

Rancho Santa Fe Association

FIRE AFTERMATH REPORT

Fire Aftermath Review Committee
June 5, 2008

Background

On October 22, 2007, the Witch Creek Fire, fanned by strong Santa Ana winds, raced down the San Dieguito River valley and into the community of Rancho Santa Fe. Over 48 hours later when the firestorm finally subsided, 18 homes within the Covenant had been totally destroyed and an additional 14 homes or accessory structures had been damaged. In addition to the structural losses, hundreds of acres of open space areas were stripped of all vegetation and reduced to ashes.

Thankfully, there were no fire-related injuries or fatalities within the Covenant area. But, given the severity of the wind and weather conditions, and as devastating as was the loss of homes, the outcome could have been much worse. Because of prevailing wind patterns, the east-west orientation of the San Dieguito River and several smaller canyons and the existing vegetation, the community of Rancho Santa Fe will remain vulnerable to future wildland fires. In other words, from a wildland fire perspective when viewed from a regional context, Rancho Santa Fe has similar characteristics to much of San Diego County and Southern California as a whole.

The Association Board was very grateful for and pleased with the emergency response of the Rancho Santa Fe Patrol, Association Parks and Recreation Crews, Rancho Santa Fe Fire and other Association staff and members who worked extremely hard to minimize additional property damage. However, the Association Board also felt that given the high probability of a future wildland fire that might again impact the Covenant, it would be prudent to: 1) review what actions were done correctly and contributed to the overall success of the firefighting efforts, 2) consider information or actions that were needed or lacking which could have contributed to the overall firefighting efforts, and 3) make recommendations and establish action items to reduce the possibility of loss in a future wildland fire (or other natural disaster).

Therefore, on November 15, 2007, the Board established the Fire Aftermath Review (FAR) Committee to look at the actions that occurred during the Witch Creek Fire and report back to the Board with the FAR Committee's findings and recommendations

Meetings with Other Agencies

As of the date of this report, the FAR Committee has met with the following agencies or organizations who were directly involved with the firestorm and the subsequent recovery efforts:

- Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District (RSFFPD)
- San Diego County Sheriff's Department
- California Highway Patrol (CHP)
- Rancho Santa Fe Patrol (Patrol)
- Santa Fe Irrigation District (SFID)
- Rancho Santa Fe Community Services District (CSD)
- Fairbanks Ranch Homeowners Association

In addition to these agencies or groups, the FAR Committee or Association staff acting on behalf of the Committee has also met with:

- Covenant homeowners
- San Diego County Deputy Chief Administrative Officer for the Public Safety Group
- San Diego County Department of Planning and Land Use (DPLU)

Summary of Recommended Action Items

The meetings described above have functioned as debriefings where each of the attendees discussed their respective roles and responsibilities before, during and after the firestorm. The outcome of those meetings produced the following list of 'Action Items' which the FAR Committee hereby recommends:

- Utilize the internet to provide community updates during a natural disaster
- Assist RSFFPD with educational efforts related to fire prevention
- Work with adjacent communities to improve communication and emergency preparedness
- Form a Rancho Santa Fe Fire Safe Council
- Conduct an annual test of the Regional Emergency Notification System (Reverse 911)
- Distribute emergency contact phone numbers to community residents
- Distribute Rancho Santa Fe Patrol evacuation procedures
- Implement Rancho Santa Fe Patrol recommendations
- Evaluate fuel reduction on all open space areas under the control of the Association
- Direct the Park and Recreation Committee to develop a re-vegetation plan for the Arroyo property
- Work with the Santa Fe Irrigation District to update the fire hydrant network within the Covenant

It is also important to note that disaster response, be it to wildland fire or other type of natural disaster is not a core competency of the Rancho Santa Fe Association. Those responsibilities appropriately rest with police and fire agencies and other first responders who regularly train for several types of emergencies including natural disasters. Similarly, this report is not intended to replace or duplicate after-action reports authored by the fire service.

Rather, the FAR Committee intends that this report be used to improve the emergency preparedness of both the Association and its members so that the community will be better prepared for a future wildland fire.

FAR Committee Recommended Action Items

Recommendation:

Utilize the internet to provide community updates during a natural disaster.

Reason / Background:

From the afternoon of Monday, October 22, 2007 until around noon on Friday, October 26, 2007, community residents who had evacuated were not allowed to return to their homes. During that time, many residents had only minimal access to information about the status of their homes and property. This lack of information was a source of great frustration for everyone affected by the fire.

Early in a wildland fire or other natural disaster information is especially scarce. This is because larger news gathering agencies are typically not yet on-scene and because first responders are actively engaged in fire suppression or other urgent activities. As the incident progresses, information becomes more available but must still be verified through the incident command system. Because of this, some groups have attempted to provide information directly, but with mixed results.

In some smaller gated communities, e-mail updates proved to be an effective means of communication. However, in some cases, the individuals providing the updates did so at significant personal risk in an unpredictable situation. Internet blogs were also utilized on a widespread basis throughout the county but postings are not screened and were frequently inaccurate.

After discussions with other adjacent communities, RSFFPD and the media, the FAR Committee has determined that the safest and most accurate way to convey information during an emergency would be to post such information on existing community websites. The FAR Committee recommends that the Rancho Santa

Fe Review's website should be the primary location to post updates during a natural disaster or other emergency. Members of the press have access to restricted areas and because of that can provide more reliable and accurate information. In addition, information obtained from the Patrol or from fire or police agencies would be conveyed to the Review, which in turn would regularly update their website. Secondary locations for websites can be found in the Community/Individual Preparedness section of the appendix to this report.

Recommendation:

Assist RSFFPD with educational efforts related to fire prevention.

Reason / Background:

Fire prevention includes all activities that are directly related to reducing the probability or risk of a (wildland) fire. Fire agencies, including RSFFPD, typically have entire divisions dedicated to fire prevention, which are generally led by a Fire Marshall. The authority for fire prevention requirements begins with adoption of a fire code by the local fire agency. The County Board of Supervisors must then ratify the individual fire codes for fire districts within the unincorporated area.

A fire code not only governs what type of building materials are allowed, but also includes other items such as the width of fire access roadways, the location and type of landscape materials, storage of combustible materials adjacent to dwellings and the selective thinning of existing native vegetation to reduce ladder fuels. Enforcement of the fire code is the sole responsibility of the fire agency, which has police powers for that purpose.

While a fire agency has the ability to enforce the fire code, obtaining the voluntary compliance of residents is always preferable to any enforcement action. In that regard, the Rancho Santa Fe Association should assist with educational outreach efforts. Such assistance could take the form of publishing handouts on landscaping or participating in a community meeting on how to selectively remove or thin existing vegetation to remove "ladder fuels."

Recommendation:

Work with adjacent communities to improve communication and emergency preparedness.

Reason / Background:

Just as a wildland fire does not recognize community boundaries, communication and overall preparedness should also be seamless in working with neighboring areas.

For example, on Monday morning, October 22, 2007, the Rancho Santa Fe Patrol began the orderly evacuation of the Covenant which was completed before the fire entered the community later that afternoon. Because adjacent communities also needed to evacuate at the same time, communication was essential to avoid a severe traffic jam. In other parts of the county, a lack of coordination led to 2 to 3 hour traffic jams that endangered lives and potentially blocked access for emergency equipment and personnel.

Improving communication and emergency preparedness will require participation in annual disaster training and in disaster drills. By participating in such training exercises and drills, the Patrol will be able to establish communication protocols with adjacent communities and with the Sheriff and the fire service. Sharing information during a natural disaster also improves intelligence gathering, which in turn helps agencies and organizations with decision making for such things as evacuation routes, shelter locations and even emergency supplies.

Recommendation:

Form a Rancho Santa Fe Fire Safe Council

Reason / Background:

The Fire Safe Council of California is a non-governmental organization that was created to improve fire awareness and fire prevention efforts at the local level throughout the State of California. They function as a clearinghouse for fire related information and assist local groups with the creation of regional Fire Safe Councils. Under that umbrella, the Fire Safe Council of San Diego County was initially formed in 1997 and subsequently established as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation in 1999. Subsequently, several communities within San Diego County have formed local Fire Safe Councils who work with the regional (San Diego County) Fire Safe Council.

The primary mission of a local Fire Safe Council is to provide educational information about fire prevention to various stakeholders within their community. Typically, a local Fire Safe Council includes members from the following types of organizations or agencies:

- Local Fire Agency Representatives (RSFFPD)
- Insurance Industry Representatives
- State and Federal Resource Agencies
- Utilities (San Diego Gas and Electric)
- Local Organizations (RSF Association)
- Community residents

By bringing together members from various organizations such as those listed above, local Fire Safe Councils become a valuable tool to disseminate educational materials to the community. But their main contribution comes through the development of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The three elements of a CWPP are:

1. Collaboration – local, state and federal agencies are required to work together with the community on wildfire protection issues
2. Prioritized Fuel Reduction – hazardous fuel areas and fuel reduction methods and treatments must be identified. Evacuation routes and shelter locations are also typically identified
3. Treatment of Structure Ignitability – measures must be identified to reduce ignition potential for structures

An approved CWPP then provides the ability to obtain grant funds to implement the measures and tasks identified in the plan. In the Covenant, grant funds could be used for thinning or selective removal of “ladder fuels” in areas of existing native vegetation or to assist with the replacement of wood shake roofs.

Recommendation:

Conduct an annual test of the Regional Emergency Notification System

Reason / Background:

The Regional Emergency Notification System, commonly referred to as “Reverse 911”, was used last October to notify residents that they needed to evacuate in advance of the approaching Witch Creek Fire. While the system worked very well overall, some residents did not receive a phone call notifying them that mandatory evacuations were in effect.

One possible reason why someone may not have been notified is that during a power failure, cordless phone systems or any type of phone that requires electrical power, may not work. Recognizing this, the County of San Diego has established a cell phone registry called Alert San Diego, the website for which can be found in the Community/Individual Preparedness section of the appendix to this report.

In addition, the County's Office of Emergency Services, upon request, can schedule an annual test of the Regional Emergency Notification System. Such a test would not be conducted for the entire Covenant area, but rather for discrete neighborhoods. An annual test would serve to verify that the system is functioning correctly within a given area.

Recommendation:

Distribute emergency contact phone numbers to community residents

Reason / Background:

Although emergency contact phone numbers are published in several different locations, having this information printed on one sheet, which could be placed next to the phone, along with wallet-sized cards would be very convenient for Covenant residents. Contact information for the following agencies should be included on the sheet and on the cards:

- 911 for Emergencies
- 211 for General Information
- Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District
- San Diego County Sheriff
- California Highway Patrol
- Local Elementary, Middle and High Schools
- San Diego County Animal Services
- RSF Patrol
- Red Cross
- Local Newspapers

In addition, space should be provided for the following individual information:

- Family Members
- Physician
- Veterinarian
- Neighbors

Recommendation:

Distribute Rancho Santa Fe Patrol evacuation procedures

Reason / Background:

Preparing to evacuate ahead of an approaching wildland fire is a very emotional time and can be very confusing when considering what things to take or what steps to perform before leaving. Therefore, the Patrol recommends distributing a checklist describing what actions should be performed prior to evacuation in a natural disaster. At a minimum, residents should take the following actions before evacuating, provided that the threat is **not imminent** and that they have adequate time to leave:

- Gather irreplaceable items (e.g., pictures, family records, passport)
- Take enough clothing and prescription medications to last for several days
- Take pet carriers (if needed)
- Take the list of important phone numbers described in a previous section
- Load the car with the items described above and park it in the driveway facing the street
- Evacuate when directed to by safety personnel or when you no longer feel safe
- Leave the alarm on
- Leave the entry gate in the open position
- Turn the gas off¹
- Open drapes or flammable window coverings
- Close non-flammable window coverings
- Tightly shut and lock all doors and windows²
- Turn the air conditioner off
- Move flammable furniture away from windows
- Move flammable items away from exterior of the house (e.g., wood, patio furniture)

This is not necessarily an exhaustive list. Both RSFFPD and the County have similar checklists, which should also be used for reference purposes.

Recommendation:

Implement Rancho Santa Fe Patrol recommendations

¹ Some agencies do not recommend turning the gas off for a wildfire. Please confirm this step with RSFFPD. Turning the gas off is most important after an earthquake if you see or suspect that any damage has occurred.

² While there is agreement regarding shutting all doors and windows, RSFFPD recommends leaving one door unlocked so that firefighters can gain access to your home if needed. However, many police agencies recommend locking all doors and windows.

Reason / Background:

The Rancho Santa Fe Patrol developed a list of recommendations to improve service delivery to Covenant residents. Most of the recommendations involve the purchase of additional emergency equipment or supplies for the patrol officers.

The Fire Aftermath Review Committee also recommends that the Association create identification cards for key Association and support personnel. To prevent looting and protect private property, the Sheriff and the National Guard sealed off the community for several days during the October firestorm. Identification cards would allow key Association personnel access into the Covenant to perform vital tasks in the event of a similar natural disaster in the future. The Association Manager would determine what vital tasks need to be performed and which employees would then be issued cards.

Finally, the Patrol strongly recommends that residents have an up-to-date evacuation and boarding plan for their horses.

Recommendation:

Evaluate fuel reduction measures on all open space areas under the control of the Association

Reason / Background:

Open space areas are an integral part of the fabric that serves to define the rural character of the Covenant area. In some cases however, those open space areas can contribute significantly to the spread of a wind-driven wildland fire. This is especially true in the case of canyons with an east-west orientation because the prevailing Santa Ana winds also come from the east.

As described above, prioritizing areas for fuel reduction is one of the required elements of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The criteria for prioritizing areas for fuel reduction should include the following:

- Canyon orientation (east-west)
- Slope (fire moves more quickly uphill)
- Age of the vegetation (vegetation over 30 years old pose the highest risk)
- Vegetation type (e.g., low grasses vs. chaparral)
- Proximity to structures and evacuation routes

Once areas have been evaluated and prioritized for fuel reduction, they should be selectively thinned to remove ladder fuels and any dead, dying or diseased vegetation. In many cases due to inaccessible topographic features, thinning and vegetation removal may need to be performed by hand crews. Therefore, the Association or some other community organization should continue the partnership with Cal Fire work crews to remove hazardous fuels.

Recommendation:

Direct the Park and Recreation Committee to develop a re-vegetation strategy for the Arroyo property

Reason / Background:

Because of the intensity of the wind-driven Witch Creek Fire, much of the existing native vegetation burned leaving bare ground on the canyon slopes and riverbed areas. In order to prevent future erosion and the proliferation of highly flammable non-native species, the Park and Recreation Committee should develop a strategy to re-vegetate the Arroyo to mitigate the risk from future wildland fires. Reducing the flame front length is a critical factor in reducing risk and should be considered when designing a re-vegetation plan.

Recommendation:

Work with the Santa Fe Irrigation District to update the fire hydrant network within the Covenant

Reason / Background:

Fire hydrants are a vital infrastructure component and serve as a critical water source for fire suppression. In areas of newer development, fire hydrant locations are required to meet the spacing set forth by the current RSFFPD Fire Code. However, some older areas of the Covenant do not have as many hydrants as would currently be required.

Therefore, the Association should work with the Santa Fe Irrigation District to: 1) update the SFID maps to reflect all existing fire hydrant locations within the Covenant, and 2) create a prioritized list of locations to add additional hydrants.

Summary Recommendation

The Fire Aftermath Review Committee recommends that the Board direct the committee to work with staff to implement the recommendations in this report and to give a progress report to the Board during the August Board retreat.

Conclusion

The preceding eleven recommendations represent a comprehensive strategy to improve emergency preparedness with respect to wildland fires and other types of natural disasters as well. Implementing these recommendations will also increase community awareness that we live in a region that is prone to wildland fires. Hopefully, as a result of that increased awareness, the community as a whole will be better prepared for the next wildland fire.

It should also be noted that there are several other actions related to emergency preparedness which, while beyond the scope of this report, could be implemented by individual residents. Some of those actions include:

- Purchase an emergency pool pump
- Purchase a home safe with an Underwriter Laboratories fire rating for document protection
- Retain a company to apply a fire resistive gel or foam just prior to the approach of a wildland fire

Again, any decision to implement these actions is best left to individual homeowners and is therefore, beyond the scope of this report.

Complacency is the enemy of preparedness. With the passage of time, we all have a natural tendency to forget the speed with which the events unfolded last October 22, 2007. It is with that in mind that the Fire Aftermath Review Committee presents this report to the Association Board of Directors and urges adoption of the recommendations contained herein.