Sand Ridge Fire Safe Council *Newsletter*

Winter 2025 *Issue 7*

A Conversation With Jeff Hoag

Homes that survived the L.A. Fires – Inspiration for us all

Jeff Hoag, Battalion Chief, Wildfire Resiliency program, Amador El Dorado Unit of CAL FIRE, sat down with the Foothill Fire Flash recently to talk about his experience with the L.A. County wildfires of last month. He was part of the largest DINS (damage inspection after fires) team ever in California. After several weeks of examining both homes that survived and the many that were destroyed in the flatter, more densely populated area of the Palisades Fire, he came home with these insights:

Could you really tell what had been there for homes that were destroyed? Well, we could pretty well tell some things like siding. Even easier to tell were the roof type, and vents and their mesh size if they were present. Other attributes were more difficult to identify like if eaves were enclosed. It takes a trained eye to determine what was there before the fire. It depends on the makeup of the structure and the level of destruction. Everything we found was recorded on our reporting platform “Field Maps”.

What was your sense as to the main reasons why some homes survived? Four things really stood out to me for the homes that survived: First, there was zero penetration by embers in homes that survived: there were no gaps >1/8 inch, in any vents, walls, eaves, etc.

Second, siding was non-combustible, such as stucco or fiber cement. Even in one instance where a burning home fell over right onto the house next to it, that house had non-combustible siding and did not catch fire and burn itself. Full non-combustible siding was important because these homes were all so close (many with 4 ft set-backs, so just 8 ft from each other). Where siding was wood, radiant heat and embers from one burning house caught the home next to it on fire, and on down the line.

Embers can hit walls and accumulate at their base

Third was a clear, no plant, no combustibles, 0-5 foot zone around houses that survived. It truly made a big difference. I saw lots of piles of embers at the base of walls, where the walls were noncombustible and didn’t catch on fire.

And fourth, many surviving homes avoided attaching combustible fences directly to the house, which helped break potential fire paths. Homes with significant setbacks from surrounding structures, such as across a street (typically 60-80 feet wide), also played a crucial role in reducing structure-to-structure ignition and preventing fires from spreading between neighboring houses.

Did luck seem to be a factor for homes surviving? No, it looked more like prep and construction in almost all cases.

Do you think the kind of wholesale destruction you saw in L.A. could happen here in El Dorado County? The possibility of urban conflagration exists under the right conditions. We typically do not see the type of wind events we saw in Southern California in El Dorado County. But that does not mean it could not happen. A number of factors could lead to a similar event, but it would be difficult to say when or where because there are so many variables. We have witnessed catastrophic incidents in communities not only from strong wind events but from fuel and terrain driven fires as well. When people prepare their homes and communities work to reduce the available fuels around them it greatly helps to reduce the chance of such events

What happens with the data you and other CAL FIRE folks collected? CAL FIRE "DINS" will collect data on individual homes that were affected, damaged, or destroyed during the emergency. We use this information to report it to residents on the status of their homes when the area is evacuated, and then also make it available to researchers, such as at IBHS (Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety), NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology), universities, etc. Those researchers rigorously look at what statistically helps homes survive - to inform us all as to what actions really matter and we use that information to update building codes to build safer homes and communities in the future.

Surviving home right next to destroyed home, Palisades

What are your thoughts on sprinklers and retardants that so many people think will help? I didn't personally see any sprinklers on any homes -- either those few still standing or those many destroyed. Water was an issue and adding sprinklers to water use would have made the situation even worse. I did see retardant on a lot of homes, especially the larger ones. And some of those homes were still standing, though often in amongst other surviving homes that did not have retardant. There are so many variables with retardants -- How long ago was it applied? By whom? How well did they apply it? What brand? It would be very hard to capture such data.

Is there anything else you'd like us to know about the fires? Firefighters worked hard to get people out safely. Some suppression was able to occur, but with so many homes burning at once, there was no way to have an engine at each house. Evacuation was a huge issue. People had a pretty good warning that a major wind/dry event was coming, but didn't always heed it or prepare to evacuate quickly.

My advice: ***Be ready, and pay attention!***

"Imagine standing in a 100 mph wind with 1000 homes throwing burning embers all over the place. Those can be from homes or forest- your home needs to be able to resist that kind of intense bombard-ment"

Chief Jeff Hoag

Outingdale Shaded Fuel Break

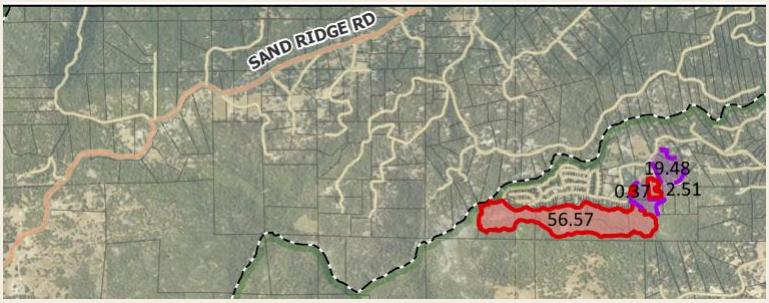
As part of a larger $2 million fuel reduction grant, work is underway across South County Fire Safe Councils. It is removing roadside vegetation along parts of Mt Aukum, Omo Ranch, and Fair Play roads. You may have seen some of this activity and signs if you travel in that part of the County.

While there is no work happening exactly in the Sand Ridge FSC area, all of this work makes our larger community safer, and therefore, we are safer! One part of this project that is important to us and is more difficult to see is the 50-acre shaded fuel break on the south side of Outingdale. This part of the project will help protect Outingdale and, therefore, the Eastern end of the Sand Ridge FSC.

What is a shaded fuel break you might ask..... It is NOT clear cutting. Instead, it is a treatment protocol that removes small trees and brush and limbs up mature trees to create a shaded "park-like" area. If a fire were to contact this area, it would drop to the ground, and have much less fuel to propagate itself. Firefighters also have a much easier time containing a fire in a shaded fuel break area. See the map and photos for more details.

Before

After



Green Waste Day

We will be holding a Green Waste Day on the Bucks Bar side of Sand Ridge in May. Stay tuned for further details.

Assessments

As a reminder, we have trained assessors who can give you valuable tips about home hardening and defensible space improvements. Many of you have done a great job with this, but there may be some additional actions we recommend that could save your home in the event of a wildfire.

FireWise Renewal

We know you're actively working on your properties. Please remember to keep track of the following so we can show progress when we are up for FireWise Renewal in the fall:

- **Hours worked** by you or others in maintaining defensible space and making retrofits for home hardening
- **Money spent** on on defensible space/home hardening
- **Burn pile** numbers and size

Remembering Robert Stockel

We are sad to inform you that we have lost a friend and valuable member of the Sand Ridge Fire Safe Council. Robert volunteered many hours of his time doing home assessments, organizing last year's green waste day, and setting a great example of fire safety at his own home. Our thoughts are with his family during this difficult time. His full obituary may be found in the March 12 Mountain Democrat.

West Slope Foundation Workshop

Please attend the two-day workshop below by registering on-line at the ***westslopefoundation.org/preparedness/workshops***

Contact the Sand Ridge Fire Safe Council

eMail: info@sandridgefiresafe.org
Facebook Group: Sand Ridge Fire Safe Council