

New Neighborhood Voice

December 7, 2003

New San Jose Fire Department Wildland Program Manager

We live in a Wildlands Urban Interface Zone - here's great advice!

By Fire Captain Ralph Ortega, San Jose Fire Department

In September I became the new Wildland Program Manager for the San Jose Fire Department, replacing Captain Joseph Carrillo who was promoted to Battalion Chief. I've been asked to address some wildland issues, for the San Jose area, so I've decided to start with our Automatic Response Policy during wildfire season.

Our city has been divided into zones. When homes are built in wildland zones we call them, Wildland Urban Interface Zones (WUI). WUI's describe where our wildland areas meet residential areas. Firefighters have identified homes, in the WUI area, as Threat Zones since the homes in these zones have to deal with the threat of wildfires. During wildfire season (approximately May through October) San Jose Fire will automatically send two engines and one Battalion Chief to any fire-related call in these areas, as opposed to the single engine response that we send during the off season. This enables us to have a quick response, with the necessary resources, when minutes and seconds are crucial to saving lives and property. We train our officers and firefighters to Not wait before calling additional resources when an incident is occurring in these threat zones.

Foothills fire goes to a "Tier 3" Response

To give you some idea of how this works, I was at station 31 at Ruby and Aborn when the bell struck for a fire in the East Foothills. Upon leaving the station the captain saw smoke in the hills and immediately called for a Tier 1, then 2, then a Tier 3 response, and he did this all before reaching the end of the street. Good call!

By the time we reached the incident, the fire had grown to about three acres. It had started to burn a beautiful three story home under construction and was endangering two other houses. The first two engine companies on the scene were sent directly to the home in the

fire's path. The crews executed a (very dangerous) frontal attack saving the home. The remaining companies were sent to contain and control the rest of fire. CDF arrived with engine crews, helicopter crews, air tankers and a bulldozer in time to make a very difficult stop at the head of the fire. The fire front burned into a ravine on a very steep hillside. It was threatening to break through our containment lines to the next hillside where dozens of homes were at risk. We did a good job that day and as firefighters say, "We made a good stop." No one got hurt and we saved some homes.

Some factors that could have made this fire unmanageable are, Time of Day, if the wind had been stronger, or if CDF resources were unavailable. For example, the recent wildfires down south diminished the state's ability to assist elsewhere. Wildland firefighting relies on training, communication, teamwork, good equipment and most of all having a plan that is well practiced.

Here is a breakdown of our "Tier" Responses;

1. **Tier 1** dispatches 3 engines, 2 brush patrols (BPs), 2 Battalion Chiefs and activates BP groups, other stations move up to cover more area and we advise the California Dept of Forestry (CDF) that a Tier incident is occurring.
2. **Tier 2** dispatches 3 engines, 4 BPs, 1 water tanker, 1 Battalion Chief, 1 Duty Chief, 1 Safety Officer, 1 Wildland Officer, 1 Medical Officer, the Incident Dispatch Team and advises CDF that SJFD can't send any mutual aid to assist them at this time.
3. **Tier 3** dispatches 2 engines, 3 BPs, 1 water tanker, a request for assistance to CDF, 1 Public Information Officer, 1 Mechanic, station move-ups and notifies Santa Clara County Fire District of possible mutual aid requests.

In total 53 fire vehicles and 91 personnel were used. Five fire stations had to be moved to cover more area. In all, the fire consumed approximately 30 acres. The Wildland Urban Interface Zones and the Automatic Responses for them are just some of the tools that we have learned to use to protect our residents and their property.

Fire prevention measures you can take to protect your family and property:

- ✚ 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 30 feet (footage increases if property is located on a slope or surrounded by heavy vegetation)
- ✚ Trim any tree branches hanging over your roof
- ✚ 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 property**)
- ✚ 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.

The items listed above are just some easy ways to safeguard your home. It doesn't mean that you must have bare dirt around your house. You have the option to use ornamental fire resistant vegetation to beautify and give your home the best chance possible to survive a Wildfire. What I want you to know is, if you live in a wildland area, you can (and should) try to make your house and surrounding area as fire safe as possible.

Your local fire station has literature on these items and other issues concerning wildland areas. Please feel free to visit your local fire stations to learn more about becoming fire safe.

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