Community forum about Gladding Fire draws crowd

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By Liz Kellar



Ashley Baer
The Gladding fire destroyed several homes on Labor
Day

area with Harris.

A forum on the Labor Day Gladding fire that burned nearly 1,000 acres and destroyed several homes sparked a wide-ranging discussion among Lincoln residents, some of whom want to start neighborhood groups to expedite evacuations in the event of another fire.

A panel including Cal Fire Chief Brad Harris, Rui Cunha of the Placer County Office of Emergency Services, and representatives from the county Sheriff's Department, Animal Services Division, Environmental Health Division and Public Information Office; California Highway Patrol; Red Cross; and the Lincoln Hills Community Emergency Response Team gave presentations and answered questions from the crowd of approximately 150 residents at Mount Pleasant Hall Sept. 25.

"The best opportunity to protect ourselves is to do it ourselves, before fires start," Placer County Supervisor Robert Weygandt told the audience; Weygandt is a resident of rural Lincoln and spent much of the day of the fire touring the

Harris gave an overview of the Labor Day fire, explaining that the fire was fanned by temperatures that topped 92 degrees, wind gusts of as much as 31 mph and extremely low humidity.

He added that the cause of the fire still is under investigation.

The blaze involved 563 personnel and cost an estimated \$1.2 million to fight, Harris said. Losses in property alone have been estimated at approximately \$185,000. That figure does not include hay, fencing, pasture or infrastructure such as damage to roadways such as burned guardrails.

"We had a real problem with spot fires," Harris said, adding that highly flammable blackberry bushes along the riparian corridors were an issue.

"Had this crossed the Auburn Ravine and Highway 193, we were going to be fighting this fire in the city of Auburn," he said. "That was the potential of this fire ... Overall, the suppression went very well, given the conditions that we had."

The discussion moved into the specifics of the fire and the various agencies coordinating the firefighting and evacuation of people and animals.

A "reverse 911" emergency notification system was put into place at approximately 5 p.m. the day of the fire, notifying residents within three miles of Clark Tunnel Road and Highway 193.

Some residents commented – and the county agreed – that the notification system could have been started earlier.

"In the early stages of a fire, we're trying to organize chaos," Harris reminded the audience.

Another area of frustration was the lack of readily accessible information, a situation exacerbated by the fast-moving and erratic fire.

Some residents discussed starting neighborhood groups with fire captains to help expedite evacuations and improve communication in the future. County Animal Control Officer Joe Sepra told the audience that he is currently putting together a county animal response team so that pets and livestock rescue could be streamlined.

"A lot of people came to help ... but we don't want to put people in harm's way, we have to keep the roads clear," he said.

Members of the new team will have placards on their horse trailers that will allow them access through road closures, he explained.

Weygandt said he hoped the rural Municipal Advisory Councils would help organize the community resources.

" I was real pleased, we accomplished what I was hoping for," he said Friday afternoon. "We communicated information from the county that would be useful, and we also heard from the community. Hopefully, we'll have the county be better at the response and have the community be more prepared."

Weygandt, whose own home was in the path of the fire, said he was taken by surprise at the extent and speed of the blaze.

"This fire definitely changed my perspective on the fire risk inherent in this community," he said. "I've never seen an evacuation before; it was a pretty surrealistic experience in a lot of ways."

Weygandt added that any Lincoln residents with questions regarding the fire can call his office and ask for Jennifer Pereira, at (530) 889-4010.