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## MOFD conducts first controlled burn exercise in Moraga

By Nick Marnell



Photography by David Grube for John Muir Land Trust, c 2019

Still frightened by the 2018 grass fire near Buckingham Drive, Moraga residents questioned the timing and the safety of a controlled burn conducted by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District on property recently purchased in the town by the John Muir Land Trust.

As residents complained on social media about a controlled fire going out of control, MOFD was pulling together a 30-person team from its district, the Berkeley Fire Department, the East Bay Regional Park District and the Concord Federal Fire Department to conduct a controlled burn and training exercise along the eastern slope of Painted Rock. The trust requested that MOFD conduct the exercise as a safety precaution, and the prescribed burn was set for June 29. "We heard a lot from homeowners in the area that fire was a real concern. So we wanted to make sure we got off on the right foot," said Glen Lewis of JMLT.

MOFD Battalion Chief Steve Gehling, the incident commander, conducted a 9 a.m. burn briefing at Fire Station 42 and detailed the eight-page incident action plan to the participants. "This has never been done in Moraga," Gehling told the crews. "This is a big deal for us to show residents that it can be done safely and without damage to the community."

Crews atop Painted Rock tested the weather and air quality, and then conducted a small test fire, which Gehling explained was to determine how fast the fire would travel that day and how much vegetation could be burned at one time - so as to not upset the nearby neighbors. At 11:30 a.m., Gehling approved the test results and the exercise began.

An unusual sight was firefighters setting fires, as they poured a mixture of diesel fuel and gasoline onto the brush. Even more unusual was to see firefighters making no attempt to extinguish the fires. "The fire will put itself out," Gehling said. "If done right, this is very easy to do."

The steep terrain proved anything but easy for the fire crews. But plenty of safety precautions were in place, as a hose line circled the perimeter of the exercise, and the Berkeley engine trailed along the ridge to protect the back end, toward Buckingham. Two 2,500-gallon water tenders sat nearby and Medic 41 was parked at the top of the hill, just in case.

The exercise began slowly, but once it became obvious that the "safety strip" - the black path that remained after incineration - was able to hold off the oncoming fires, crews began taking out bigger chunks of vegetation as they moved down the hill toward Moraga Road.

Lafayette resident Jerry Kent watched the proceedings from the Campolindo High School parking lot. "It's a smart move, to do this with the fire department here and things under control," Kent said. "I saw this hill burn last year when it was out of control."

By mid-afternoon, a 5-acre, 1,100 foot strip of the 15-acre property was completely charred. Gehling reported that no one was hurt and that he had heard no complaints of smoke drifting into the neighborhoods. "They did exactly what they said they were going to do, and did it very cautiously," Lewis said of the firefighters.

"We can use this tool to make the community safer," Gehling said. "The black part of that hill will not burn the rest of this year."



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Reach the reporter at: [nick@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:nick@lamorindaweekly.com)

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