

Lessons Shared at the County's First Wildfire Preparedness Event

County of San Mateo

When Heather Vandenberghe saw plumes of smoke blown by 80-mph Santa Ana winds, she listened “to that little voice in my head.”

She packed her daughter and her dogs and a few essentials into her car and headed out of Los Angeles’s Palisades area in the first hours of what would become one of the most destructive fires in California history.

Her Ring camera shows her driving away on Jan. 7 at 11:51 a.m., before any evacuation warnings or orders. “I felt like we were leaving in plenty of time,” she said later.

A neighbor who left at noon had to abandon his car in choked traffic and run for his life as fire consumed their homes. “I was nine minutes away from that,” she said. “I’m very grateful that I just trusted my intuition and got out when I did.”

Leaving early in an emergency situation was one of the lessons emphasized Saturday at a special wildfire preparedness event sponsored by the San Mateo County Department of Emergency Management in partnership with dozens of local organizations.

More than 400 residents came to learn from survivors like Vandenberghe as well as experts on how to develop a readiness plan, pack a “Go Bag,” reduce the risk of embers igniting your property, gain insight on insurance and much more.

“Grab the things that if your house burns, what are you going to miss?” Vandenberghe said. “Don’t spend time grabbing clothes. Save your memories.”

San Mateo resident Marc Molina came to the event with his wife Tracey and their two sons, Matteo, 1, and Marco, a 3-year-old in a firefighter outfit.

“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. “Hopefully, we can learn safety first before anything happens.”

Attendees like the Molinas could take a deep dive with experts on how to sign up for local emergency alerts, install fire-resistant landscaping and turn off the natural gas valve supplying your home.

“There’s a specific way you can turn it to ensure that it’s off,” Dan Burke, a volunteer with a local Community Emergency Response Team, told attendees as he showed how with a gray shut-off valve and a wrench. “Once the emergency has passed and it’s safe to turn it back on again, you want to call PG&E and only PG&E. There are procedures that they follow to ensure it’s safe.”

Speakers included San Mateo County Board of Supervisors President David Canepa and Supervisors Jackie Speier, Ray Mueller and Lisa Gauthier. Panel discussions included “Home Defense & Personal Readiness,” “When Minutes Matter” and “Insurance: What Do You Need to Know?”

Emily Rogan, a senior programs manager for United Policyholders, a nonprofit insurance and consumer rights advocacy group, offered these insights:

“Hardening your home and creating defensible space improves your insurance options and protects your assets,” Rogan said. “If you are dropped by your insurance company, start shopping right away. You will get 75 days’ notice, but you might need that entire time to find replacement coverage.”

Hayman Tam, a retired aerospace engineer, demonstrated how to pack in a Go Bag – a kit that can help you survive on your own for a few days. “You don’t want to go crazy,” he advised. “You want something you can carry.”

As California’s wildfires burn hotter and more intensely and with the fresh memories of the LA fires, Supervisor Speier suggested San Mateo County organize “Be Wildfire Safe & Ready” to share knowledge and empower residents with the tools they may need to survive in any emergency.

Vandenberghe may have been more prepared than most when she found herself in the path of a wind-fueled inferno. While growing up in Southern California, her family evacuated due to a wildfire. “I grabbed my hamster. I was 8,” she recalled. She was in New York during the 9/11 attacks and Superstorm Sandy.

She keeps essential documents like passports and the deed to her home in handy plastic cases in her garage. She filled her gas tank on Jan. 5 even though she had a third of a tank before the Palisades fire broke out on Jan. 7.

“When I had to flee, the power was out. All the gas stations in the area were closed. I would have been in real trouble if I didn’t have gas in my car,” she said. “From now on, I don’t ever go beyond half a tank of gas. Don’t let your gas get so low that if you had to flee you couldn’t drive 50 miles somewhere. That’s my life lesson.”

She regrets not shooting video of her home and its contents prior to the fires as documentation for her insurance. “That’s the one thing I didn’t do. And it’s one thing that as I was leaving, I was thinking, ‘Should I quickly take a video of my house?’”

Vandenberghe decided against running back into her house surrounded by flames. “In our situation, we had to flee and thank God I left when I did and thank God I didn’t take that video or I would have been in a really dire situation.”

Learn more tips about emergency preparedness, sign up for emergency alert notifications and find upcoming events at the San Mateo County Department of Emergency Management.