

Smoke on the Horizon



Paul Summers, a former Fire Division Chief from California and our newest member of the BOD offers this very timely article.

With fires continuing to burn all over Arizona and New Mexico, it's obvious that fire season definitely is here and we should be prepared. As many of you know, I am a retired Fire Division Chief with 40 years of firefighting service at the city, county, and state level, and I was asked to offer my thoughts on wild land fire safety to our friends here in Coyote Creek. After all, we are in a wild land area with vast open space, both public and private, surrounding us.

Generally speaking, fire officials commonly refer to the three "E's" when it comes to fire safety and fire prevention. "Engineering, Education, and Enforcement" and we can use these same terms for our families and friends for their safety.

Engineering – All, or nearly all of the homes here in Coyote Creek are designed and constructed with many fire safety elements built-in. Some have fire sprinklers, all have smoke detection, walls are double insulated, all have self closing fire rated doors which separate the living area from the garage, and I would hope all have portable fire extinguishers as well. Additionally, the required open space – neighbor to neighbor – is a safety measure as well. The likelihood of a fire jumping from one home to another is not high given these distances. Keeping the desertscape clean of litter and dead growth is necessary, at least 25 to 50 feet from your walls (but don't remove living plants). Those homes with view fencing should have a good garden hose and nozzle at hand, which will reach far enough to be effective.

Education – OK, so everyone knows not to smoke in bed so we'll leave that one in the ashtray. During fire season, however, we must be cautious of our outdoor fireplaces, fire pits, and chimineas making sure the fire screens are in place, working properly and that fires are never left unattended.

Enforcement – I read, as did many of you, the letters to the editor in the newspaper regarding the closure of our national parks and national forests. Many folks wanting to cool off in our local Southern Arizona mountains were upset. Unfortunately, fires like the ones we are witnessing now, do not always bring out the best of our society. While hundreds of wonderful volunteers give their time supporting the victims of these fires

(and thousands give donations!), these fires also bring out people who like to start fires. On many occasions in California, a wild land fire would be destroying one area depleting important firefighting resources and another fire would erupt suspiciously in another part of the county. The most tragic example was the Esperanza Fire in California. This fire, which took the life of five firefighters, started at the time two other serious fires were burning in the area. The suspect was apprehended, convicted, and is now awaiting the death penalty. Closing an area, while an inconvenience, is a necessary tool to help prevent tragic happenings.

So, you ask, what do I need to do in the event of a wild land fire here in our area? First, make sure you and your home are prepared, and do this long before there is any smoke on the horizon. Prepare a “getaway” bag with whatever you may need in an evacuation shelter. This should include medications, personal items (read clean undies), phone contact lists, copies (not originals) of important documents, cell phone chargers – in other words, whatever will make your stay away from home less of a burden on you. Moreover, remain CALM.

Second, stay informed on the fires in the area. Two excellent public web sites are Inciweb and the National Interagency Fire Center (www.inciweb.org and www.nifc.gov). They give daily reports on all of the fire activity by state. Additionally, the NIFC site provides important information on other disaster situations (flood, hurricane, earthquake, etc.) if the fire activity is low.

Third, if you see smoke close by, call 911. You would think that is a no-brainer but trust me, it isn't. One of the frequent complaints we would get is “it took you too long to get here”. After some exploratory questions, we would ask if they actually called 911, and they often admitted that they really didn't; they asked someone else, who asked someone else, who asked – well you get the picture. So, make the call and if you end up being the 399th person to call, I will gladly be the 400th.

Fourth, remember your animals! Domestic pets will need to be cared for so make sure you have a crate for transporting them, and that your “getaway” bag contains their medications (if needed) and vaccination records. It's a good idea to have the location of a care facility or friend that could house them during an emergency. Now, the big one – the equestrian connection. Horse owners must have a way to transport animals to a safe refuge preferably before it's time for you to evacuate your home. Arrange with your stable mates, or neighbors for those of you stabling on your property, a plan to transport each other's animals (along with food if possible), to pre-determined evacuation sites: a boarding facility, a friend's ranch, etc. Not everyone owns a horse trailer and, as often happens, some of you will be out of the area on vacation when a wild land fire threatens. Having a good plan in place and knowing your animals will be handled safely is a great comfort. One final note, there are no “horse tags” like our canine friends have so if your horse will be mixed in with many other equine evacuees, say at a large ranch, you may need a method for identification. An easy and harmless way to mark your horse or mule is to use liquid shoe polish in the bottle with the dauber end. Simply write your name and

phone number on the flank. This worked very well in California and allowed the animal technicians a method of contacting you.

Fifth, make contact with your neighbors, especially if you're on one side of our community and see smoke "over there", and give assistance if need be, and call 911. Finally, remember we are in the "monsoon" season, which means the possibility of lightning strikes in our area and in the surrounding mountains. Lightning strikes cause a number of fires each year, so we should expect to see smoke, especially at higher elevations. Usually, though not always, these are short-lived due to the accompanying moisture, and not too troublesome. Some though, seem to appear days after the storm, and have been "punking" under the canopy. If you see smoke rising in the distance please refer to step three.