

TAKING WILDFIRE PREVENTION TO A NEW LEVEL

A new organization has been formed that promises to take fire safety to a new level in Nevada County. It's called the Coalition of Firewise Communities and is composed of representatives from each of our Firewise Communities that have been working hard in their neighborhoods to promote safe practices in a dangerous wildfire environment. As part of a well-respected national movement, the Firewise Communities are trained and supported by the Fire Safe Council of Nevada County.

With a seat at the table in our Coalition, all the Firewise Communities can now speak with a unified, independent voice to tackle the common fire safety problems that cut across the entire county. This Coalition, growing in leaps and bounds, is currently made up of forty-five Firewise Communities. Some are big such as Alta Sierra and Lake of the Pines, and some are small such as road associations and tiny neighborhoods tucked away in the trees. Nevertheless, their total geographical footprint is huge, encompassing nearly 50,000 people. That's nearly half the population of Nevada County!

Our initial Coalition meetings tell us that we have much in common even though our groups are spread over a wide region. We are reminded of the recent horrific fires in Napa County and Southern California, as well as those closer to home. These events give us renewed focus on early warning systems, safe access, property clearance, getting emergency help, tapping into local resources, and this is just the beginning. The dangerous interface between people and wildlands is getting the best of us. Even a record-breaking rain year did not stop California from having a record-breaking fire year! We agree that it can no longer be business as usual, and we need to try new things involving new players who see that fire is everyone's fight, not just the work of the fire departments and organizations such as the Fire Safe Council.

The Coalition has started to take on some challenging issues. We are determined to improve evacuation protocols and emergency warning systems so that people can get out of their residences safely and efficiently, reducing the risk of entrapment and death. We are working to improve property clearance laws and ordinances to include more robust inspection, follow-through, and enforcement, and we are starting with appeals to State government. We are working to partner with the real estate interests in Nevada County to upgrade client information about defensible space requirements prior to the close of a transaction, eliminating the gaps in knowledge that can leave people vulnerable in a changing wildfire environment.

Speaking with a forceful voice, the Coalition of Firewise Communities recognizes that we must make fire safety a priority and bring together the whole community around the idea of beating back the serious fire threat. We will never be completely safe, but we can take immediate steps to become a lot safer.

Kent Rees, Chair
Coalition of Firewise Communities