

# No Backing Down

## **Even after a historic wildfire, residents in one Santa Rosa neighborhood continue to embrace the value of the Firewise USA program**

There's no single or correct way to handle the aftermath of a devastating wildfire, and until it happens, it's impossible to know how any individual or community might respond. With that said, the response of residents in Fountaingrove II, a neighborhood in Santa Rosa, California, that was decimated by last year's Tubbs Fire, provides a great example of resiliency and community rebuilding.

The Tubbs Fire could not have encountered a more prepared community. Fountaingrove II had been a Firewise USA® site since 2009, committed to the principles of community-wide wildfire preparation and hazard mitigation. In addition to Firewise, Fountaingrove II has a group called the Open Space Maintenance Association, which helps coordinate and execute the neighborhood's yearly vegetation reduction and resident education efforts. Dennis Searles, the community's Firewise program leader, recently told me that the community joined Firewise to bring even more definition to the neighborhood's wildfire mitigation efforts and to keep residents motivated.

All the work seemed to be paying off. Both the Santa Rosa Fire Department and Cal Fire have considered Fountaingrove II a role model for its vegetation reduction and mitigation efforts.

In any other fire, these preparations might have been sufficient. But the Tubbs Fire, pushed by near hurricane-force winds, was no ordinary fire—its speed and scope ruined even the best-laid plans. The fire destroyed more than 470 homes in the community, including the homes of three of Fountaingrove II's Firewise board members. There was a small silver lining to the devastating outcome: In its annual report, published after the fire, Fountaingrove's maintenance association found that the community's mitigation efforts had performed well in areas where the fire acted as predicted.

Searles and his fellow residents have not been deterred, and they don't consider their pre-fire efforts a failure. Searles told me that, while they were sheltering in a hotel during the fire, a fellow Fountaingrove resident approached him to reiterate that the

work the community did prior to Tubbs wasn't wasted—they had, after all, successfully kept the wildfire risk at bay for a decade.

In that vein, just a month after the fire, the community chose to hold its annual Firewise Day of safety education, and continued its active status in NFPA's national recognition program. While residents were naturally in a state of shock following Tubbs, Searles said, most people felt that the Firewise program would be critical going forward to provide residents guidance on rebuilding and repairing homes in ways that will leave them less vulnerable to the next wildfire. By keeping the Firewise committee in place, community leaders have a platform to encourage metal roofs, exterior preparedness, native vegetation, nonflammable fencing, and a reduction of vegetation used as privacy fencing.

That's especially important in Santa Rosa, where city officials have made few changes to building regulations post-fire, leaving it up to homeowners to educate themselves and make choices about how to rebuild in this fire-prone area, Searles told me.

After such widespread loss, some may wonder why residents would want to rebuild in an area with such a high and proven wildfire risk. The simple answer, Searles said, is that despite the challenges of rebuilding—too few builders to meet demand, costs rising above insurance payouts, and more—residents are connected to the region and its beautiful landscape and don't want to leave. As they plan their futures, it's a strong lesson for others to see that the residents of one fire-ravaged neighborhood in Santa Rosa continue to embrace the value of the Firewise USA Program.

LUCIAN DEATON is project manager in NFPA's Wildland Fire Operations Division. Top Illustration: Michael Hoewele"