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Moraga's Vice Mayor opts for prescribed burn in yard to reduce future wildfire threats

By Vera Kochan



ConFire Captain Aaron Brunton supervises his fire crew Photo Vera Kochan

Moraga Vice Mayor Teresa Onoda was worried about the risk of additional wildfires in her neighborhood. "We have evacuated twice, and that makes me very concerned about fire, because we live on Merrill Circle." A friend and Firewise member, Suzanne D'Arcy, told Onoda about the free ember-resistant vents that the Moraga-Orinda Fire District was offering to residents thanks to a \$500,000 home hardening grant they received (www.mofd.org/our-district/fuels-mitigation-fire-prevention/home-hardening-grant-program).

Upon picking up her pre-ordered vent from MOFD, Onoda arranged to have a Firewise meeting in her home for her neighbors. MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker came to the meeting and used her yard as an example of what needed to be done, most of which involved limbing-up trees. Winnacker reminded everyone in attendance that MOFD could arrange a prescribed burn for free on residential properties if the job required it.

Onoda's next step was to hire Will Thorn, owner of Wildland Corporation (wildlandcorp.com), a fuels mitigation expert. "He limbed-up all of the trees, and just before the prescribed burn, during the January storms, two of our oak trees fell."

Thorn was in contact with MOFD's Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein who decided when was an optimal time for the burn. The day before the Feb. 16 burn, MOFD alerted residents in the area to prevent any panic from the smell of smoke and to advise keeping windows and doors closed.

"Our job for the pile burning was to deal with any fallen trees, limbing-up trees, and removing any brush or flammable vegetation," stated Thorn. "We ended up with three piles about 8 feet or higher. One pile is called a "feeder," and that's what is used to toss onto the burning piles when the flames have died down a bit." Thorn was present during the burn, because "I like to be there to see the job through."

Captain Aaron Brunton of Contra Costa Fire Crew 12 brought a 16-man crew of firefighters to perform the prescribed burn which was located near the top of a steep incline. According to the Bureau of Land Management, "A prescribed fire (also called a controlled burn) is an important tool that can be used to reduce the risk of large uncharacteristically severe wildfire, increase public and firefighter safety, as well as meet a variety of integrated natural resource management objectives."

"MOFD often reaches out to ConFire (the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District) to assist with these types of projects," stated Brunton. His crew size fits the minimum requirement for a Type 2 IA (crews that can form into three or four separate squads of four people to initially attack fires separately). None of the fires that Brunton has supervised have ever "escaped."

Optimal weather and seasonal conditions for the burns is winter when Mother Nature has provided enough rain and the trees have absorbed enough water to make it safe. The fire crews also hook up hoses to the nearest fire hydrants in the street. Once the burn has been completed, the fire crew spreads out the embers and hoses down any hot spots to prevent a possible fire coming back to life at a later time.

Brunton noted that these types of free, prescribed burns are available in Contra Costa County thanks to funds from Measure X.

Onoda has already decided what she will do with all of the cleared space. She has purchased a Bay Area Wildflower mix of seeds from Pacific Coast Seed, Inc. of Tracy, Calif. that will attract butterflies.? Thorn will return during planting season to help sprinkle the seeds. The cycle of life continues.

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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