

Woodside Ranch FIRE NEWSLETTER

Woodside Ranch Fire Education Committee

December 2019



SURVIVING THE PARADISE FIRE: LESSONS LEARNED

A presentation by Barb West to Woodside Ranch homeowners on November 20, 2019.

Barb West lived in Paradise, California for 40+ years. She and her husband Roy lived in a ranch style home on the edge of a canyon and had defensible space. Their home, shop, boat, toy hauler, hydraulic trailer, pop-up camper and all their possessions burned in the Camp fire on November 8, 2018. The West's moved to Bend after the fire and have decided to permanently become part of the community. Barb shared their harrowing escape from the fire and lessons they learned in hopes of helping us prevent, escape and survive a wildfire.

Setting the Scene

Paradise is a community of about 26,000. It is located on a flat ridge with steep canyons of the Feather River on both sides. Vegetation is made up of conifers, deciduous trees and brush. The area had experienced years of severe drought so was extremely dry. Occasionally they have high winds up to 50 miles per hour. They have a history of fires with a big one in 2008 when 76 homes in the area were destroyed.

There is one main four-lane road through town along the ridge that serves as the primary route to and from the town of Chico, 12 miles away. That road reduces down to two lanes in the town center to slow traffic. That created a tremendous bottleneck during the evacuation.

Morning of November 8, 2018

The West's began their day about 7AM. It was a cold morning of 42 degrees with a strong wind and haze in the air. Was it fog or smoke? Barb called the hospital where she used to work to see if they knew of a fire. She was told the fire was 30 miles away in Pulga. Assuming there was no

threat, Roy went off to work at a house up the street. At about 8:20 AM a large black cloud came over the house. Roy called saying hot embers were falling and he was coming right home. Barb began to load up the pets and pack the car. They got a reverse 911 call at 8:30 AM and they immediately left with the pets, a couple of files, and two shirts in two cars.

Barb showed pictures of her harrowing drive: it was pitch black from the smoke; heavy flying embers like a blizzard; fires on all sides of the road, trees, houses, a senior housing complex, cars, horse trailer all ablaze; power lines down everywhere; explosions happening all the time. Her car heated up and the heat warning light came on. Her husband decided to take a different route and they communicated by cell phone. The cell phones went down and she lost contact with her husband. AM radio was the only communication she had but only an urgent evacuation notice came through, no useful information on what was happening or where to go. All lanes were opened to outgoing traffic but even so the roads failed with too many evacuating. A few fire trucks were trying to get into Paradise but couldn't get through the traffic. It took 5.5 hours to go 1.5 miles. Finally she saw the blue lights of a police car and emotionally realized she wouldn't die alone if the police were there.



After 6 hours she reached Chico and met up with her husband who had arrived ahead of her. Unfortunately they were evacuated again with huge smoke and flames visible from Chico. By this time all of Paradise was destroyed.



With the magnitude of the fire, the wind driving it at one football field per second and the ember storm setting spot fires way ahead, there was no stopping this fire. The only option was immediate evacuation and an attempt to save lives. In total 52,000 people were evacuated, 18,804 structures were destroyed, 85 died in 4 communities, and 153,336 acres burned. The fire lasted 16 days but the greatest death and damage occurred in the first 6 hours.

Barb's Lessons Learned and Tips

- Sign up for reverse 911 immediately – it could save your life
- Leave as soon as you feel threatened, don't wait for a call or door to door notification
- Be prepared for a fast evacuation. Know what to take, have a list as you don't have time to think when evacuating. Things like check book, passport, hard drive, electronic devices, will, insurance papers, pet supplies and papers
- Take protective clothing, jacket and change of clothes
- Kitty litter for both you and your pets in a long escape by car
- Have fuel in your car. Keep at least half a tank all the time
- Check on your neighbors. Do they know? Do they need help?

- Use social media like Facebook for information
- Having pictures of house inside/outside, all possessions, out buildings & contents will greatly help your insurance claims
- Use something like Keeper app (\$30/yr) to keep record of all documents, pictures, passwords etc.
- Have all emergency & non-emergency police phone numbers on your phones
- Be insured – homeowners and renters
- Review your insurance policies. Be sure to have replacement cost and loss of use coverage
- Get counseling afterward, it helps

Barb's Thoughts on the Woodside Area

- Do more fuels reduction. Have more FireFree days
- Two lane roads can be inadequate during evacuation
- Keep up the good work on educating and being organized

Documentaries & Films

Excellent sources to get analyses of what happened in Paradise, CA and more 1st hand experiences.

- Butte County: Camp Fire, Part 4-Lessons Learned
<https://youtu.be/K4dljn6B9b4>
- AARP: How to Prepare for a Wildfire
<https://www.aarp.org/politics-society/history/info-2019/surviving-deadly-wildfire.html>
- Frontline: Fire in Paradise
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3OX1PR2SCM>

Thank you Barb

We sincerely thank Barb West for sharing her experience and wisdom about a wildfire evacuation and disaster. Hearing it first-hand makes it real and helps us realize that it could happen here too. Thanks Barb for helping Woodside Ranch be prepared.

If you have comments or suggestions for future newsletters email them to board@woodsideranch.net