

PREPARATION FOR THE BIG FIRE

We all know that we live in a wooded neighborhood bordering on a large area of public land, with an enormous amount of dead wood, brush and other flammable material accumulated over many years, and that there is a substantial risk of a disastrous fire in the Woodlands. But for many of us, preparation for such A DISASTER IS LOW ON OUR PRIORITY LIST, IF THERE AT ALL. There are just too many things to do right now.

But as you consider your priorities, think about this, from the Kentfield Fire Department's web site (www.kentfieldfire.org):



“Marin is built on one of the most fire prone landscapes on earth ... and firefighting professionals predict that many neighborhoods have little chance of surviving a major fire.”

And this, from the Get Ready Marin website (www.getreadymarin.org):

*“Fires spread rapidly (nearly 800 homes burned in the first hour of the Oakland Hills fire).”
And many were injured and 25 died in that fire.*

We have more than enough fuel for a really big one; there are 569 houses here and, unlike the situation in the Oakland Hills, there is only one road out: Woodland Road. All we need is one of those occasional hot days, a strong, dry wind, and what starts out as a very small fire – maybe from a cigarette or a smoldering (illegal) campfire in the Water District/Tam area – and the best fire departments in the world will not be able to control it. Don't bet your life and those of your children, your family, on next year.

OK, since those lives are our highest priority, we should prepare for the big fire. But some of us have another problem in getting started. The Get Ready Marin booklet (the Booklet) is an excellent disaster preparedness guide. But it is more than a bit daunting. It covers fire, earthquake, flooding, in almost 50 pages of advice.

There is no simple solution to that problem. But what you can do is to start by focusing just on the big fire, and preparing for it. Just take it step by step, bite by bite, week by week – get your family involved – the “too busy” spouse, the kids – give them more responsibility as they get older – join with a friend or neighbor or two or more to make some of it easier and better coordinated. It can be done. Just get started.

To help you do that, we have put together a summary of things to do in that preparation, principally by pulling together the relevant parts of the Booklet in a more manageable way, and focusing on the Woodlands. Like the Booklet, the memo provides suggestions, but cannot address every circumstance involving your particular property and family (e.g., special needs of infants, preschoolers, the infirm). And it does not address other fire safety matters covered in the Booklet, including those relating to making your house and property more fire safe.

– KWPOA Fire Safety Committee

What to Have on Hand

Let's start with the easiest part – just things to buy and where to put them. You've already done much of this.

- **Smoke detectors** – one in each bedroom area, where they can be heard at night, even with the bedroom door closed, and one on each story.
- **Fire extinguishers** (2-A; 10-B: C rated) – in kitchen and garage. Make sure entire family knows where they are and how to use them.
- **Emergency battery or crank operated radio** - one handy in the house, another for car(s). Set radio to emergency station (KCBS740, KGO810, 1610AM).
- **Flashlights** – one by each bed, one in car(s).
- **Cotton bandanas and goggles** for each family member, for smoke protection – in car(s).
- **Small first aid kit** – in car(s).
- **Light backpack** to hold radio, flashlight, bandanas, goggles, first aid kit, some cash (ATMs may be out) – in car(s). You may not be home when disaster strikes. If a family member may be home without car access, have additional pack at home with those supplies.
- **A butterfly wrench** - close to your gas shutoff valve. Learn how to shut gas off and teach family members, as appropriate. If valve is stuck, call PG&E.
- **Carrying case, cage or leash for pet(s)** – in a handy place.
- Since house phones may be out, consider getting a **non-electric style phone** - plug into wall.
- If your house has more than one story, **an escape ladder** – in an upstairs closet.

Keep Important Information Safe

This part is not hard either – just lists, names and locations, and where to keep the information. You may have only 10 minutes to get away – a wildfire can move faster than you can run.

- Make a list of **things to take with you** that you can carry out (e.g., jewelry, financial records, cell phone, charger, checkbook, extra cash, meds, family photos, safe deposit key, computer drives and disks), keeping in mind that you may have to bike or walk out – no grand pianos. Keep list in handy place(s), known to all of the family. Ask children what few items they would like to take. (A swimming pool might be a good place to leave some items, such as silver).
- Make a list of **insurance policy, bank and other account numbers** and important personal, financial and business phone numbers, and keep it with the 10 minute list and a safe place away from home.
- Keep a **list of emergency phone numbers** by or in your phones and purse/wallet (e.g., Sheriff 499-7234 (or 2311); Kentfield Fire Dept. 453-7464, Red Cross 721-2365; PG&E (800) 743-5000; CALTrans Highway Conditions 800-427-7623; Marin Humane Society 883-4621; doctors).
- **Identify a contact person** at least 200 miles from your home, since local phone lines may be jammed or inoperative. Keep the name and number in your purse/wallet, and advise contact, family and friends. Make sure your children have that name and number in their school pack and at home, and that they know why they have them.
- Identify a **neighbor** for children to go to in case of a more limited fire.
- Identify one or more **reunion locations** in case family members are in different places when disaster strikes. Include the location(s) with the other information the children have.

Have a Disaster Plan

This part requires work, and more thought. You knew it wouldn't be that easy.

- Explore **alternative roads** from your property to Woodland Road, and alternative bike and walking trails and routes (including neighbors' property) out of the Woodlands in the event it's not possible to get out by car. The shortest route may not be the safest – or even passable, and the fire roads off Crown and Evergreen can't be used by car. View alternate roads at www.kwpoa.com . Consult with neighbors.
- Know your children's **school disaster plan** and hold/release policy. Comply with the school's "comfort kit" request. Consider authorizing one or more persons to pick up your children, and advising children to go to a nearby police or fire station or other location if stranded.
- Find at least **two escape routes** from each bedroom and from your house.
- For insurance purposes, **take pictures** of the exterior and interior of your house and its contents, and make an inventory, with purchase information, where practicable.
- **Store insurance photos** (or CDs) and inventory, and important documents in one or more safe places away from home (e.g., safe deposit box, attorney, friend, work place).
- Consider possible **places to stay temporarily** if you can't go back to your house –friend, family member, motel, Red Cross shelter – and how you would get there if not in your car.

Practice Your Escape

This last part involves periodic activities, which should be scheduled – a bore, but critical.

- Conduct family **fire drills** at least twice a year. During those drills, review procedures, persons and places decided on, as well as additional actions to be taken if there is smoke or fire in the house. View www.kwpoa.com (p.19 of the Booklet) for those additional actions.
- **Bike or walk the escape routes** with the children. Educate them on what to do if they are with you, in school or at home alone (you may not be able or permitted to drive into the Woodlands to get them). Make a game of it on a Saturday morning.
- Practice and knowledge bring confidence as well as increased safety – for all of the family.
- Other periodic routines:
 - **Check smoke** detectors monthly. Replace batteries at least once a year and detectors in ten.
 - **Check fire extinguishers** at least once a year.
 - **Check flashlight and radio batteries** periodically.
 - **Update** inventory, important documents, names and numbers, etc. periodically.

The Real Thing

If you have gotten yourselves ready for the real thing, take a bow. Now you don't have to do anything except follow up on the periodic stuff, hope it doesn't happen, and think about what you will have to do if it does. But you are prepared, and will be able to act quickly and calmly.

If you need to get out because you smell smoke or see flames in your house or because the smoke detector alerts you to a fire, follow the exit procedures decided upon, and, if necessary, take the additional actions noted above in getting out.

In the event of the big fire, you will probably learn of it through seeing smoke or fire in the distance, hearing the sound of fire engines or the Kentfield fire house siren, or listening to the County's automated

telephone warning system phone message. You may be ordered out by fire personnel or sheriff's deputies or you may have to make your own decision.

In either case, act promptly (when in doubt, get out), and consider the following in getting out:

- Turn on your **emergency radio** for information.
- **Put on** wool or cotton pants, a long sleeved shirt and sturdy shoes.
- **Confine pet(s)** – cage, leash, car.
- Using your 10 minute checklist, **gather up what is on the list**, and, if not on the list, radio, rings, glasses, wallet, purse, keys, account and phone list, and maybe this memo.
- If there is time, **close hall doors and windows**, pull down drapes and curtains and close blinds.
- **Turn off gas valve** if you hear or smell gas. Don't try to turn it back on by yourself.
- **Contact and help neighbors** needing assistance.
- **Decide whether you can get out by car** and, if you can, which alternative route to take, using available information, including what you see and smell. Put 10 minute list items, radio and other items noted above, plus pet(s), in the car and get out.
- **If you have to abandon the car** on the way out of the Woodlands, take your pack and items noted below with you, and park off the road to allow emergency vehicles to get by.
- **If you decide you have to bike or walk out** from your property, determine which alternative route to take. Put what you can of 10 minute list and other items noted above in your pack and your pockets, along with flashlight, first aid kit, bandana and goggles already in the pack, and move out – with confined pet(s). Children home alone should leave with the pack stored there.
- **Keep phone use to a minimum** to permit emergency calls. Do not use 911 if you know the Fire Department has been alerted unless there is a life threatening emergency. Be prepared for the possibility that phones won't work. Text messaging might be an alternative.
- **When you are out of danger:**
 - If all of the family is not together, **head for the reunion location**, paying attention to access and other possible problems.
 - Decide whether to **pick up children** in school (or have them picked up by your designee), or to leave them there. Depending on the situation, they could be safer and feel more secure there.
 - If you can't return to your house, **decide where you will stay** temporarily, again taking into consideration access and other possible problems.
 - Contact the **contact person**.

Additional Information

As noted at the outset, the Booklet also deals with fire safety matters in addition to what has been covered here. They include house construction and maintenance, vegetation management and fire insurance policy coverage (pages 24, 36-37), and should be read and acted on. It also deals with other disasters that might strike us in the Woodlands, most notably, an earthquake.

Some of what has been covered here will also be of help in the event of an earthquake. But a quake may affect a much larger area, shut down roads, utilities and markets, overwhelm public services and create other problems for some days, requiring us, whether at home, in our car or at work, to survive for days on the food, water, and other supplies and equipment we have stored. Again, we urge you to read the Booklet, and to get prepared.

The Booklet, as well as additional information on disaster preparedness, including programs and classes, is available through the first two websites noted earlier, the Kentfield Fire Department and the KWPOA office.