

Published May 12th 2021

Local leaders gather to raise awareness of wildfire danger and push residents to prepare

By Sora O'Doherty



Orinda Mayor Amy Worth and Moraga Mayor Mike McCluer Photo Sora O'Doherty

ecosystems while also sequestering carbon and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Applications for grants are due by 3 p.m. on May 19.

Porter then turned to what residents can do. He stressed the need to create defensible space around residences and other buildings. "At a minimum," he urged, "meet state requirements." He suggested that there are low cost retrofit options available to harden homes. "Think every area in California can and will burn someday," he said. "Right now we have seen both at the federal and state levels 1,787 wildfires that have burned 8,420 acres." Although he said that the fire season this year is two months early, it is not too late, but work needs to be done now.

Director of Cal OES Mark Ghilarducci said that last year the agency handled 12,500 mutual aid requests, and 32 counties required presidential disaster declarations. Noting that the day of the event was a red flag day, he said that the pattern is not slowing but instead we are having fires sooner. "As the Governor said, the hots are hotter and the dries are drier," he quoted. Fires are more extreme and require newer equipment and more technology, and \$2.9 billion has been invested. OES has added 100 new pieces of equipment across 60 jurisdictions. Ghilarducci talked about positioning resources in advance of fires, a technique that was utilized very successfully by MOFD in Moraga last year to fight the Sanders Ranch fire.

Ghilarducci urged residents to practice evacuation routes both in the daytime and at night, when they look different. Other things he recommends include having battery backups for all devices, keeping your car's gas tank filled at all times, having supplies ready to go, and don't wait to evacuate.

That theme was echoed by Assistant Commissioner of the California Highway Patrol, Rich Stewart. "Don't wait, don't put first responders in danger," he urged. He talked about how frightening and dangerous wildfires are, how fast they move. It is the job of law enforcement to go in and rescue people, he said. If you are trapped by a wildfire, he advised calling 911.

Robert Baird, Director, Fire and Aviation, Pacific Southwest Region at U.S. Forest Service, said that this year is set up to be another destructive year. One area of concern is tree mortality. He urged residents to be extra vigilant in recreational areas. Last year fires were set by lightning. He also talked about mutual assistance. "We can draw from across the United States, Canada and Mexico," he said. In addition, the U.S. Marines and Army provide assistance, including night flying helicopters to fight killer wildfires after dark.

The Directors of the California Office of Emergency Services, the Director of Cal Fire, the mayors of Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda, the president of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District board, MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winnacker, and other elected officials were at the San Pablo Reservoir May 3 to try to raise awareness of wildfire danger and help residents get ready for the probability of serious fires this season.

"We now have nine months of fire season," Cal Fire Director Thom Porter began. "We need more resources; we need to prevent fires and promote fire preparedness." Cal Fire is adding 1,400 new firefighters now above the normal hire, which will add more new hires before peak fire season. Cal Fire's biggest concern is boots on the ground, he said.

In addition to more firefighters, Cal Fire is also adding new firefighting helicopters. The new S70i helicopters are larger and faster and will change the way Cal Fire battles blazes, Porter said. Five of 12 new helicopters have been added now, and numbers six and seven will be added by the end of May.

The director also talked about the Cal Fire Grant Funding for Fire Prevention and Forest Health Projects program. Up to \$317 million is available for forest health, fire prevention, forest legacy and forest health research grant projects. Cal Fire is soliciting applications for projects that prevent catastrophic wildfires, protect communities, and restore forests to healthy, functioning

"We need you to help, to reduce fuels and to create defensible spaces," he said. "It used to be, `Ready, Set, Go!'" he said, but not anymore. Now it is just "Go!"

Also in attendance at the event were Marguerite Young, director of the East Bay Municipal Utility District, Lafayette Mayor Susan Candell, Orinda Mayor Amy Worth, Moraga Mayor Mike McCluer, MOFD Chief Winnacker, MOFD Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein, and Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA