

CalFire Battalion Chief Kirk-VanWormer

Interviewed by Allison Ash

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Interviewer: As I mentioned to you this is a history project that we're doing with the Mayacamas just to get the information from the firefighters. Just to help inform citizens about what happened, but also, for the next time the fires happen we have a little bit more information than we had the last time. But just for the record can you say your name and your title with CalFire? And then where you live.

Kirk Van Wormer: My name is Kirk Van Wormer. I'm the battalion chief for the Glen Ellen area which includes Glen Ellen and Petaluma. Currently, I live in Petaluma.

Interviewer: Great. Great. Well, thank you for being willing to talk to us.

Kirk Van Wormer: You're welcome.

Interviewer: I think to start it would be great to just give a brief history of how you got in to firefighting.

Kirk Van Wormer: So I grew up here in the Valley along with a lot of the people that work in the fire service, and I started as an Explorer Scout for the Valley of the Moon Fire Protection District. And then I became a volunteer or a paid call firefighter with Valley of the Moon. Well, I'm sorry. I started as an Explorer in

1986, and I became a volunteer in 1987. It was also, that same year that I got hired as a firefighter with CalFire, and I've been doing it ever since.

Interviewer: That's great. Well, to talk a little bit about the 2017 incident. Probably the easiest way to get started is to just tell me about that Sunday, October 8th. It started out as a beautiful fall day, but tell me how that evening progressed, and we'll start there with the basics.

Kirk Van Wormer: Well, okay, let's start before the 8th.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: So the winds that were coming, we knew that we were going to have what we call fire weather. When you have extreme weather conditions you can anticipate extreme fire conditions. My fellow battalion chiefs and I were talking about it and looking at information online from weather reports.

CalFire had staffed up extra resources, and from the information we had at the time it didn't look like it was going to be a very big weather event. This is the interesting thing about predicting the weather is sometimes you are right on, and sometimes you're not. So we knew exactly where the winds were going to hit. What we did not know was we did not know the velocities were much stronger than were anticipated.

Our mindset, if we knew there was a potential for something to happen. We didn't know where, but again, we did know where the winds were forecast to hit. Where they hit is where they were forecast to hit. Up through the Sonoma Valley here. All the way up in to the Geysers. It wasn't a surprise that the winds came, but again, the velocities were much stronger than anticipated.

Okay, so I was actually, on vacation. It was actually, a really beautiful Sunday for me. Then that night I started getting texts from my partners and other people. We have our own communication network, of course, outside of official email and such so I knew something was going on.

Interviewer: Texts for that?

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, texts. Mostly texts.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kirk Van Wormer: I knew something was going on, but again, like the public, we didn't understand the severity of it. Like I said, I was on vacation and so, my mind was not on work. However, in the middle of the night, I want to say it was around 10:00, and I wasn't in the area, either. I was close so I wasn't too far away, but I wasn't here.

So about 10:00 I got a phone call from Tony Gossner, the Santa Rosa Fire Chief. Now, Tony and I go way back and so, he was looking for one of the CalFire chief officers above my level. If he can't get a hold of him he calls me.

Interviewer: Sure.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, so I said, "Well, my partner, Marshall is working." And he's like, "No, no, I need higher than that." Meaning a higher-level chief, and I'm like, "Hmm, that's interesting. Okay." So I gave him some phone numbers and said, "Here, you need to call him."

I remember him telling me that this was going to be another Hanley fire. I'm thinking around 10:00 that night right after the fire started. And again, I'm not here so I don't see it. I don't know. I can't feel it, but that took a little while to sink in because Tony is obviously, very intelligent. A very well-rounded guy. He know what's going on, and for him to say that, that took a little while to sink in.

So anyway, so he goes about his thing, and I go about my thing, and I started asking other people questions. It still doesn't even really sink in until the following morning I get back in town, and I get in my work truck, and I start going because I know something is going on. I don't understand the severity at the time.

But from Petaluma the only thing I knew about was the Tubbs Fire so I tried calling our command center or dispatch center and, of course, the phone didn't ring because they were so busy. So I said, "Okay, well, I'm going to keep going."

I started driving up towards Santa Rosa from Petaluma, and when I got the area of Sonoma State I started listening. Well, I was listening to the radio the whole time, but I started hearing radio traffic about fires in the Valley, and I'm going, "Oh, okay, I didn't know that was going on."

They were talking about the Adobe Fire and the Nuns Fire. I think those were the two originally that I heard about. At some point, I think it was later in the day though we heard about the Norrbom Fire. And then it was even further than that in the future that I found out about the fire at Sonoma Raceway. There was not a whole lot of understanding as to what was really going on. The severity of everything.

Interviewer: Was it unusual that you were learning about so many different fires on the same Monday morning?

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, you normally would have one fire. Yeah, normally, we have one fire. So let me give a little input in to that. When we're working, when we're driving around we play a game where wherever we happen to be we say, "Okay, what if a fire is here? What would we do?" Most everything that we practiced or trained upon is about usually, one fire. Not a significant number of fires at the same time so it's a little out of the ordinary. Nothing normal.

But I remember that day of driving, and when I got to Sonoma State, and I heard the stuff in the Valley I'm like, "Wow, that's my battalion so I need to go there." So I came across Crane Canyon Road and up through Bennett Valley, and I was just absolutely in awe with the spread of the fires. At that point it was the Adobe Fire that I ran into first. Well, there was the Pressley Fire and then the Adobe Fire as I'm coming down Bennett Valley Road.

It was really hard to set in. Maybe hard is not the right word, but it was very confusing trying to figure out what was going on, and it was very overwhelming with what you were hearing, what you were seeing, and where the fires were. Now, we go to fires all the time. Fire is not a big deal to us, but when you change it up a little bit and now, the fire is in your own backyard it's a whole different dynamic.

Interviewer: In what way?

Kirk Van Wormer: Well, it's our backyard. Like I said, this is what I call my battalion. It's not my battalion, but I'm responsible for what happens here so to have all of a sudden everything on fire where normally, we don't have significant

fires like this, it took a little while for it to sink in. It was definitely shocking, so to speak.

So then I went into the Kenwood Fire Station where the command post was set up for the Adobe and the Nuns. We just didn't have any people. There weren't enough people to do anything at that point. Now, in reality, what happened was the winds died down so the few resources that we had were starting to make some progress, but we were vastly understaffed to make any progress.

Interviewer: The team that you had here as well as the Kenwood folks and any of the volunteer folks, they were around because do you know where they were? Do you know who was assigning resources? Who was telling people where to go?

Kirk Van Wormer: The incident command post was set up at Kenwood so Ben Nichols, who is the Division Chief with us. He's a long-time Sonoma County guy. He was set up as the Incident Commander to begin with. But again, that was for the Nuns and the Adobe so I don't know at that point if anyone was handling any of the other fires. We weren't dealing with the Tubbs Fire. That was somebody else.

It immediately became very, very overwhelming because now, we have this large fire, and at the time it really wasn't that big as far as fires go. But what was overwhelming was the fact that as I'm driving over you see all these structures that have been burned and not a lot of fire engines. You start putting two and two together saying, "Oh, we've got a big problem." That was the overwhelming part.

With the amount of damage, and it happened so quickly. That was overwhelming. The spread of the fire is what it is. We take care of that eventually, but having enough resources to protect additional homes or to even put out homes and building that are currently on fire, we didn't have them so that was very overwhelming.

From that point it gets to be a blur, and even to this day, even to this day in talking to people you find out little, tiny things about what happened. The one thing that comes to mind is that we've all been to big fires. At the time, this really wasn't a big fire. Even when it finished it was 50,000 acres. Something like that. Overall, it's an average fire nowadays.

But what was strange here, and this was probably because of everyone's connection in the Fire Service was there were and still are stories of people doing work around here that I'm still learning about to this day. It took a while for people to get in here. We had very, very few resources.

I don't remember exactly. I'd have to go back and look at some notes, but it was a couple, a handful of strike teams and engines. Maybe three at the most. A couple of fire crews, the MA crews and two borrowed bulldozers so we didn't have a whole lot of resources.

Interviewer: Is that your normal level of resources or were the resources you had already deployed by the time you got here?

Kirk Van Wormer: No, so what people need to remember is that same night in California there were 187 fires that started. Eighteen of them grew in to large fires.

Interviewer: CalFire is responsible for all of the State of California?

Kirk Van Wormer: Not all of the State of California, but significant portions of it. There's different jurisdictional areas. The Forest Service has a huge chunk of land in California. CalFire does and then on top of that local agencies such as Sonoma Valley and Glen Ellen have areas that they're responsible for.

It gets complicated as to whose jurisdiction, but the problem was is that there were so many fires it was overwhelming. There weren't enough resources to go around. That was the problem here is the way the fires were geographically oriented we had trouble getting resources.

In other words, if you look at map where we are, and you look at the final footprint of the Nuns Fire while we've got the Atlas Fire to the east so any resources coming from the south and east either go to the wrong fire, maybe they're ripped up and told to go to the wrong fire.

The same for the Tubbs Fire west and north of us, but then again, there was also, a large fire going on in Mendocino at the same time so it was a challenge to get resources here no matter what.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about air resources because that's so important in fighting a big wildland fire. I know there were weather, and smoke issues, and just availability issues, but can you talk a little bit about did we get air resources here, or when that happened?

Kirk Van Wormer: Before we get in to that there's a big misnomer that the public has. Aircraft, air tankers, and helicopters do not put out fires. What they're designed to do is they're designed to work in conjunction with ground resources.

So if you have an air tanker that drops on a fire, even the 747 that's out there if there are not ground resources in there to reinforce that line the fire will eventually burn through that retardant. They do not stop fire. They do not put out fires. It's a team effort.

The public doesn't know that. They see these wonderful, expensive things flying around, but they're all part of a plan. It's the same thing if you put a guy with a shovel out there he's not going to stop that fire, either. It's part of, and we quote a lot of the times in the Fire Service, "It's a tool in the toolbox."

With that being said, yeah, we had aircraft, but another problem is they can't fly at night. There are some aircraft in the state of California that can fly. However, right now, it's not CalFire's fleet. What we call contract counties. L.A. County, L.A. City, Ventura County, Kern County.

They have helicopters that can fly at night. Not air tankers, but helicopters. In fact, remind me here in a little bit, we did have one of the Kern County helicopters up here flying at night, but that wasn't until later on in the incident.

The other problem with the aircraft is the smoke. They cannot see the smoke. If they cannot see it through the smoke they cannot fly. Air tankers fly under what's called visual flight rules so they have to see the terrain. They have to be able to plan their route in and out the fire. If it's not safe to do so they can't fly.

Interviewer:

Of course.

from Australia so how did that change resource-wise, and whatever problems, or challenges did that present, or benefits?

Kirk Van Wormer: That's part of our Mutual Aid System, but it takes time for that to get in to place. And so, like I said, that night 187 fires in California. Eighteen turned in to large fires. It took time to organize which resources were going to go where. And then not only that, but you have to reconcile which resources are already somewhere and identify where they're at so you don't try and deploy them to another incident. So it takes time.

Interviewer: Who was responsible for that or who was managing that? Who was incident command at that really, uber-high level?

Kirk Van Wormer: That is something that takes place every day in the State of California. It's an ordering system. Like I said, it's the California Mutual Aid System. There's a group, a multi-agency group that basically, receives that call to fire-scope. I don't remember what it stands for right now off the top of my head, but so, for example, let's say, I'll walk you through how the process works.

We had a fire here at Cross Street. This is SRA. This is State Responsibility Area so CalFire would be responsible. It starts to grow and then I order resources. It goes to our command center, and our command center then ships the order to what's called the GACC. There's two GACCs in California.

Interviewer: Is that G-A-K?

Kirk Van Wormer: G-A-C-C.

Interviewer: G-A-C-C?

Kirk Van Wormer: I'll explain it here in a second.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: So there's two GACCs. The GACCs are geographical area coordination centers. What we call in slang is North Ops and South Ops in California. North Ops is up in Redding. South Ops is down in Riverside so the orders go to one of those two agencies. For us, it's North Ops.

From there, they decide who's going to fill the order. They have the larger 10,000-foot view, if you will. Everything that's going on in Northern California. They will then decide where the order goes. Now, from there, the order for resources can go back to CalFire resources. It can go to the Forest Service which is rare, but it can or it can go to local government.

Now, local government is all the city fire departments. Sonoma Valley, Schell Vista, et cetera. They are actually -- manage is the wrong term, but they are coordinated through Cal OES. Cal OES is a major player. The order could then get sent to Cal OES who will send it to one of their sub-regions to get resources down.

Interviewer: And OES is Emergency Services?

Kirk Van Wormer: The Governor's Office of Emergency Services, yes. That's how the orders go out.

Interviewer: Got it.

Kirk Van Wormer: They're based on the closest concept. Our closest resource concept, but they also, take in to account activity meaning fire activity either in the region where they're pulling the resources from or closer to

where the actual incident is. So they have to balance it, and they try not to drop any one agency or fire department down to a level where they cannot provide their normal service because that's the other thing.

All these agencies and fire engines still have to do their normal service to their normal areas. Anyway, it takes time to get those resources in place, and when you're driving a fire engine from Northern California all the way to Southern California it's going to be 10 to 12 hours. A lot of the fire engines do not go fast on the freeway so it takes time.

Interviewer: With our local area here, and with your firefighters, and volunteer firefighters at some point people have to sleep, and they have to eat. It's like we have an army of firefighters here, and you need this whole logistic support to help them keep their bodies going. How does that work? Are you responsible for part of that as a battalion commander? How do firefighters get taken care of?

Kirk Van Wormer: The CalFire engines are supposed to be self-sufficient for a minimum of 24 hours. We take it a little bit further, and we make them self-sufficient for at least two days.

Interviewer: Food and water?

Kirk Van Wormer: Food and water. They carry it on the fire engine so that we have time to get that logistic support in place. Now, if it's a relatively small fire or it's just us there we have ways of taking care of that. We'll call vendors in. We'll call field trucks in. We'll call whoever is set up eating in restaurants or have someone come out. We can take care of that.

The Incident Management Teams, if the incident becomes larger and the CalFire Incident Management Team is deployed they have that all built in to that. There are some major sections or groups within that IMT, the Incident Management Team. One being finance who pays for everything.

One being logistics which covers not only food and water, but sleeping, maintenance, vehicle breakdowns, land use agreements, et cetera, et cetera. Then there's Operations and Operations is the group that actually, takes care of fighting the fire. I'm forgetting one right now.

Interviewer: I know there were a lot of guys who didn't sleep very much in those first 48 hours. It was very intense.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, well, I don't know if I said this yet, but it was 3.5 days before we actually, started getting significant resources in here. Three and a half days with the same resources so that was an eternity. That's something that we're not used to. What we're used to is a single fire and then resources come in, augment the fire, and it goes out eventually. That's what was weird about this experience is we begged, and pleaded, and asked for resources, and we just didn't get them for 3.5 days.

Interviewer: Why didn't you get them?

Kirk Van Wormer: Hmm?

Interviewer: Why didn't you get them?

Kirk Van Wormer: Because of all the other fires. Remember, 18 large fires going on in the State of California at the time. On top of that there were

red flag warnings in Southern California. So because of that okay, let me put it this way. We have a red flag here, but there's a major fire burning in Laguna Beach.

Would you want this fire engine to leave when you have a red flag warning here? When they have a fire there? Probably not so there was a lot of that, too. That's all about the deployment of resources.

Interviewer: Got it. And so, with respect to the Mayacamas specifically, how do you interface with the Mayacamas team?

Kirk Van Wormer: We support them. We respond to their calls with them. We partake in events with them. We help them with training. We helped them set up the Fire Safe Council so we are basically, just here to support.

Interviewer: During the fire especially, the early days in that first week is there a particularly incident or situation that you're particularly proud of? How your team responded, or dealt with it, or anything that's memorable in that regard?

Kirk Van Wormer: Oh, man, everything they did. When you say team it has a different meaning here in the Valley. We have the different jurisdictions. We have CalFire. We have Sonoma Valley. We have Schell-Vista, but what was very cool during that experience was -- well, let me back. We all know each other whether we're a different patch or not we all know each other.

For that period in the Valley we had people from all over the place. People who grew up here and now, work for other places. The City of Oakland, Marin County, CalFire from Butte County. That's what was really cool about the whole experience is not only did we have all of our employees here, the people who work here, but we had people who grew up here and were part

of our world that now, works some other place that somehow finagled their way back up here.

That was pretty cool because in the middle of the night you'd run in to someone and you'd be like, "How did you get here?" And they may never answer the question, and you'd just go along about doing things, but yeah, we had people from all over the place who grew up here. Who were part of the environment, and that was what was truly special.

Interviewer: What are your memories of sensory? What were you smelling or what were you hearing? What did the fire sound like, and what did it look like while you were fighting it?

Kirk Van Wormer: Well, it's funny that you ask that because I don't know. I don't pay attention to that anymore. What the fire sounds like depends on what conditions it's burning in. what fuel type it's burning in. Whether it's windy or whether it's not. I don't pay attention to that anymore. It's all white noise to me after doing it for 24 years.

My focus is elsewhere. It's primarily on my folks to make sure my folks are okay. And then other folks and making sure they get the tools that they need to do the job. That was what was so incredibly frustrating about the Nuns Fire here is we could not get them tools to do their job.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's got to be very hard.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, you mentioned a little bit about communications on your way in that morning. The phone at red com or whoever.

Dispatch wasn't answered. How did communications work in this fire just given how many simultaneous fires there were and the chaos?

Kirk Van Wormer: Well, communication on, let's say, the Nuns Fire was super easy because we didn't have anybody to talk to. There were so few resources. We made it happen. Communication wasn't a problem. We could talk to everybody we needed to. We didn't have the resources to do the job, but we could talk to everybody.

Interviewer: And that means to the volunteer companies as well as your folks? Did you set up TAC frequencies for that or did you use the standard?

Kirk Van Wormer: We already have a radio plan. The radio plan that we used is the one we do day in and day out here in the Valley so the frequencies are all known. Whether you listen to them or not because you're busy is a different thing, but early on we used the standard frequencies that we use here so communication was not a problem as far as I know.

Interviewer: Okay. I know for the MVFD because of the geography had trouble with communications. Just the radio signals in the hills sometimes they weren't able to keep [unintelligible]--

Kirk Van Wormer: Well, the way radio signals work is the higher up you are the better reception and better ability to transmit you have. Now, there are a lot of other variables in there, too. Age of the radio, et cetera, but I do know our standard radio frequencies around here have been used for a long time. They haven't changed, and they worked really well that night.

Interviewer: Yeah, good. That's good to hear. Then tell me a little bit about your thoughts about volunteer companies generally.

Kirk Van Wormer: They're the heart and soul of the fire service. Without them we, as CalFire can't do our job. We rely on them, and that's why we try and bend over backwards to help them out. It's not just Mayacamas, it's all the volunteers in Sonoma County. They're fantastic. They do a great job.

Here's the way to heighten or focus on their importance. If Mayacamas is up on the hill on a red flag day if they are able to respond, and put a fire out when it's small versus no volunteer fire company being out there, and the fire being allowed to grow how do you quantify that contribution?

You invariably say they're saving millions of dollars by being there so it's hard to say how important they are. I know it's very, very difficult with the training requirements to recruit and keep volunteers which is unfortunate because they are such a valuable resource.

Interviewer: During the October fires was there a specific engine that was dedicated to Mayacamas? I seem to recall that there was one.

Kirk Van Wormer: There was.

Interviewer: Do you know which one it was?

Kirk Van Wormer: I want to say 3461, but I don't remember for sure.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: I think that's what it was.

Interviewer: Well, I know they guy said there was an engine with a crew that was there a lot.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm just want to thank them.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, yeah, and they were up there. Most of the activity was down here because the fire was still down here early on. When the fire did turn around and go back up the hill I know they were up there. I know there was communication with them. It wasn't me, but I know other people were communicating with them.

I remember distinctly trying to send a strike team and engines up the hill to help them, and they couldn't get up Trinity Road because the fire lines were down. So at that point yeah, it was really frustrating.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, I had heard about that. How about your personal situation during the fire?

Kirk Van Wormer: That's a great question. It's funny, at the time we kept talking to each other about how -- we've got a document that captured this, but there was no physical way we were going to be able to do that at the time. At the time, you're focused on what you're doing so you don't get a chance to really think about any personal feelings until afterwards.

I'm still trying to figure stuff out. So much happened in such a compressed timeframe which is funny because we don't think of 3.5 days as a compressed timeframe, but in reality, it was. A lot of it is just trying to

go back and put the pieces together because so much happened at the time. You want to capture those memories and process them because it was heartbreaking at the same time.

That was the biggest thing is you don't want to see anybody's property burned. Their houses, their barns, and then you come in and you see all this destruction, and it's very frustrating because you don't have the ability to do anything about it.

So it's that dealing with the helpless feeling of that. And then just trying to capture the magnitude of it all. When I say the magnitude of it all this is just one little piece of the bigger picture because the Tubbs Fire was a whole different scenario up there. The Atlas Fire was a whole different scenario.

I remember trying to explain the magnitude of this fire because with the Nuns being caught between the Atlas and the Tubbs a lot of the focus was on those. So trying to convince people above my level of the magnitude of this fire was very, very frustrating because I don't know if they quite understood what we were trying to tell them. In fact, I would say for sure they didn't understand what we were trying to tell them.

That was very, very frustrating. Is there any way to change it? No. Unfortunately, it was the circumstances that we were in with two major fires on either side of us and us stuck in the middle. So it was incredibly frustrating.

Interviewer:

Sounds like it.

Now, with that being said, that may be viewed by the public as dangerous, but it's actually, very well-managed with the rest of the situation. There's a lot of those. Was there any particular situation where I was fearful?

Interviewer: Or felt in danger or felt your people were.

Kirk Van Wormer: For me, not so much anymore just because my--

Interviewer: Too many years.

Kirk Van Wormer: --job is a little bit different, but yes, there was one. Later in the week when the north winds kicked. Remember, we had three or four north wind events during the course of that week. When the fire started coming down in to the 7th Street East area in Lovall Valley there was a short list of fire crew that when you use the word trapped it implies no way out, and you're going to die.

They weren't trapped, but they took refuge at a house. We had to go down there and deal with them. Luckily, they made it out okay, but that's one of that where you're worried for your people more than yourself. Because you worry about their training. Are they going to make the right decisions? Did they pick a good spot? Things like that. Those are worse than you, yourself being in physical danger so, yeah, that would be one of them.

Interviewer: And so, now, that this is in the rear-view mirror I think of those fires in the rear-view mirror, but you deal with fire 24/7 so there's always a fire in front of you. But given the fires of October 17th in the rear-view mirror are there things you would do differently now or are doing differently now? Has anything changed with your approach, or outlook, or your scenarios?

Kirk Van Wormer: That's a broad topic. Has anything changed?
Well, the fire service is 200 years of tradition unimpeded by progress so changing things is very, very difficult to do. You can change it on a personal level. I can't control things. I can't control the weather. What we can do is we can continually remind people that defensible space is important.

The one biggest thing that we learned out of this fire is the firebrands are a huge issue. Our defensible space--

Interviewer: Firebrands?

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, I'll go in to that in a second.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: Are what we were talking about, defensible space, proved not to be adequate. What firebrands are, they're little pieces of burning material, and when you watch the videos of the Tubbs Fire you see all these sparks going through here. Those are firebrands.

Interviewer: Got it.

Kirk Van Wormer: The firebrand production that we had was amazing, and that's a component of the dryness of the fuels, the relative humidity, the air temperature, and the winds. My personal opinion that is what burned down all the houses in Santa Rosa. The firebrands because what happens is those firebrands are blown by the wind, and they find a real nice nook and cranny, and they get jammed into that nook and cranny.

That can be a bush outside. It can be the eaves of the house. It can be debris in the gutters. It can be any number of things. So once it gets jammed into a nice, little spot the wind is still blowing so it just continues to get fanned. It will catch anything that's burnable and it's in contact with on fire.

Now, during a normal fire, a single fire we usually have a lot of fire engines that can get in and put those out before they can start burning significantly. Even in Sonoma County which is a county rich in fire engines. We have a lot of fire engines. We make all sorts of jokes about how many fire engines per square mile in Sonoma County.

Even that was not enough to put a fire engine at every house to knock these spots out. So one really important thing that we learned was now, there's a 10-foot zone around your house. The defensible space says basically, you need to modify the vegetation 100 feet around your house.

Thirty feet around your house needs to be a clean zone where we really clean up all the fuels. What we don't want is the fire to continuously march through the vegetation to the house, or the barn, or whatever. Well, that 10-foot zone around the house that we're now talking about is an ultra-clean zone to where there's no bushes.

There's nothing flammable. There's nothing to catch those embers that are blowing into the house. That wasn't a part of the original defensible space. Now, it's huge, and it needs to be huge. So what has changed? Well, we're aggressively trying to let property owners know the most important thing they need to do is take the time and the money to make sure their house is defensible.

Because even before the October fires one of the things that we would tell them is, "Defensible space is here to make sure your life and your property stays intact. All

Interviewer: Okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: Nils Derickson. He is one of the bulldozer operators here at the station. He was the one that originally started the dozer line up the hill towards Cavedale. Sean Jerry. He is one of the captains here. He was instrumental in not so much Mayacamas, but stopping the fire around Moon Mountain Road.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah, he set a backfire there, I believe.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, which is normal.

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh, okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: Yeah, it's normal. And then Steve Millosovich. He's also a captain here. Steve was a little more involved with the fire up around Sugarloaf, but they all have great stories of what occurred here in the Valley.

Interviewer: Okay, great. So I'm going to stop the recorder, and I'll get this contact information from you.

Kirk Van Wormer: Actually, you can get a hold of them all by calling here.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kirk Van Wormer: It's real simple.

Interviewer: Okay, great.

[End of recorded material]

