



Veteran Firefighter Uses Mitigation to Protect His Home

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

San Diego County, California



Fallbrook, CA - As a veteran firefighter, Gary Bottenfield understands the nature of fires and knows how to be prepared. Bottenfield has lived in Fallbrook for 32 years with his wife, Lana, where they have survived three major fires.

On Monday, October 22, 2007, a devastating wildfire started in Rice Canyon in the San Diego area. The Rice Fire burned 9,472 acres between October 22 and October 29, 2007, in and around the northwestern San Diego County unincorporated community of Fallbrook. More than 200 structures were damaged in this fire, according to CAL FIRE, the state fire agency.

As the Rice Fire made its way toward Interstate 15 and jumped across Pala Mesa Resort Golf Course, the Bottenfields knew their house was in great danger. They received the reverse 911 call on Monday afternoon and took shelter at their daughter's home in Temecula. Even though it was painful to leave their home, as law-abiding citizens they understood the importance of listening to the authorities and following mandatory evacuation orders.

When Bottenfield returned home on Wednesday afternoon, he found the house intact even though his next door neighbor's house and two other homes within view were completely gone. He later learned that once his neighbor realized his home was already a total loss, he worked relentlessly with the firefighters to keep the flames from getting any further.

When asked why he believed his house survived the Rice Fire, Bottenfield replied: "The fact that I mowed my weeds saved my house. One of my neighbors and I share a mower and we tear the blades up every year." Said Bottenfield, "We make sure we always mow everything down to the dirt."

Something as simple as mowing the weeds was a lifesaver for the Bottenfields; but that is not the only mitigation safety measure they have. Their 2,677-square-foot stucco home has a concrete tile roof, boxed stucco eaves, fire sprinklers inside the house and attic, smoke detectors in virtually every room, double-pane glass windows, and a carefully planned defensible space on the 2.7-acre home site.

Defensible space does not necessarily imply cutting down all trees and shrubs, or creating a bare ring of earth across the property, according to the general guidelines from the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE).

A defensible space around a home provides firefighters with enough space to work and also prevents fire from transferring from one fuel source to another. It can be created by removing dead vegetation, separating fuels, and pruning lower limbs of trees. Bottenfield has done all those things in addition to planting red apple ice plants along the edges of his property, which is known for its fire retardant capabilities.

As a retired firefighter, Bottenfield is a firm believer in smoke alarms: "I have seen smoke alarms save lives. They are the cheapest investment you can make, and you can never have too many." said Bottenfield, "Sleeping with your bedroom door closed also could save your life; it will keep the smoke out and keep the fire from spreading too quickly."

The Bottenfields said they learned a lot during the evacuation and will be more prepared next time. They were able to devise a plan based on their observations of what happened and how they reacted to the situation. Lana Bottenfield will focus on taking family photos and irreplaceable things while her husband will focus on important documents. Together they make a great team. They also keep a four month supply of canned goods and water in the house for emergencies.

The cost for using boxed stucco eaves instead of the regular wood ones that were in the original construction plans was approximately \$1,500 extra. The cost for having sprinklers installed inside the house was \$3,500. Money well-spent, according to Bottenfield. The replacement value of his home has almost doubled from the \$350,000 he spent years ago, so Bottenfield was happy to spend a little extra to make his home safer and stronger.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region IX**

State: **California**

County: **San Diego County**

City/Community: **Fallbrook**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**

Hazard Type: **Fire; Wildfire**

Activity/Project Type: **Building Codes; Vegetation Management**

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/1998**

Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**

Funding Source: **Homeowner**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$5,000.00 (Estimated)**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **No**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **1731 , 10/24/2007**

Repetitive Loss Property? **No**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/>

Reference URL 2: http://www.fema.gov/hazard/wildfire/wf_prepare.shtm

Main Points

- As a veteran firefighter, Gary Bottenfield understands the nature of fires and knows how to be prepared.
- After being evacuated during the 2007 California wildfires, Bottenfield returned home on Wednesday afternoon to find his house intact even though his next door neighbor's house and two other homes within view were completely gone.
- Something as simple as mowing the weeds was a lifesaver for the Bottenfields; but other mitigation measures include: a concrete tile roof, boxed stucco eaves, fire sprinklers inside the house and attic, smoke detectors in virtually every room, double-pane glass windows, and a carefully planned defensible space on the 2.7-acre home site.
- The cost for using boxed stucco eaves instead of the regular wood ones that were in the original construction plans was approximately \$1,500 extra.
- The cost for having sprinklers installed inside the house was \$3,500.
- The replacement value of his home has almost doubled from the \$350,000 he spent years ago, so Bottenfield was happy to spend a little extra to make his home safer and stronger.



Where neighbor's home used to be



Fire alarm and boxed eaves



Defensible space in back yard



Gary Bottenfield stands in front of his stucco home