

## County hosts first wildfire preparedness fair

The Almanac

Fluffy service dogs, Smokey Bear, Cal Fire's Captain Cal and more than 400 people milled about the San Mateo County Event Center in San Mateo on Saturday, April 26, for the county's first event to equip the public with practical information for preparing for a wildfire.

"Be Wildfire Safe & Ready" featured booths with information on backup battery packs for use during power outages, which have become more frequent during heat waves, to demonstrations on how to turn off your natural gas valve.

There were also opportunities to meet emergency response crews from the Sheriff's Office, American Medical Response San Mateo County and local fire departments. County Supervisor Jackie Speier spearheaded the event, in part, because of the massive fires that hit Los Angeles unseasonably in January.

One panel featured wildfire survivors, including Menlo Park resident Heather Vandenberghe, who relocated to the Peninsula from Southern California after the destructive Palisades Fire earlier this year. She saw plumes of smoke blown by 80 mph Santa Ana winds, listened "to that little voice in my head," and fled before evacuation orders. A neighbor who left nine minutes later ultimately had to abandon his car in traffic and run for his life.

"Grab the things that if your house burns, what are you going to miss?" Vandenberghe said during the panel. She does regret not shooting video of her home and its contents prior to the fires as documentation for her insurance. "Don't spend time grabbing clothes. Save your memories. ... I'm very grateful that I just trusted my intuition and got out when I did."

Officials at the fair emphasized the importance of leaving early in an emergency. Experts also shared how to pack a "go bag," install fire-resistant landscaping and how to sign up for local emergency alerts.

Emily Rogan, a senior programs manager for nonprofit consumer rights advocacy group United Policyholders, said during a panel that “hardening your home and creating defensible space improves your insurance options and protects your assets.”

“If you are dropped by your insurance company, start shopping right away,” she noted. “You will get 75 days notice, but you might need that entire time to find replacement coverage.”

San Mateo residents Marc and Tracey Molina came to the event with their sons, Matteo, 1, and Marco, a 3-year-old dressed in a firefighter outfit, according to a county press release.

“We hope to learn what we need to do in case fire happens, especially right now when it seems like there are wildfires all over the place,” Marc Molina said in a prepared statement. “Hopefully, we can learn safety first before anything happens.”

The San Mateo County Large Animal Evacuation Group hosted a booth at the fair. Michelle Ameri, vice president of the group, said that after the CZU and Edgewood fires, her organization decided to invest in a rescue team with a trailer and equipment to evacuate large animals that might have fallen into a ravine or other hard-to-reach areas. They’re using \$25,000, including from the county’s Measure K half-cent sales tax, for the trailer, equipment and training.

Going into wildfire season, the group is hosting one to two monthly trainings on animal handling, ham radio use and CPR classes. They host trainings on Zoom and drills in person.

Learn more about emergency preparedness and sign up for emergency alert notifications at [smcgov.org](https://smcgov.org).