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Multiple agencies involved in Lamorinda virtual evacuation drill

By Sora O'Doherty



MOFD ran a virtual evacuation drill with the cooperation of local and county agencies on Sept. 30. Photo Sora O'Doherty

The virtual evacuation drill conducted Sept. 30 wasn't just for the benefit of residents, but was also intended to help the many local, county and state government agencies and volunteer groups practice essential skills for handling wildfire emergencies that have the potential to destroy parts of Lamorinda. At 7 a.m. representatives from the Police Departments of Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda; the Moraga-Orinda and Contra Costa County Fire Protection districts, Contra Costa County Community Warning System (CWS), Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and the Lamorinda Area Radio Interest Group (LARIG) gathered in the parking lot of the Lafayette Reservoir. Contra Costa County Regional Fire Communications Center, Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team and the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office Communications Center participated remotely.

Among the purposes of the drill were the goals of practicing how to establish and operate a unified command with law, fire and cooperating agencies in a

large-scale wildfire scenario. In addition to seeing how effectively the community warning system could perform, the drill sought to provide an opportunity for law enforcement to activate the Genasys Protect/EVAC application from the field.

Local governments were involved as well. City and town staffs received a handout of the evacuation information from CWS, and were to practice updating evacuation details, such as arrival points, road closures, etc. Another goal of the exercise was to identify potential areas where communication can be improved between the field, CWS and the Genasys Protect/AWARE website.

Members of Lamorinda CERT and the LARIG sent messages to their members, asking them to radio in and also to respond, had this been an actual emergency, if they would have been available to assist their neighbors to evacuate. CERT sent text messages to 618 trained CERT members. Over 97% of the messages were delivered, and 37.5% of the recipients replied. Over 100 CERT members reported that they would be available to assist. CERT also conducted a General Mobile Radio System (GMRS) net. This net received 44 incoming calls from seven zones in Moraga, 10 in Orinda and three in Lafayette. Twenty-two HAM radio operators checked in with LARIG between 8:25 and 9:18 a.m.

The Sleepy Hollow, Orinda Downs, and Monte Vista neighborhoods organized a functional evacuation exercise, where about 25 neighbors "evacuated" to the Orinda Safeway where they shared coffee and donuts.

The scenario was a wildland fire originating at the reservoir, pushed by heavy fuels, hot, dry winds, and low humidity. The imaginary fire in the drill escapes the initial attack, triggering evacuation actions in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda.

At the end of the drill, a survey was sent to participants. Although the initial link sent was not operational, after discussion with CWS staff the issue was identified and a new link was posted. The updated link received 564 responses from exercise participants. About 37% of respondents live in Lafayette, 33% in Orinda, and 29% in Moraga. About 28% of respondents reported that they are members of one of Lamorinda's FireWise Communities, while just over 30% do not, and over 41% of respondents did not know if they live in a FireWise Community.

Three quarters of respondents do not have school age children in the household, with the remaining quarter reporting the presence of between one and four children at home, and 68.4% of respondents had not logged on to their CWS Alert account to verify their information within the past 90 days, while small numbers had either logged in within a shorter time or never. Of those who did log on, only 49.5% reported that they were able to locate their evacuation zone, while over 50% said that they could not. And although more than 50% reported that they had not packed "go bags" for each family member and pet, the overwhelming majority reported that during an actual emergency they would be willing and able to check on their neighbors before leaving.



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