

Fire and Forest
Renewing Commitment; Evacuation Win
by Mike Esnard
(from The Town Crier - September 2013)

If anything good comes out of the two major fires that burned on the hill this summer, I hope it is a renewed interest and commitment in making our communities fire safe. The Mountain and the Silver fires should serve as reminders about our vulnerability.

So I hope we again ask the question, “What can we do to keep ourselves safe from wildfire?”

Of course, the first thing to do is to handle our own responsibilities, making sure our homes are properly abated, with good roofs and vents. We can also encourage and support the fire agencies in performing inspections to make sure all homes are in compliance with fire codes.

But I hope we don't stop there. As citizens, we can support the fire agencies in maintaining fuelbreaks and reducing hazardous fuels around the community. The purpose of this work is to slow a fire approaching (or leaving) the community, and as we just saw demonstrated, this is a critical issue in fire suppression.

It's not that the agencies responsible for this work, in our case the Forest Service and Cal Fire are either unaware or unwilling to do the required work. The issues that stymie the necessary work are two and interconnected: money and environmental regulations. The money issue is obvious, since their fuels budgets are inadequate to the task and need to be increased. But a change in environmental regulation would also help a great deal. Requiring another environmental study to do work on an already established fuelbreak is both very expensive and foolish.

So I hope that anytime we have an occasion to be in the company of our political leaders, whether county, state, or federal, as well as our fire agencies leaders, we will let them know we are concerned about the fire

safety of the community and want the fuelbreaks surrounding the community to be well maintained. When the issue of cost comes up, we can point out that prevention is a great deal cheaper than suppression, and much safer.

On another topic, we are grateful to the fire fighters who fought our recent fires, but I would also like to complement the Riverside County Office of Emergency Services, the Sheriff's Office, as well as the community in general, for how well the evacuation went during the Mountain Fire.

People in emergency services spend a lot of time planning and worrying about large evacuations in emergencies. A lot of things can go wrong, and a lot of people can get hurt if they do. But in our case everything went very smoothly.

Idyllwild seemed safe from the Mountain Fire the first day as it moved east, but when it threatened to loop back towards town from Saddle Junction, fire managers needed to think about moving residents out. When they did, Gina Moran-McGough, Riverside OES, was there with the evacuation plans developed over the years by the Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST). (She keeps them in her trunk, just in case.) When the threat began to increase, Gina and her colleagues were on the phone to the camps, alerting them to a soon to be issued evacuation order.

When the evacuation order came, people from the camps and town were able to leave the mountain successfully and without incident. This is a tribute to good planning by all involved, and to the calm and cooperative spirit of the community.