

Local Group Efforts May Have Saved Lives and Homes

Just days after the Rim Fire swept thru the community of Pine Mountain Lakes and other small communities near Yosemite National Park, evacuated residents returned to find their homes still standing. This is largely due to the efforts of the Southwest Interface Team (SWIFT), a group comprised of county, state, federal and other external partners, working collaboratively to create Firewise, fire adaptive communities by conducting fuel treatments such as fuel breaks.

"The fuel breaks played a critical role in reducing the intensity of the fire in the Pine Mountain Lake community, their purpose was to reduce fuel loads and the work done the past five to seven years made the difference," said SWIFT coordinator Allen Johnson.

Maps developed by SWIFT were integral to the incident management team's ability to identify locations of fuel reduction treatments and existing fire breaks. The Southern Area Incident Management Team managing the Rim Fire incorporated this information into their pre-planning efforts for establishing fire and contingency lines. "If every community completed this work it would protect more homes and make firefighting efforts less complex," said Incident Commander Mike Wilkins.

Fire isn't new to SWIFT; they encourage using all possible resources to mitigate wild land fire by using wild land fire prevention and protection strategies to these areas populated with primary and secondary residences.

Since its induction fourteen years ago, there have been seven major wildfire incidents, including the Rim Fire:

- Pilot Fire – 1999
- Hunter Fire – 2000
- Creek Fire – 2001
- Tuolumne Fire – 2004
- Don Pedro Fire – 2007
- Telegraph Fire of 2008
- Rim Fire 2013

Since 1999, SWIFT has worked with partners and landowners to promote Firewise communities by accomplishing:

- 5,000 acres of prescribed burns
- 25 miles of road corridor treatments
- 8,800 mechanical mastication treatments
- 54 miles of shaded fuel break
- 79 miles of fuel breaks

The six wildfires prior to the Rim Fire burned more than 61,000 acres within or directly adjacent to the SWIFT area, resulted in a firefighter fatality, and burned over 40 homes. It is the goal of SWIFT to

continue to work to protect the local communities, the lives and property, and the natural resources through aggressive fire prevention and preparedness efforts.

The group is comprised of: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Eldorado Hills Resource Area; California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection; US Forest Service - Groveland Ranger District, Stanislaus National Forest; Cal-Fire - Tuolumne/Calaveras Ranger Unit, Madera/Mariposa/Merced Ranger Unit; Mariposa County Fire Department; Hetch Hetchy Water & Power; City and County of San Francisco; Yosemite Foothills Fire Safety Council; Mariposa County Fire Safe Council; California Department of Corrections; Central Sierra Resource Conservation District; Yosemite National Park and Pine Mountain Lakes Association.

The success of SWIFT should serve as a great example for communities across the nation on making their communities defensible.

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