

New Neighborhood Voice

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Defensible Space?

Here's how to prepare for the upcoming fire season!

Wildfire Awareness Week May 7-13

By Fire Captain José Guerrero, San Jose Fire Department

I recently assumed the administrative position of Wildland Program Manager for the San Jose Fire Department. Of my eighteen years with the department, fourteen years have been with San Jose Engine Company 2, one of nine Wildland Companies in the city. In those years, I have had an opportunity to respond to many vegetation fires in Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Zones. In addition I have had the opportunity to respond outside Santa Clara County, as Engine 2 is one of five strike team engines in San Jose. As I responded to the fires in local and out-of-county areas, the words "Defensible Space" were constantly in my mind.

Structure protection and fire extinguishments are our primary goals once the fire has occurred. As we prepare for this upcoming season, prevention and awareness is our goal.

March and April 2006 brought record rainfall to the area and vegetation growth is expected to exceed last year's growth. As a homeowner, the following tips will assist in minimizing the fire danger around your home.

- Have a plan and practice it (without one you won't know what to do)
- Become more aware of your surroundings (think fire safety)
- Post your address so that it is clearly visible (on your house, beginning of your driveway, or both)
- Have available a ladder that can reach the roof
- Consider shutters or fire resistant drapes
- Have what we call a "Defensible Space" around your home, which means an area clear of combustibles around your home to a minimum of 100 feet
- Trim any tree branches hanging over your roof



SJFD Fire Captain José Guerrero

- Space trees and shrubs at least 10 feet apart (choose plants that are fire resistant)
- For trees taller than 18 feet, prune the lower branches to at least 6 feet from the ground
- Trim any branches within 10 feet of chimney
- Make sure the chimney has a ½ inch wire mesh cover and cover all vents and openings with ¼ inch wire mesh (to prevent flying embers from entering)
- Keep roof and gutters clear of leaves and needles
- Consider a fire resistant roof when you install or replace your roof, class C or better (**this alone may save your home**)
- Stack woodpiles at least 30 feet away from all structures
- Locate LPG tanks at least 30 feet from all structures and give the tanks at least 10 feet of clearance
- Use ½ inch fire resistant mesh screen under porches, decks, house, and floor areas (keep weeds and grass from growing under them)
- Identify at least two exit routes from your house and neighborhood (try to travel away from the fire's path)
- If advised to evacuate, do so immediately.

Firefighters commonly use the following quick method to help determine whether a home is defensible under fire conditions when fire resources are sometimes limited. Firefighters ask themselves these questions:

C- Clearance

Does the home have a minimum of 100 feet clearance?
Is there enough clearance to successfully defend this home?

R- Roof

Is the roof type combustible?
Are there tree branches hanging over the roof?

A- Access

Is there safe access for the fire engine and its personnel?
Are there tree branches impeding access to this home with our fire engine?

F- Fuel

What kind of fuel is there around the home and how will it react under fire conditions?
Is the fuel going to burn hot and quick?

T- Topography

Is the home located with slopes greater than 30 degrees?
Can firefighters safely extend hose lines around the home taking in consideration the slope?
Will the fuel begin to pre-heat as a result of the slope around the home?

The previous are just a few questions firefighters consider when resources are limited. In the Wildland Fire Season that begins in May and lasts until approximately October, for vegetation fires within the WUI Zones, we respond with two engines and one Battalion Chief. Firefighters recognize the importance in delivering as many resources as early in the

fire as possible to minimize its potential of damaging property and threatening lives.

Your local fire station has literature on these items and other issues concerning wildland areas. Please feel free to visit your fire stations to learn more about becoming fire safe. Or visit the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council Web site at www.SCCFireSafe.org for their 20-page guide for homeowners, *Living With Fire in Santa Clara County*. It provides more detail on making a Defensible Space around your home and recommended fire resistant plants as well as other useful information. Note: This guide still has the older 30 foot minimum for Defensible Space, rather than the San Jose Fire Department recommendation for 100 feet above, but you can adapt this information for your local fire agency recommendations or requirements.

Captain José Guerrero, Wildland Officer
San Jose Fire Department

NNV Note: Governor Schwarzenegger has declared that May 7-13 will be Wildfire Awareness Week. This annual outreach campaign is designed to educate residents throughout California about the upcoming Wildfire Season and what they can do to prevent wildland fires around their homes.

Wildfire Awareness Week is sponsored annually by the California Fire Safe Council, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) and, locally, by the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council.

It has been another wet winter in Santa Clara County. This could mean high fire danger in our Wildland Urban Interface areas due to an above-average growth of brush, grasses and other plants – which could become hazardous fuel once the hot summer months descend upon us.

Captain Guerrero's article above was first published in the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council newsletter. Reprinted with permission.

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New Neighborhood Voice is a monthly newsletter for, by and about the people who live in or near the Alum Rock Corridor (Alum Rock Park, Alum Rock Village, Country Club Heights, Country Club Villa, East Highlands, East Hills, Hillcrest, James Lick High School, Kirk/Fleming, Lyndale, Mayfair, Mt. Hamilton, Toyon).

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