My Story: A Passion to Be Prepared

Jo Ann Fites-Kaufman, President, Coalition Board of Directors

How long have you lived in Nevada County and where did you grow up?

I've lived in Nevada County for more than 28 years. I moved here from Plumas County, where I grew up.

What was your first experience with wildfire?

When I was young – maybe nine 9 years old? – living in Quincy, I could see the Mount Hough fire out my bedroom window, across the valley. It was scary! My mom told us to pack up a few clothes. I don't remember packing my clothes, but I do remember putting my troll dolls in.

You've had a career as a forest and fire scientist with the U.S. Forest Service. What made you get interested in wildfires?

I always loved the outdoors and forests. I went to college to study forestry and ecology. I started my career with the US Forest Service and was working on the Eldorado National Forest when the 1992 Cleveland fire broke out. Although the fire was more than 24,000 acres, today it would be considered on the smaller size. I was part of the recovery planning team. I had recommended leaving a certain number of dead trees or snags, for wildlife. I was told by Sue Husari, one of my mentors and Regional Fuels Officer (for California) at the time, that I needed to go to a wildfire because I recommended too many snags and it would be dangerous for firefighters. So she got me set up to go to some wildfires with a federal wildfire incident management team.

I went to several fires that first summer on the Tahoe National Forest and spent time shadowing an Operations Section Chief, Planning Section Chief and Fire Behavior Analyst. I caught the fire bug! I found the challenge of trying to predict and understand fire behavior at different fuels fascinating. I liked the camaraderie of all the different people with varied jobs on the fires.

Then my mentor said that someone needed to figure out a way to measure fire behavior in different fuel treatments so we would know what works best. So I continued to go to wildfires with different teams, gained their trust and built a special Fire Behavior Assessment Team. It was hard, at first, to get funding and permission to go ahead of wildfires to very rapidly measure fuels and set up fire behavior equipment. But we persevered and began to get permission or requested to go to fires across the western U.S., and later the entire country. Our initial focus was on measuring how fire spread through different fuel treatments, like thinning and/or prescribed burning. But we added extreme fire behavior and firefighter safety to our focus early on.

What is your involvement with wildfires now?

Since I retired from the US Forest Service, I have dedicated my time to community wildfire safety and prevention. I have a great passion toward passing on what I learned on wildfires about how fuel reduction treatments really can make a difference in how wildfires burn. Thinning, prescribed burning and grazing really do slow down and lessen the intensity of wildfires. It's hard work but it makes a difference!

I've also been a teacher and really enjoy working with people and educating them on wildfire safety. I've had several "near misses" on wildfires, where I was luck to have survived. All but one happened when I was trying to escape a wildfire. So I know the importance of making roads safe for evacuations.

My first near miss was on the Cottonwood Fire near Loyalton, close to the Nevada border on the Tahoe National Forest. I was driving with an experienced Operations Section Chief on a road away from the fire in a small creek drainage. The fire was half a mile away and moving slowly. Suddenly, it exploded and moved from the drainage next to us to where we were.

We had fire all around us, very intense and scary crown fire! The fire was burning from the ground to the tops of the trees. We were almost out of the fire when we were stopped by a burning log across the road. We had to turn around and drive back through the intense fire. We were very lucky to get out. Once we did, we stopped and got out of truck car and heard the "freight train" – the roar of the fire. That experience motivated me even more to study how fuel treatments can change fire.

Right now, I am leading the new Fire Safe Nevada County Coalition. I just stepped down from the Nevada County Resource Conservation District Board, where I helped establish a prescribed fire program. I still spend a lot of time helping others learn how to use prescribed fire as a fuel reduction tool. But mainly, I am dedicating my time – a lot of time – to helping Firewise Communities and all of our communities be better prepared for wildfires.