

COMMUNITY

Wildfire protection plan offers safety tips for Los Altos Hills residents

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Written by J Logan - Special to the Town Crier

After years of drought, Santa Clara County residents welcomed an abundance of winter and spring rains that revitalized watersheds and promoted the growth of fresh grasses and vegetation. Now, these favorable weather conditions also foreshadow dangers lurking in the summer and fall seasons when grasses, brush and vegetation dry from the heat and during hot and windy weather conditions become the fuel of wildfire dangers.

Los Altos Hills resident Dave Stewart is a Community Emergency Response Team supervisor who for many years has dedicated his time and volunteer efforts to emergency preparedness activities to support his neighbors and community in the event of disaster.

With a new understanding of the looming dangers of wildfire, Stewart set himself on a course of action to learn more about how to protect his family and property. He registered for a free one-day workshop offered by the Santa Clara County Fire Department titled “Ready, Set, Go.” The workshop is fundamental to the 2016 Community Wildfire Protection Plan developed by the Santa Clara County Fire Department and adopted by the Los Altos Hills County Fire District.

Stewart’s actions, learned in the “Ready, Set, Go” workshop, will greatly reduce the intensity of a wildfire and the damage it can cause if it sweeps through his property and will lessen the potential of the fire spreading to neighbor’s property.

Stewart kept a photo journal of the property hygiene progress from before, after and during the final step of brush and tree branch chipping removal services. To view his journal, visit photos.app.goo.gl/ipEPGqzhL5uFx5jt9.

PROPERTY HYGIENE

Stewart embarked on the tasks of “property hygiene.” His large residential lot was full of dry brush, low-hanging limbs from myriad oak trees and vegetation along the ingress and egress roads through his property. After concentrated brush clearing, tree-limb pruning and vegetation management, Stewart created defensible spaces around his property and along roadways so that wildfires could be slowed, contained to the ground and combated by firefighters with the outcome to save his home.

Property hardening is the assessment of flammable areas and objects on property with a goal to reduce or modify the components known to spread fire. Examples of ways to harden your home for fire resistance include installing a roof of fire-resistant materials, protecting vents in eaves to baffle intake of embers and avoiding flammable outside wall or deck products.

Defensible space is designing areas around the house and buildings to eliminate ignitable materials, debris and objects. The recommended design of defensive open space is 30-100 feet of clearing around buildings and homes.

BRING IN THE GOATS

Residents like Stewart often take to labor with hand tools and stack dry brush and tree limbs for disposal. However, there is another alternative – goats. Residents with large areas and sloped land will often bring in goats who go into canyons and fields to munch away dry brush, poison oak, low-hanging limbs and any vegetation in their path. The fire district hires a goat vendor each spring to munch away vegetation in the Byrne Preserve area that is daunting to hand crews who have the same intention.

FREE BRUSH REMOVAL

After Stewart completed the property hygiene, he contacted the district to schedule brush chipping and removal services. Brush chipping services are part of the fuel reduction residential program provided free to all district residents. The district contracts for these services from a tree contractor, who brings the necessary equipment and crew to remove piles of brush and tree branches residents have stacked near the roadway or in the driveway for removal. The program is growing in demand.

Local fire prevention programs are critically important parts of an ongoing process that will enable the residents to address the current and future challenges of wildfire protection and preparedness efforts.

For more information, visit the district's website at lahcfd.org under "Programs for Residents." Programs include yard waste drop-off and weed abatement and fuel reduction services.

For more information on Santa Clara County Fire Department's workshops and emergency preparedness classes, visit sccfd.org.

J Logan is general manager of the Los Altos Hills County Fire District.



Photos provided by Los Altos Hills resident Dave Stewart