

Fire and Forest

A Year in Review

by Mike Esnard

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The Fire Safe Council began the year with its attention on the new insect threat to the hill's oaks, the Goldspotted oak borer. Many of our volunteers and staff attended a training program in January at the Nature Center led by experts from the Forest Service and UCR. From that training came two teams that inspect trees for signs of infection. Thus far, 27 trees have been confirmed by lab analysis as infected and have been taken down by Cal Fire. This program will be active again in the coming year.

In spring and early summer we used up the remaining portion of our abatement grant from the California Fire Safe Council that we were awarded in 2012. Lucky for us and the hill, the Riverside County Fire Department had abatement grant funds that kept the work going on private property. We have been awarded another grant by CFSC for the coming year, so as the County funds wind down we will continue to help homeowners make their properties fire safe.

Sadly, this year we lost two people very dear to us. Vivian Larson, a retired nurse and long-time member of the Woodies, passed away in February, and Tom McCullough, a retired math professor, former Woodie, and our Board Treasurer, passed away in May. We miss them both, but still have our warm and funny memories of our work together.

In May we were delighted to receive the Greenwood award for environmental contributions to the hill at this year's Earth Fair at the Town Hall. The award was very meaningful to us, and we were most happy to have the environmental benefits of our work recognized.

Wildfire, our organizational nemesis, appeared twice on the mountain in summer. Mid-July saw the Mountain fire take off from Mountain Center and quickly move east through Bonita Vista and into the wilderness. Its threat to

head back west towards town brought the first evacuation of Idyllwild since the Bee Canyon fire in 1996. Seven houses were lost but there were no fatalities, and the fire was kept out of town by an extraordinary deployment of personnel (3,400) by the fire fighting agencies.

Three weeks later in early August the Silver fire ignited around Poppet Flat and raced east through Twin Pines. Though much smaller in acreage than the Mountain fire, the Silver fire destroyed more homes (26) as it burned the northern edge of the mountain. Again, there were no fatalities.

For well over a year the MCFSC had a sub-committee looking into the feasibility of converting biomass into usable energy. We focused finally on the feasibility of using small units to burn biomass and other refuse and turn the heat into electricity. Unfortunately, we came to the conclusion in August that such a project was simply too expensive to justify the costs at the present time.

The best news of the year was the funding and start-up of the reroofing grant, a FEMA/CalOES project aimed at helping homeowners replace wooden shake and shingle roofs with Class A fire resistant roofs. (The hardening of roofs is seen by experts as the single most effective remodeling effort a homeowner can make to improve the fire safety of their home.) After four years of planning and volumes of paperwork, contractors began replacing roofs in September. Our goal is to have 120 replaced by next summer, which will be a significant accomplishment.