

Summer, Weeds, and Defensible Space - A Very Short Story

Well, here we are again on the verge of Summer! We are all watching the hills that have been so wonderfully green work their way into brown. You have all probably read and heard me talk about weed abatement and defensible space before. All of you who have lived in Valley Center for a while, you know what needs to be done!

Today, though, I want to tell you a little story... About the Miller Fire, which happened back in October of 2019. First, I'll set the scene: It was one of those warm windy October days, where you can feel the crackle in the air, and your brain says "hmmm..... Santa Ana...". For those of us in the fire service, it was a day where we all turn the volume up a notch on our radios, knowing that there is a 'potential'... And that if something does break, seconds will really count. We've checked our PPE (y'all know what that acronym means now!) a dozen times... Everyone looks out at the flags snapping in front of the station and we all feel that 'itch'.

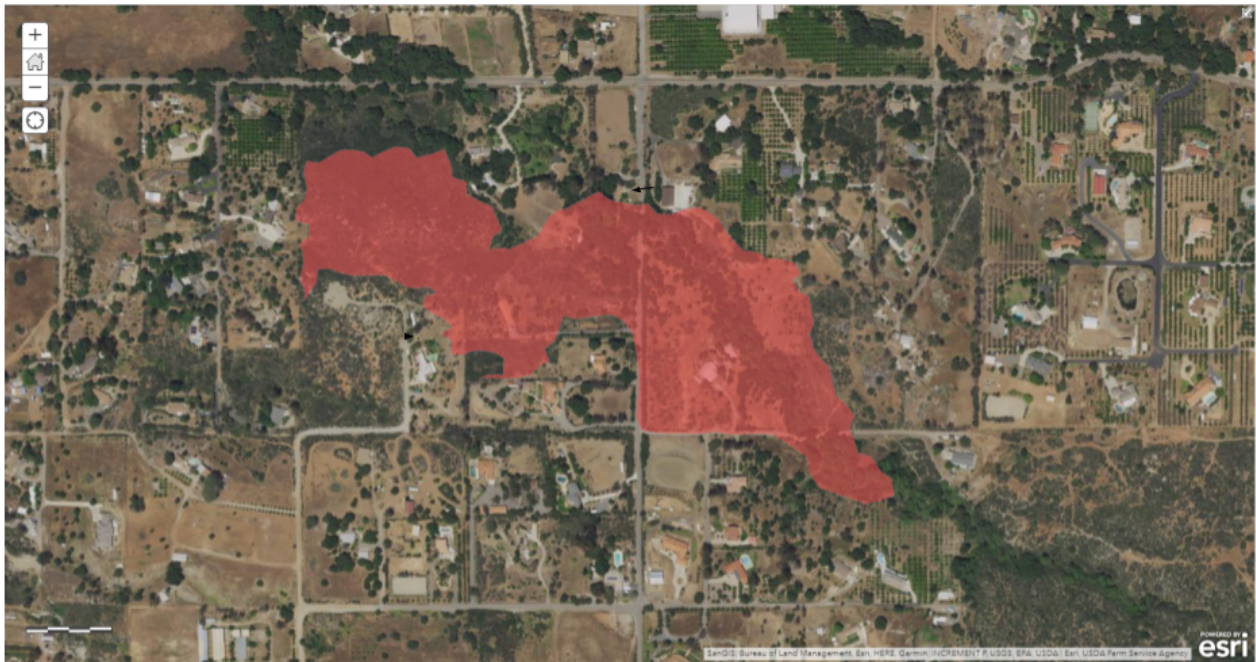
And so it begins. 9:20 AM. Fire in Ramona. The Sawday Fire, on the Sawday Truck Trail. Our water tender is dispatched down there. Fortunately, the line holds under 100 acres. The winds soften in Ramona, and just as they call off the last fixed wing aircraft, a call comes in from Valley Center. The wind is still blowing pretty hard up here and the fire is moving rapidly. I remember hearing Air-Tac, saying "I'm heading up there, I can see the header". There were still tankers in the air for the Sawday, so we had aircraft working our fire very quickly. I'm sure you remember the pictures of the pink houses.



By the time I worked my way back up to Valley Center, there were fire resources all over the place. The winds had died down a little and very shortly the “forward rate of spread” of the fire was stopped. Ultimately it was 37 acres, with a few out-buildings destroyed and one home damaged. Great work by your Fire Department, our allied agencies and of course CAL FIRE. A good outcome.



Now, this is the part I wanted to emphasize with you. Take a look at the outline of the fire. You can see there are some well defined edges (the straight lines) on the fire perimeter. Yep, those correspond to roads. But, they also correspond to properties where the owners had done their defensible space clearing! Those properties gave our firefighters a cushion, and acted as fire breaks to help contain the fire. How do you fight a wildland fire? By removing the fuel in it's path so the spread stops. But that process takes time and manpower. These folks had already done a great deal of the work for us! A fire like that could, with the right wind and fuel conditions, run all the way to the beach. We had luck that the wind subsided a little, but we also had those defensible space properties in position to help us.



It's a well known chestnut that defensible space can help protect your home. But, what isn't so well known is that defensible space acts as a sort of "herd immunity" (see what I did there?) and helps to protect an entire community. Every property that is already cleared is a strong line that is already in place and frees our limited resources to work somewhere else.

Here's where I get back on my soapbox! Let's get that mowing done! Let's clear those piles of wood and cut back that brush from the property lines, roads and driveways. Let's get rid of that stack of old plywood that you've been meaning to throw in the dumpster! Anything that we can do together now is something that can make a huge difference when the next fire starts...

We can help you! Please give our office a call: 760-751-7600 and set up a Courtesy Inspection. We will come out to your home, free of charge, and tell you exactly what needs to be done to make your property as safe as possible from wildfire!

Jim Davidson
Fire Marshal / Battalion Chief
Valley Center Fire Protection District