

THE MENDOCINO COUNTY FIRE SAFE COUNCIL

by Julie Rogers

It was the spring of 2003. Due to budget constraints, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) had decided to close the Ukiah Air Attack Base, responsible for fighting wildfires in Mendocino County and beyond. The residents of our rural county were not pleased, and the fight was on.

Colin Wilson was the perfect person to represent our county's cause. Imposing, articulate, and persuasive, the president of our County Fire

Chiefs' Association told the State Board of Forestry that, without aircraft, his ability to fight wildfires in Mendocino County would be severely hampered. The Board listened, and soon funding for the Base was restored.

Long a fan of our fire-fighting planes, I joined the cause, and so was introduced to the wide, wide world of wildland fire and its impacts on people, homes, and the environment.



Soon I learned that many of our residents were petrified by fear of wildfires. Their homes were on steep, wooded hillsides far from fire stations. They counted

on aircraft to be there quickly to protect them. What would happen if the planes were gone?

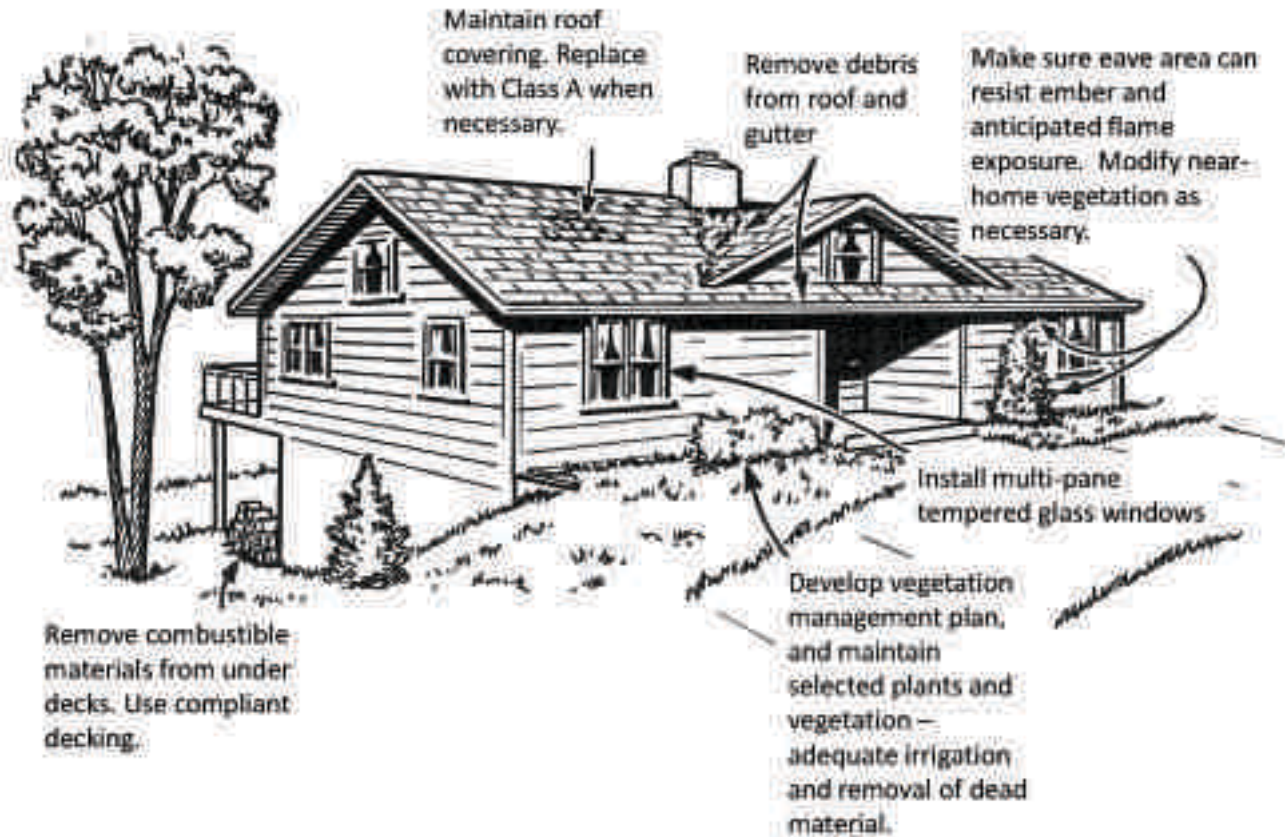
Listening to such stories, I was struck by the helplessness they conveyed. Then a town dweller myself, I wondered why people moved into



ABOVE AND LEFT: Research shows that small embers entering attic vents are the most common cause of home destruction in wildfires. Above photograph by D. Koski. Left photograph by P. Armstrong. • BELOW: The widespread destruction caused by the 2003 Cedar Fire in San Diego County motivated fire chief Colin Wilson to found the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council. This was the largest wildfire in California history, tragically killing 15 persons, burning 2,227 homes, and consuming 280,000 acres of wildlands and suburbs in San Diego County. Photograph by D. Koski.



GUIDELINES FOR A FIRE-SAFE HOME



A pictorial summary of key preventative measures homeowners living in the wildland-urban interface can take to minimize destruction from wildfires. Diagram taken from ANR publication #8392, *Home Survival in Wildfire-Prone Areas; Building Materials and Design Considerations*, <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/Items/8393.aspx>, ©2010 Regents of the University of California. Used by permission.

remote areas if they weren't prepared to face the risks. Shouldn't they take some responsibility for themselves? I asked Chief Wilson, "Does our county have a grassroots effort to prepare for wildfires?" His response: "No, but I wish we did." We agreed to stay in touch.

At a workshop that winter we first heard of "Fire Safe Councils." These groups were accomplishing great things, and their model seemed right for our county. So our effort began. In January 2004, 90 people attended our first public meeting. Chief Wilson, who had just returned from a deadly fire "down south," showed slides of daylight turning to darkness as communities were engulfed by smoke and flames. He expressed a vision of people prepared to meet all the challenges wildfires might bring. Attendees responded

with enthusiasm and support, and the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council (MCFSC) was born (www.firesafemendocino.org).

Just what is a Fire Safe Council? It is a group of persons concerned about wildfire safety in their local area and working to improve it. The group can be whatever size, form, and scope the local needs require. The MCFSC serves an entire county, but in many areas a regional, watershed, or community boundary is more practical. Ours is an autonomous nonprofit corporation, but in other places Fire Safe Councils are affiliated with county governments, Resource Conservation Districts, other nonprofits, and fire agencies, or are completely independent with no affiliation or formal structure at all.

Some small groups have chosen

also—or instead—to become Firewise Communities. The Firewise program, sponsored by the National Fire Protection Association, provides incentives for communities to continue improving their wildfire preparedness year after year (see www.firewise.org). We are now incorporating this excellent program into our outreach activities.

Our Fire Safe Council is equipped to apply for, receive, and manage funding available to groups like ours. To date we have secured nearly \$800,000 for wildfire preparedness projects. We produced our county's Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in 2005, and have created two editions of a non-technical, easy-to-read publication called "Living with Wildfire in Mendocino County" (<http://firesafemendocino.org/pdf/index.html>).

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Fire Safe Councils. This article includes a section on starting a Fire Safe Council, and an updated list of existing Fire Safe Councils. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fire_safe_councils

Firewise, a national program promoting homes that are not only “defensible” but also “survivable” without firefighters’ intervention, <http://www.firewise.org> and <http://firewise.org/usa/index.htm>

U.C. Berkeley’s Center for Fire Research and Outreach, <http://firecenter.berkeley.edu>

Mendocino County Fire Safe Council, includes several publications written by the Council, as well as links to other resources, www.firesafemendocino.org

CAL FIRE (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, formerly called CDF), <http://www.fire.ca.gov> and http://www.fire.ca.gov/fire_prevention/fire_prevention_wildland.php

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology, which strives to balance fighting fires with the environment’s needs: www.fusee.org

“How to Plant Weed Wise and Fire Safe: A Guide to Keeping Inland Mendocino County Safe and Beautiful,” <http://www.firesafemendocino.org/pdf/FireSafe%20Landscaping.pdf>

But the rubber truly meets the road at the local level. Seven years into our work, a dozen local fire safe groups have formed. Each is addressing situations in its own road association, subdivision, ranch, or

neighborhood that hinder its safety and emergency response efforts.

Exactly what are they doing? Moving flammable materials away from homes, reducing brush along narrow roads, creating accurate

maps for firefighters and medics, posting reflective road and address number signs, starting phone trees, and making their home water supplies accessible for fire-fighting. (An excellent four-page pamphlet, “Developing Home Water Supplies for Fire Protection” is available at <http://firesafemendocino.org/pdf/watersupply.pdf>.)

Crucially, they are also heeding the advice of U.S. Forest Service researcher Jack Cohen

to make their houses resistant to airborne burning embers produced by wildfires, as these are the top cause of home destruction from wildfires. Cohen says that “little things” like litter on roofs or decks and in rain gutters, plants in wooden planters, jute doormats, brooms, and lawn furniture cushions are often what ignite first from embers. U.C. Cooperative Extension researcher Steve Quarles has found that burning embers frequently invade attics and under-deck spaces; he recommends covering all such openings with metal mesh of 1/8" or less. Both researchers have found that little embers blowing inside attics are the major culprits in homes being lost to wildfires. They also warn homeowners to replace wood shake roofs with fire-resistant ones, as shake roofs—and the homes they cover—almost never survive wildfires.

Armed with knowledge, people in our county are deciding what they will do when a wildfire approaches. Will they be able to evacuate safely? If not, what are their alternatives? They may need to go to a safety zone—a large outdoor area previously cleared of flammable items—or to a home that has been especially well prepared, as described above. In addition, a few able-bodied, well-trained, and properly equipped persons may plan to stay in the area to put out little fires before they become big ones, knowing that smoldering embers can cause homes to ignite up to eight hours after the fire front has passed. Overall, and most important, neighbors are meeting neighbors, sharing resources, and working together for their common safety.

What is the relationship between our county-wide council and local ones? It is one of support. The MCFSC does not tell local groups how to organize or what to do. We do not require them to elect officers or keep meeting minutes. In fact, we strive to spare them from administrative tasks so they can

This house is burning, even though surrounding vegetation is not, suggesting that it was ignited by embers and not by nearby trees. Photograph by D. Koski.



focus on resolving their on-the-ground needs. We provide suggestions, education, networking, resources, and assistance as requested, knowing that each group has its own values, concerns, and abilities. If a group's needs exceed their means—as, for example, if their roads are overgrown and their residents frail—we seek assistance on their behalf. We apply for funding and administer the project when funding arrives.

How do local groups begin? Most often, one or two persons contact us, worried about their neighborhood's overgrown brush. We offer to attend a road association meeting, social event, or informal roadside gathering to explain our work. Usually a few persons step forward to lead. They want to meet again and involve more people. Another date is set, and a local fire safe group is born.

Over the years, the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council's perspective on wildfires has dramatically changed. When we first began, I viewed fire as only an enemy to be fought and feared, an invader that threatened to destroy everything in its path. Now I know that wildland fire is an integral natural process in the California landscape and that we humans have in fact invaded its turf! Following are some insights I have gained:

- 1) Many homes have been built in locations where fires historically burned lightly and frequently across the landscape, reducing flammable vegetation and benefiting local flora and fauna.
- 2) In an effort to protect those poorly placed homes, wildland fires have been so vigorously suppressed that the ecosystems are disturbed and the vegetation overgrown.
- 3) Most fire agencies view all wildland fires as enemies to be attacked rather than potential partners in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

4) Fear of liability has nearly eliminated the beneficial practice of prescribed fire (controlled burns conducted under strictly limited conditions).

5) Many wildland residents do not understand true forest health, but consider thick forests with heavy underbrush to be “natural,” although historically they are not.

Researcher Jack Cohen maintains that today's wildfire “disasters”—fires in which many homes burn—are primarily the result of a “fire exclusion paradigm,” the longstanding American attitude that fire is always bad and must be stopped. But wildland fire can be our friend, and this is precisely what the MCFSC now teaches. We explain that if we understand how fire behaves, accept the risks of living in wildland environments (often referred to as the wildland-urban interface or WUI), and prepare ourselves and our homes to survive, we can truly “live with wildfire.”

Whatever their size, form, or approach, Fire Safe Councils, Firewise Communities, and similar groups are gradually improving Californians' ability to survive and thrive in wildland areas. Is there a Fire Safe Council in your area? If so, join it. If not, help start one, or look into becoming a Firewise Community.

Together we can greatly reduce the damage that wildfires cause to homes in fire-prone areas and can move toward restoring our ecosystems to good health.



Air tankers offer invaluable assistance to firefighters on the ground, but the fire retardant they carry must be delivered carefully due to its detrimental impacts on waterways. Photograph by P. Armstrong.

REFERENCES

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