Success Story

Is your Firewise Community ready to "Go"?

There's nothing like practice to truly test your community's readiness, especially if your FWC has a large population or multiple emergency exits. Here's how one community tested its readiness.

Lake Wildwood, one of Nevada County's most populous communities, executed a mock – or practice – evacuation that started with planning by the LWW Steering Committee early in 2021. An important step was early inclusion of Nevada County and local responder agencies: Office of Emergency Services, Cal FIRE, the Penn Valley Fire District and the Sheriff.

The following months concentrated on increasing community participation. To make the practice drill both educational and fun, a "Poker Run" was held in June to increase Lake Wildwood residents' familiarity with the community's exit routes and gates. Residents followed a map of the community showing routes and four gates, collecting their poker cards along the way. A fifth informative card was promised to those attending the town hall that evening; those holding the five-card poker hand would win prizes.

At the town hall, responder agencies and FWC leaders gave presentations on topics including fire conditions, emergency awareness, personal preparedness, alerts, emergency situations, and repopulation. The date of the drill, Sept. 17, was revealed at the end of the meeting – but the time of the evacuation was kept secret.

For two weeks before the drill, notifications were sent to all Lake Wildwood residents to ensure they were aware of the upcoming practice evacuation.

Finally, on the day of the drill, Lake Wildwood security staff opened the community's north and east exit gates. Nevada County Office of Emergency Services sent out a CodeRED alert signaling the start of evacuation.

The Nevada County Sheriff's Office, the agency in charge of the evacuation, used Lake Wildwood's security office as the field command post, delegating tasks like evacuation route management, resource allocation and public information. Once evacuated, residents gathered at the old K-Mart in Grass Valley, purposefully located at a distance to get resident to drive far away from the "fire."

Lake Wildwood residents who participated in the mock evacuation found that it encouraged a lot of discussion and social connection about the evacuation experience and what could be done better next time – but it was also fun.

Firewise Community leader Gene Vander Platts, who was in the incident command post during the drill, recalled, "One of the things we learned is that Lake Wildwood has resources that the County was not aware of such as security employees, public works employees, traffic signs that were available to be deployed, and some equipment that could be used for downed trees and stalled cars. We also learned that in the event of a mandatory evacuation, all our people, including security personnel, would be evacuated. Anytime agencies can train together, we will learn something new."

Boxed sidebar:

How to plan a practice evacuation:

- Set a date, define routes to be used and set a rendezvous location.
- Share the plan with local responder agencies: Office of Emergency Services, your local fire department, Cal FIRE, and the Sheriff's Office. If you are located on a major highway, add California Highway Patrol and Caltrans. Engage them in tabletop exercises and planning their roles in the drill. Get commitments of assistance.
- Encourage community members to study all routes. Give them a map. Plan to have them visit each exit route.
- Hold a Firewise town hall featuring presentations by the FWC leads and participating responder agencies.
- Promote the event for two weeks in advance.
- On the day of the event, send the evacuation warning out to all residents. Include the fire's direction so participants can choose the best route as they head for the rendezvous location.
- Meet up at the rendezvous location to discuss what was learned, what went well and what could be done better.