

# A Day on the Fire Line

By Rick Parfitt

We all feel a collective sigh of relief and an immeasurable sense of gratitude to CAL FIRE, local fire agencies, volunteers and police agencies for their huge and rapid response to contain and put out the Summit Fire. I'm especially grateful to Battalion Chief Darrell Wolf from CAL FIRE who has spent many hours with me over the last couple of years to work with our community and support our efforts to develop a Community Wildfire Protection Plan for the Lexington Hills (LH CWPP) area.

On Friday May 30<sup>th</sup>, I had the chance to see first hand the devastation a wildfire can cause. I was invited by Chief Wolf to accompany him on his rounds of the fire crews still working to put out hundreds of hot spots scattered over the Summit Fire area. He wanted a member of our community to take photos and learn about the Summit Fire so we could incorporate it into the LH CWPP.

We started the day by driving to Morgan Hill for the CAL FIRE Transition meeting. With the fire under control, but the burn area still dotted with hot spots it was time to transition to a mop-up crew. The team leaders and the top brass reported on what worked and what didn't work. It was like being in a war room. There were reports on costs, resources allocated, collaboration between the two counties, plans of attack, injuries, and what could be improved. Out of the tragedy, it was our good fortune that the fire occurred early in the season so a large number of resources could be mobilized and the two divisions of CAL FIRE (Santa Clara County and Santa Cruz/San Mateo Counties) worked effectively together.

After the meeting, Chief Wolf gave me maps and reports detailing every aspect of the fire. We hopped into his CAL FIRE Chevy and slowly bounced our way up a steep dirt road, Casa Loma, to Uvas Road, then took Loma Prieta Road to the remote

dirt section of Summit Road where the fire started. We could not have made it without four wheel drive.

As we passed each work crew and the subcontractors, Chief Wolf, now in charge of mop-up operations, would quickly assess the situation and give directions and guidance as needed. Many of the roads we drove that day were the same roads he and I had driven a year before as we surveyed CAL FIRE's PL566 fire break program. This program goes back to 1976 and keeps these remote roads open, graded and cleared of brush (sponsored by the Santa Clara Valley Water District).

We stopped briefly on the left side of Summit Road where the fire started at 5:17 AM Thursday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>. The private parcel had been cleared of trees and brush presumably for the planting of a vineyard leaving massive piles of downed trees and brush. Some of the brush piles had been burned and one theory is an ember stoked by the wind became the point of ignition for the Summit Fire.<sup>1</sup>

On this remote dirt section of Summit Road, it is narrow, filled with pot holes and surrounded by dense brush; there are few road signs, street addresses often don't exist and locked gates are common. For fire crews not intimately familiar with the area, it is hard to know where the homes are and what is a driveway or a fork in the road. This created just one of the big challenges during the fast moving fire as emergency personnel worked quickly to save lives and homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Embers created during a large wildfire that are carried aloft by strong winds spreading the fire are often called firebrands. When these firebrands land outside of the perimeter of burning fire, they can create spot fires over a mile away from the main fire and can destroy homes and property as they rapidly grow.

Chief Wolf made frequent stops to instruct his crew bosses and I took numerous photos from all angles and aspects of the fire. The steep canyon facing Maymen's Flat once dense with chaparral was reduced to a blackened moonscape dotted by black twisted stubs of Manzanita. On the other side of the slope were the burned out homes of Maymen's Flat. One concrete house had burned from the inside out – it was fire proof on the outside, but a hail storm of wind-driven firebrands and the intense heat of the fire caused the flammable inside to ignite. Burned trunks of uprooted Knobcone Pines that blew over as the fire storm swept through littered the hillside. The initial fire was fueled by dry winds with gusts up to 50 miles an hour blowing from the North-East. This is the same direction the winds blew during the Austrian Gulch Fire (1961), the Lexington Hills Fire (1985) and the Croy Fire (2002). Normally the prevailing winds blow a cool moist breeze from the South-West. As we develop our LH CWPP, it is these dry NE winds that we should plan for.

Next we traversed the mid-section of the fire, Ormsby Trail. Here fifteen more homes had burned during the first three hours of the fire. Earlier in the week I had seen the destruction on Maymen's Flat while checking on a friend's parcel, but nothing prepared me for the devastation on Ormsby Trail. In the middle of large clearings one home after another was burned to the foundation. A ten thousand gallon water tank was reduced to a heap of melted plastic. A pile of clay roof tiles was all that remained of a home where the owner had used a fire resistant roof.

The orientation of Ormsby Trail, a ridge perpendicular to the direction of the winds and surrounded by super-flammable chaparral with a Knobcone pine over-story must have magnified the force of the wind and created super high temperatures. It was too hot to fight from the ground. The huge smoke cloud that hung over everything made it difficult to fight from the air.

Creating Defensible Space, having available water and a fire resistant roof was not enough to save these homes. The strong winds threw firebrands a thousand feet ahead of the advancing flames. The firebrands must have battered the houses finding every vent, every corner, every wood pile, every opening in the eaves or crevices where they could lodge and catch fire. It brought tears to my eyes. The homes didn't stand a chance.

Are there similar wind tunnel landscapes located inside the Lexington Hills area? What homes are most threatened and what type of early warning system should we have for rapid evacuation? A similar fire in the middle of the night anywhere in our mountain community may only give residents minutes to evacuate.

As we traveled down Ormsby Trail to Eureka Canyon the vegetation transitioned from high chaparral to a mixed canopy of hardwoods and Coastal Redwoods. In the canyon, more sheltered from the winds and with the change in vegetation, the fire dropped to the ground and burned with a lower intensity. Evidence of spot fires from embers and burning debris that rolled down the steep slopes were on both sides of the road. Hand crews and hose lines were more effective at keeping these low intensity spot fires from spreading. Unlike the ridge tops above, where the Knobcone pines and chaparral were reduced to cinders, the fires along Eureka Canyon left the hardwood/Redwood canopy mostly intact.

After a quick lunch in Corralitos we headed back up the ridge through Section Delta.<sup>2</sup> A dozer line had been constructed to stop the advancing head of the fire. A combination of Redwood forest, aerial assaults and a change of wind direction to the cool coastal winds kept the fire from reaching this last bull dozer line.

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<sup>2</sup> Delta is the Greek letter that CAL FIRE uses to designate the section where they intend to stop the fire.

Returning to the ridge top, we drove along Summit Road and pulled over where the wind had changed directions on the Saturday after the fire started pushing the fire back over Summit Road into the Uvas Canyon County Park. As a contingency, CAL FIRE had planned for this change in wind direction and had quickly put dozer lines down the slopes toward Croy Canyon. They contained the fire as it burned down slope into Santa Clara County.

Looping back on Summit Road, we saw many of the homes that were saved both from the efforts of the ground crews and some very accurate drops by the flight crews.



**Figure 1: The vegetation around this house was on fire, but the house was saved by a direct drop from one of the CAL FIRE helicopters**

Some of the areas we did not visit were the spot fires caused by firebrands that blew over a thousand feet past the perimeter of the fire and across Eureka Canyon Road.

These spot fires grew large enough that they burned down some homes and structures.

Overall many more homes were saved than were destroyed or damaged by the fire. Important factors that helped save homes were: a clearly marked address, an easily accessible driveway, brush that is cut back along the road and 100 feet or more of Defensible Space around the house. These factors give firefighters time to find your home, time to position themselves, and time to make a safe escape should the fire become too intense to fight from the ground. During a rapidly moving fire spot fires can form far ahead of the fire line and flame fronts can twist and turn in any direction. Fire fighters must be able to move quickly and homes tucked away on an unmarked driveway are less likely to be saved.

Fire is an inevitable part of the ecosystem we live in. This fire demonstrates a need for several fire protection plans that are neighborhood based and integrated. Future fires will continue to cross county and neighborhood boundaries. As we get further along with the Lexington Hills CWPP, I look forward to working with CAL FIRE in Santa Cruz to incorporate and integrate their countywide CWPP with ours. We already have the benefit of the Croy CWPP sponsored by the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council. Please visit our web site to learn more about the LH CWPP and support our local volunteer fire departments: [www.SCCFireSafe.org/LHCWPP.htm](http://www.SCCFireSafe.org/LHCWPP.htm).

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**The Santa Clara County FireSafe Council is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Our mission is "Mobilizing the people of Santa Clara County to protect their homes, communities and environment from wildfires." To learn more about our free Chipping Programs, or the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council, please visit the SCFSC Website at [www.SCCFireSafe.org](http://www.SCCFireSafe.org). The council meets at 2:00 PM on the second Tuesday of each month. Interested organizations and individuals are welcome to attend! For more information and meeting locations, see [www.SCCFireSafe.org](http://www.SCCFireSafe.org), e-mail [info@SCCFireSafe.org](mailto:info@SCCFireSafe.org) or call (408) 975-9591.**