

Is THIS the Year Oracle Burns? Newsletter May 2011 All Conditions Extreme!

In 2002 & 2003, Arizona had some of the biggest fires in its history. Oracle was in the path of some of these fires. The Bullock Fire of 2002 (which started south of San Manuel and ran up the north slope of the Catalina Mountains to the Mt. Lemmon Fire Department, burning 30,563 acres) led to the Oracle Hill Fire. The Rodeo-Chedeski Fire followed in northern Arizona, taking about 400 homes and charring 468,638 acres. The next year, the Aspen Fire burned 84,750 acres of the Catalina Mountains, including the town of Summerhaven, in which 340 homes and businesses were destroyed.

On July 12th, 2002, lightning started The Oracle Hill Fire in the Coronado National Forest just south of Oracle, coming within a quarter mile of Oracle residences and burning 2,432 acres. Several agencies arrived to help keep the fire at bay. Slurry planes flew "right over our heads!" out of the area fire trucks lined up as far down American Ave. as the eye could see; the plume of smoke would shoot up every day at 1pm; memories are told of packing up the family vehicles to be ready to evacuate, every day adding a few more items to the boxes. The entire town was on edge. People remember going to the Oracle post office to meet CNF staff to inquire about the latest fire conditions. Oracle even had some people who were evacuated. The worst was that Oracle was slated to be the next "Summerhaven" – meaning we would burn down!

Next time will we be so lucky?

Current conditions in Oracle and surrounding areas are severe. Above average precipitation was received in 2010, which allowed for abundant growth and continuity of grasses. The hard freeze in early February compounded the situation by further stressing the majority of the oaks along the 4,000 to 6,000 foot elevations. This has resulted in some of the lowest moisture levels ever in local trees and vegetation, which, in turn, increases the intensity of a potential burn. These extreme conditions have started at least one month earlier than usual and consequently will last longer. Conditions will continue to deteriorate as we start into the hottest months of the year, with near-record low humidity levels and no relief in sight until the monsoons. – (*paraphrased from the May 2011 Fuels Advisory for the Coronado National Forest (CNF), Frost Damaged Oaks and Continued Drought*)

What has the Oracle Fire Department done since then?

- Established and maintain the brush disposal site for Oracle residents. Now open 7 days a week, 7am – 5pm. For \$3.00 per load, this is a convenient way of disposing of brush collected around your property. Proceeds are used to maintain and improve the site as well as to benefit the community.

- Auto-dialer (reverse 911). This allows OFD to notify Oracle residents of emergencies or evacuations.
- Mutual Aid agreements with other fire departments and agencies
- Improved communications and dispatching capabilities.
- Improved Fire Department equipment, resources and facilities
- Expanded staffing and training
- Obtained several fire prevention grants
- Created public education, outreach and awareness
- Obtained FEMA grant (one of only 30 awarded in the country) for purchase of Kid's Safety House
- Created Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)
- Initiated an 18-mile-long fuel break surrounding most of Oracle
- Established nationally-recognized Firewise Communities Board
- Trained the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) for additional support
- Conducted neighborhood and community fire awareness meetings
- Acted as liaison between The Arizona State Forester's Office and property owners to clear properties and protect structures.
- Conducted property evaluations to assist owners in becoming more firewise
- Improved Oracle town map to include fire hydrants. Map now located on the OFD website
- Established OFD website (www.oraclefire.org)
- Installed weather station and webcam (for up-to-the-minute weather conditions)
- Improved ISO rating for Oracle homeowner's insurance
- Increased community relations with public events such as Thanksgiving dinner and others
- Provided electronic message board for fire prevention and community communications

So what can you do?

- Thin or clear vegetation on your property; establishing at least a 30 foot safe

zone around your home and structures, keeping it well irrigated

- Dispose of excess brush and leaves at the brush dump (leaves can be composted for free)
- Clean gutters, and move firewood and propane tanks away from home
- Encourage your neighbors to become Firewise
- Check your property evaluation on the OFD website and talk to Fire Dept. personnel to discuss what it means and how to improve
- Ensure your driveway is accessible to large emergency vehicles
- Place street numbers (preferably reflective) in a highly visible place at the entrance to your driveway
- Ensure OFD has your current phone contacts on the auto-dialer
- Prepare a family emergency evacuation plan, including all pets or animals
- Call 911 at the first sight or smell of smoke or fire!
- Check OFD website frequently, www.oraclefire.org, for additional information and updates