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Fire Races Across Moraga Hillside

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Fighting the fire from above and on the ground Photo Bob Johnson

A wildfire burned five acres of the hillside behind the Rheem Center in Moraga late in the afternoon of Sunday, July 26. Crews from Contra Costa County Fire and Cal Fire came in aid of the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD). The fire was brought under control in an hour.

The cause of the fire was originally considered suspicious; MOFD Battalion Chief Darrell Lee and Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe collaborated in the investigation.

On Friday, July 31, Priebe said that no evidence was found that the fire was caused by human intervention. "A popping sound had been heard," stated Priebe, "but we found no evidence on site of any wrong doing." He added that unless a witness comes forward, the investigation is closed.

The fire spread up the hillside towards multiple structures on Ascot Drive. "We threw a lot of equipment at this fire," said MOFD Fire Marshal Michael Mentink, "We always call for reinforcement at this time of the year when a brush fire starts close to buildings. In some of the area of the hill the

weed abatement had not been completed," he continued, which makes our work more difficult and it reduces our ability to protect structures."

According to Moraga Mayor David Trotter, Lou Fancher's ten-year old son Nicholas Johnson was the first to spot the fire on the middle of the hill behind the Rheem Theatre. He and his mother heard a popping sound, like a fire cracker. "It took me a minute to call 911 when my son told me he saw the smoke," said Fancher, "but the fire had already multiplied by five."

Fancher was so concerned about the speed of the spreading fire that she left her Ascot Drive apartment with her son to watch the efforts of the fire department from the safety of the Rheem Center.

Firefighters continued to watch for hotspots late into the night. "The deployment of forces and the efficiency was very impressive," said Fancher, "we thanked the firemen for all their work."



Photo submitted by Moraga Police Officer Randy Pacheco

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