day in the fire district's history.

"We faced an historic and massive challenge Oct. 27, the likes of which we have not encountered before and one that could have turned out much differently in loss of property and even life," ConFire Chief Lewis Broschard said.

ConFire responded to 28 incidents in Lafayette that day, with the major event the 6-acre grass fire that destroyed the Lafayette Tennis Club along the south side of Camino Diablo. "You could tell by the voices on the dispatch that this was big," Capt. Jeff Landis said. "When I arrived on the scene I thought, 'This looks like a video I saw of the Oakland Hills fire.'"

Wind gusts up to 34 mph impeded the firefighting efforts, as did a large PG&E power pole lying across Camino Diablo. "We did not have great access because of that pole. Camino Diablo was cut off. The tennis club was completely involved, so we checked to see that no other structures were in danger," Battalion Chief Dominic Ciotola said.

"It was very chaotic," Landis said. "Neighbors were fearing that the fire was headed their way. If the fire had gone up the hill to Springbrook, it would have really taken off." Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt said that some 2,400 Lafayette residents were evacuated that day, mostly from Springbrook and others from an offshoot fire south of Highway 24, near Pleasant Hill Road and Condit Road.

Fifty-six units responded to the Lafayette fire, aided by an early morning ConFire decision to hold all firefighters scheduled to go off shift that day. As a result, ConFire was able to deploy, in addition to normal staffing, a total of six fire engines, 15 wildland engines, two auxiliary support units, 14 command personnel and five support personnel. The remain-in-place order was given for the first time in the history of the district.

Investigators determined that the downed PG&E power pole was the cause of the tennis club fire. A witness told an investigator that she was traveling on Camino Diablo and heard a loud "firecracker sound" and saw the transformer at the top of the power pole explode. "She saw sparks and flames coming from the transformer falling to the surrounding area and the pole toppled over to the ground," according to the district investigative report.

The fires were contained by mid-afternoon, no one was injured and damage to the tennis club was estimated at \$800,000. "If it had not been for the excellent weed abatement immediately adjacent to the downed pole, there is little doubt that, like the tennis club to the west, these structures would have been lost," ConFire spokesman Steve Hill said.



Fallen PG&E utility pole lies across Camino Diablo, just east of the tennis club. Courtesy ConFire

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