



Oak Hill Area  
**FIRE SAFE  
COUNCIL**

# October 2021 Newsletter



**FIREWISE USA**  
RESIDENTS REDUCING WILDFIRE RISKS

*“Its not real, until it really happens”*

**Caldor Fire shook us all**

*Dear Oak Hill Area Neighbors,*

**For this issue of our Newsletter**, we would like to offer some messages from the devastating Caldor Fire. These are based on the daily CalFire reports, fire maps and other sources. We will watch as more complete conclusions come out from other, more rigorous studies. Our hearts go out to all those affected by the fire, from evacuees, to our many nearby eastern and northern neighbors- including 80% of Grizzly Flats- whose homes were completely destroyed.



**By Residents Evacuating, Firefighters were able to do their Job!**

Timely evacuation by most residents in Grizzly Flats and other areas meant there was no loss of life and that firefighters could really focus on fire suppression and protecting homes. Some evacuation orders came quickly and at unpredictable

times. In Grizzly Flats, the evacuation warning came at 9 in the evening, and then just 3 hours later, at midnight, the mandatory evacuation order was issued. For some, good preparation helped reduce the chaos and stress of evacuation.

## SIGN UP FOR **CodeRED** BEFORE AN EMERGENCY

Code Red worked for most people affected by the fire, though the system is continually being improved. The El Dorado County Sheriff uses the CODE RED service to notify you of an evacuation or other emergency but it doesn't work if you don't sign up! With CodeRED, you set up an account, select your communication preferences, such as cell phone, landline, text or email. Once set up, you receive emergency notifications as soon as they are sent.



To sign up for CODE RED, go to <https://ready.edso.org/>



## Defensible Space and Home Hardening

While wildfire preparation was not a guarantee of protecting homes, in many instances it was the difference between saving a home and losing it to the fire. Homes with good defensible space allowed firefighters to get in close to homes and take extra precautions, and in some cases gave the firefighters a little more time to get to the house. In Omo Ranch, one resident noted that though some

homes with good defensible space survived, there were others with good defensible space that did not.

When looking at photos of homes that survived from the **Structural Damage Assessment**, you can see that firefighters did a lot of work to protect homes that had caught fire, such as cutting out sections of decks, removing burning siding, etc. Several sources also mentioned the issue of road access. If the driveway or road was overgrown and firefighters couldn't get to the house safely, those homes were generally on their own.

## Lessons from home damage:

Most homes were either destroyed or completely unscathed (other than possible smoke damage). The few that suffered minor damage point out building vulnerabilities we may all have. Decks and wooden siding seemed particularly risk-prone. It appears that firefighting actions may have stopped some, if not all of these ignitions.



Photos from the CalFire Structure Damage

# What about Fuel Breaks?

Recent fuel reduction (fuel breaks and fuels treatments in larger areas) had been done around Jenkinson Lake, along Mormon Emigrant Trail, along Highway 50, and in the Strawberry and Caples Creek areas. They did actually help, by providing a place for firefighters to try to control the fire through “backburning” and “burning out” areas ahead of the wildfire. These fuel breaks were not a guarantee of controlling the fire, but they were helpful in many areas, and may well have been the reason Sierra Springs and Pollock Pines were spared.



## Intention vs. Action

We ourselves lost our beloved family cabin near Twin Bridges. All 24 cabins in our tract were destroyed, and its quite possible that nothing we could have done beforehand would have helped. On the other hand, while some cabins in our tract had 30-100 ft of some defensible space with well limbed-up trees (including ours), few if any of these historic cabins were hardened.

We had recently begun the hardening process, having replaced wood shingles with Class A roofing, closed in our eaves with soffits, and having completely cleared vegetation in the first 5 feet next to the cabin. Our intention was to replace all the windows - which were 80 years old, single pane, and even had gaps showing - with tight fitting, double paned, tempered glass windows next summer. Our intention was also to cover our vents with finer mesh (1/16 inch)

screening. Might those things have helped if we had done them this summer instead? We'll never know. It was reported at a recent El Dorado County Fire Safe Council meeting that home hardening may improve home survival by as much as 50%.



August 27, 2021



August 29, 2021

## Flying embers

The CalFire daily briefings often mentioned how far embers were flying, which varied from  $\frac{1}{4}$  to 1 mile or more. These embers started many “spot fires” outside the perimeter of the main fire, and caused fire expansion, such as across Highway 50 at Kyburz.

As one example of the danger of embers to homes, evacuees returned to a home near Sierra Springs, a half mile or so from the Caldor perimeter, to find the forest and neighborhood seemingly unaffected - until finding a dozen charred holes on their deck where embers had fallen.



Ember Char on deck. Returning evacuees were thankful that pine needles were recently removed and that their deck was clear of anything flammable.

## Fire hydrants

Fire hydrants and other water sources proved very valuable in many areas, but again were not a guarantee of protection. There is one instance where the Grizzly Flats school ( a wooden house-type building) was destroyed, but four nearby homes, with good defensible space and a fire hydrant in front, survived.

## Caldor Fire Behavior

Fire behavior varies in intensity and speed, so even preparation can not help in some instances. The rate of spread of the Caldor Fire varied significantly between areas.



In at least 2 instances, the greatest loss of homes and structures were in areas where the wildfire advanced so quickly that firefighters were unable to do adequate structural protection. In one such Grizzly Flats area, fire crews had to move away from the fire front for their own safety and come back in after the fire had passed, then work to save those houses that were not fully consumed in flames. (Note: this may have lead to the false online rumor that firefighters were told to “stand down” early on by authorities. Firefighters have assured us that the goal from minute 1 and throughout was full suppression!)

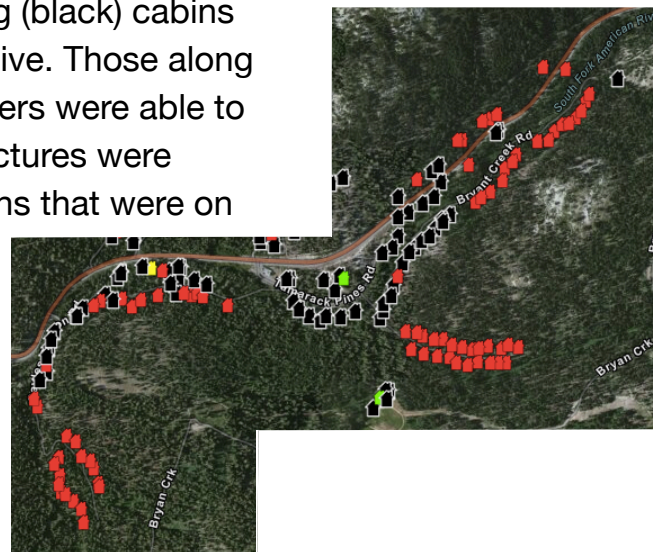
Researchers and fire managers are repeatedly finding that wildfires in recent years have become much more unpredictable and are getting harder to fight. Climate change is one reason (droughts, less predictable weather patterns, longer warm seasons) and the

history of fire suppression is another. The Caldor Fire was only the second fire in California history to extend cross the Sierra Nevada and the Dixie Fire was the first, just one month earlier!

Because of the Dixie Fire and others across California, fire fighters and other resources were stretched at the beginning of the Caldor Fire, which made early firefighting a particular challenge.

## The Risk of 1-way roads?

This map of destroyed (red) and surviving (black) cabins and homes along Hwy 50 is very instructive. Those along the main Hwy 50 corridor, where firefighters were able to safely and more easily work to save structures were sometimes the ones that survived. Cabins that were on one-way roads leading away from the highway, or ones with difficult access, were generally the ones that were destroyed.



## More wildlife here now?

Has anyone else noticed that there seem to be more wildlife here since the fire? We've seen two mountain lions on Newtown Rd, a bear close to Oak Hill Rd, coyotes, foxes, opossums- all in one week. These animals need space and our respect, but Calif. Fish and Wildlife asks that we please don't feed them. Did you know that feeding deer in particular is illegal?

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## Burn Severity Varied Greatly Across the Fire

The burn intensity of the Caldor wildfire also varied greatly across the area of the fire. Though many areas, such as much of Grizzly Flats, suffered very hot, intense fire, many other areas of the fire footprint were unburnt or only very lightly burned. For soil burn severity map, visit the [USFS InciWeb website](#).

Those areas with light surface fires are actually what our forests and woodlands are adapted to, and even need to remain healthy. We need to keep working to live with inevitable wildfires. By hardening our homes and creating and maintaining defensible space, we can reduce the destruction. By supporting prescribed burning and forest fuel reduction projects, we can reduce the area that burns intensely. By still maintaining wildlife-friendly habitats – with patchy areas of understory and brush - we can help erosion control, wildlife, and healthy landscapes.

## Smoke

Smoke from the Caldor Fire affected us all for weeks. Many of us were glued to the free “purple air” website to see whether our outdoor air was safe enough to



venture outside. Mornings it generally was not, but afternoons were often okay. For a few days it was so intense that it was really better to have an air purifier on (or fan with taped on filter) nonstop inside. If you missed the link to that site: [purple air](#). Its good to add the “woodsmoke” filter for more accurate results, and to note that sensors with black circles are actually showing indoor air, whereas the sensors that just show a color are showing outdoor air. The nearest sensor to most of us is at Oak Hill Rd and Pleasant Valley Rd (shown as “Peace Trail”, near “Tiger Lily” on the map).

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## Some Terms we Heard and Learned

**Direct Attack:** Firefighting operations are at the fire’s active edge. Generally involves extinguishing the fire (such as by wetting, smothering, or chemically quenching the fire) or by physically separating burning from unburned fuel such as by constructing a control line.

**Indirect Attack:** When firefighters construct control line that is located some distance away from the fire's active edge. Generally done in the case of a fast-spreading or high-intensity fire and or when topographic conditions are unsafe for firefighters.

**Backburn:** Also known as a "controlled burn," is a tactic mostly used with indirect attack, by intentionally setting fire to fuels inside the control line in order to remove fuel from the advancing fire. It is most easily done where understory is not dense.

**Passive vs Active Crown Fire:** A crown fire occurs where surface fire passes up through understory and is close and intense enough to ignite tree crowns, individually or in groups. Crown fires can be passive, where winds and lower fuels are not sufficient to support propagation from tree to tree, and the fire drops back down to the ground as a more manageable surface fire. In contrast, active crown fires occur where fuel is more continuous from surface to crown, and fire spreads easily from tree to tree and across the surface as an intense flame front.

**Control vs Containment:** A control line is an inclusive term for all constructed or natural barriers and treated fire edges used to control a fire. Containment is a measure of when a section of the fire line can reasonably be expected to stop the fire's spread. Containment is often reported as a percentage of the entire fire perimeter.



The Caldor Fire brought wildfire to our doorstep. We ache for our county neighbors who lost their homes, and deeply thank the many firefighters and support team members who helped control the fire. Hopefully we here in the Oak Hill Area can learn from the Caldor Fire and will continue to make our own community as **“fire-resilient”** as possible.

Sincerely,

Lester Lubetkin, Chair, and  
Alice Cantelow, Defensible Space/Hardening  
Homes Chair

*and The Oak Hill Area  
Fire Safe Council Team*

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Lupine resprouting through  
Caldor Fire ashes, one week later

P.S. The El Dorado County Fire Safe Council (our umbrella organization) anticipates that their free Chipping program will start up again in November. Stay tuned!