
From the Ozarks to Marin

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In August of 2000, the National Fire Plan set forth a new policy on wildland fire in America. One aspect of the plan called for increased focus on the wildland-urban interface, the area where homes and vegetated wildlands meet. Soon after, a non-profit group known as the Student Conservation Association (SCA) developed a program to address the education requirements of the new plan. Trained in the finer points of defensible space, SCA interns set out to engage homeowners and help them protect their own homes. It was through this grass-roots program that I first entered the complex world of fire.

Heroes and Heroines Abound

The firefighter holds a special place in America's heart. When disastrous circumstances conspire against us, the firefighter rushes to our aid. When infernos threaten to rob us of life and property, firefighters take a stand. The firefighter will march fear-

lessly into the heart of Hades to protect total strangers. The firefighter will forgo sleep till the battle is finished.

Indeed, the firefighter is a modern day hero. We stop what we are doing to watch their engines pass by, knowing they speed somewhere surely exciting. We don t-shirts and hats emblazoned with their insignia. Ask a young child what he wants to be when he grows up and he'll probably say, "Spiderman!" Ask him what he wants to do and he may say, "Be a firefighter."

However, in all the romanticism and well-deserved mythos attributed to firefighters, the true depth of firefighting has been obscured. Many people don't realize that most of firefighting occurs before the fire ever starts. Whether it be keeping tools in peak condition so they don't fail at the worst moment, running drills and rehearsing potential situations, or identifying and mitigating hazardous conditions, firefighting is—in large part—preparation. It is therefore not only the men and women wielding hoses and axes who have the opportunity to be heroes, but land-managers, city planners, and homeowners as well.

Salt of the Earth

I certainly didn't realize the full depth and complexity of firefighting until I entered the fire world professionally. Though raised in San Diego, my introduction to fire prevention and safety began in southern Missouri. In the Ozark hills I led a community outreach effort to raise defensible space awareness in the wildland-urban interface. Our team was part of the Student Conservation Association's Fire Education Corps program. Fire Education Corps teams accomplish their goals by going straight to the homeowner, door to door, and providing a channel of communication between communities and the neighboring agencies that host the teams.

Communication in the Ozarks was, flat out, behind the times. The area lacked a functioning 9-1-1 emergency system and some departments didn't have maps to identify the homes in their jurisdiction. This may have been just as well; many streets didn't even have names. If a homeowner happened to know the phone number to their local firehouse they'd be left to explain where they lived in relative terms.

Dispatch: "Van Buren Fire. What's the emergency?"

Homeowner: "Help! Some kids set fire to the field behind my house!"

Dispatch: "Okay. Where do you live sir?"

Homeowner: "Well...you go out to the old mill and head left at the fork, there's an old double-wide there, just keep going past that"

One homeowner told me it once took over 20 minutes for the emergency crews to find his house. He lived less than 2 miles from the firehouse.

That season our team of interns managed to map several hundred homes for local emergency response crews. We gathered defensible space data for each home and entered it into a Geographic Information System (GIS) database. During the project we never got to see fire on the ground, but we could be sure that the work we were doing would eventually make the difference in saving someone's home, perhaps even life.

Possibly a more powerful accomplishment, we were able to organize a defensible space demonstration project that brought together the efforts of community members, a local church group, the local volunteer fire department, as well as state and federal

agencies. Though the local volunteer firefighters still had insufficient equipment, their job would be that much safer in the event of a wildland fire.

The project not only demonstrated defensible space but the importance of cooperation in fire prevention. All it took was a few concerned citizens to serve as catalysts. Though I would soon leave that post, the organizational structure we set up continues. As of this writing, three more towns have been mapped and GIS risk hazard assessment is being used to help local fire officials plan projects. My next assignment would bring me back home to California with its huge population and relative wealth, but similar need for greater coordination.

From Ashes it Bloomed

Traveling north across the Golden Gate Bridge, one leaves the concrete confines of San Francisco into the open wilds of Marin County. Small communities branch off the trunk of Highway 101, stretching into the grassy valleys and eucalyptus forests that make up vast state and federal lands. Marin residents cherish their natural surroundings where suburban streets fade seamlessly into the brush and trees. In fact, much of Marin is a textbook example of the wildland-urban interface.

From these homes that dot Marin's steep slopes, one can view the San Francisco Bay with Alcatraz in the foreground and the Bay Bridge, Berkeley, and Oakland behind. In fall of 1991, that view included a new feature; thick smoke billowing up from the Oakland hills.

Like a mirror image reflecting off the bay, the steep hills of Oakland and Berkeley are also dotted with residential communities engulfed in dense vegetation. Historically, these hills were once rolling grasslands. As more and more people spilled out from booming San Francisco, the landscape began to change. With increasing development came forests of nonnative eucalyptus and Monterey pine. In 1991 this mixture of dense, ornamental trees, shrubbery, and homes combined under harsh weather conditions to create one of the most destructive fires in California history.

Nearly 2,900 homes were lost in the Oakland Hills Tunnel fire. Across the bay, Marin residents and fire officials immediately recognized that the same conditions existed in their hills. Sure enough, four years later the Vision fire would consume over 12,000 acres of land and 45 homes in northern Marin. In the aftermath of these fires, the FireSafe Marin Council was born.

Once Around the Table

The Golden Gate National Recreation Area's Fire Management Office in Marin County brought me out as part of the same Fire Education Corps program I experienced in the Ozarks. Many projects to reduce hazardous fuels along the park's 40-plus miles of urban interface were already underway. My challenge was to increase communication between the park and neighboring community members concerning fire management activities. I wrote news releases, went door to door, and created web pages in order to accomplish this goal. One of my duties would be to attend the monthly FireSafe Marin meetings. The level of agency coordination I was to witness there surpassed any I had seen before.

The FireSafe Marin Council is an incorporated non-profit organization dedicated to reducing the threat of a destructive wildland fire in Marin. The council is comprised of representatives from local fire departments, the water district, homeowner groups, state and county land agencies, the Marin Conservation Corps, and the National Park Service. Acknowledging that fire does not respect political boundaries, these representatives meet monthly to tackle fire issues that face Marin as a whole. The council has proven effective in increasing fire safety awareness, addressing fuel loading in the wildland-urban interface, and helping provide a means of vegetation disposal following fuel reduction efforts.

The monthly meetings also serve as a forum for coordinating the independent efforts of the agencies and groups represented. Each representative keeps abreast of their neighbor's fire prevention activities through the council. Different agencies, often with disparate objectives and directives, are able to foster cooperative projects. The case of Tamalpais Valley, a small suburb of Marin, is demonstrative of this coordination.

Where Words Become Actions

Much of my outreach focused on the community of Tamalpais Valley. Like many California suburbs, Tamalpais Valley (known locally as "Tam" Valley) is characterized by wood shingle roof homes that line narrow streets. These streets dissolve into 70 acres of highly flammable eucalyptus. Many homes stand just a few paces from public lands, making it impossible for them to create the 100 feet of defensible space required by California code.

In 2003 the National Park Service and Southern Marin fire began a series of projects in Tam Valley with FireSafe Marin serving as the clearinghouse for federal funds. The projects restored two overgrown fire roads that crossed the eucalyptus stand.

My job was to alert park visitors and community members to the full breadth of the projects before work began. Reactions varied. Past park projects had brought a certain amount of backlash from the community. Certainly when the government shows up unannounced with chainsaws, history has given sufficient cause for alarm. However, most citizens approved of the work after learning that this wasn't to be an arbitrary clear-cut, but a well-planned and multi-dimensional project. Not only did fire agencies work together on the project, but park Natural Resources staff followed the cutting with native plant restoration. Still, in canvassing the neighborhoods, I encountered some resistance and discovered that the "it couldn't happen here" mentality persisted despite the fires of '91 and '95.

Then, less than a year after these projects took place, an early season fire broke out in the middle of that same eucalyptus stand. I got to take off my outreach hat and put on my firefighting helmet as part of a hand crew. Constant bucket drops spared us from a crowning conflagration but fire still crawled right up the sides of the eucalyptus using the shredding ribbons of bark as a ladder. One of us would often have to break from the fireline and catch a spot fire behind us caused by the constant eucalyptus embers floating by. It was easy to see how homes are lost without even being in the fire's direct path.

The Tam fire came within 30 meters of homes but no structures were lost or damaged. This would prove to be a rare case of a "good" fire. It served to alert the community of the very real threat without real losses. It also proved that agency efforts were

on the right track. With the restored fire roads in place after the 2003 projects, emergency crews were able to access the fire safely and without delay.

That same week I went back into the Tam community to distribute information about the fire and defensible space. This time around the reaction was uniformly positive. In fact, whereas just a few months ago some individuals petitioned their county supervisor to stop the cutting of eucalyptus, people now were asking when all 70 acres could be removed.

The Path Ahead

Compared to the Ozarks, Marin is rich in equipment, organizational structures like Fire Safe councils, and, of course, funds. Though Marin fire departments have far superior equipment than their country counterparts, they have a far higher housing density to contend with. In a large wildfire incident Marin fire crews would be stretched just as thin as Ozark crews in their less populated jurisdiction. On scale, the two locales face many of the same issues and require similar coordination with the communities.

Protecting homes and lives from wildland fire is everyone's responsibility. From the homeowner who creates defensible space to the frontline firefighter battling the blaze, it's the combined efforts that truly make us fire safe. Done in isolation, these efforts are rendered nearly futile. With coordination we can efficiently mitigate the hazards that face us.

I've seen cooperative fire prevention efforts with and without money to back them up. The results look very much the same. The key factor seems to be participation. Protecting homes from wildland fire, therefore, is truly an opportunity for everyone to be a hero. Web slinging and a spandex costume are optional.