

An aerial photograph of a residential area at night, showing a large firestorm with bright orange and yellow flames and thick white smoke rising from the buildings. The fire is concentrated in the center and right side of the image, with smaller fires scattered throughout the neighborhood. The surrounding area is dark, with some streetlights and house lights visible. In the foreground, there are several curved, parallel lines that appear to be tracks or a road.

The Oakland Hills Firestorm

20 YEARS LATER
OUR STORY

Acknowledgements

The Oakland Hills Firestorm – 20 Years Later: Our Story

Front cover: An aerial view of the fire-ravaged neighborhood west of Lake Temescal. The “Y”-shaped intersection of Golden Gate Avenue at Highway 24 is at bottom. Lake Temescal is out of view at top, left.

Back cover: The Oakland Firestorm burned 3,469 dwellings on October 19 and 20, 1991. This view from above Margarido Drive and Rockridge Boulevard South (at bottom, with some surviving homes) surveys the destruction in neighborhoods between Highway 24 and Acacia Avenue, looking northwest to the Hiller Highlands above Tunnel Road. Hiller Drive is visible at top, left.

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Brian Cordeiro..... Fire Captain	Mark Ragatz Parkland Unit Manager
Kevin Goe..... Carpenter	Dennis Rein..... Fire Chief (<i>Retired</i>)
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General Manager's Introduction

Anniversaries are occasions for looking both to the past and into the future: we look to the past to acknowledge previous achievements, and into the future to rededicate ourselves to continued excellence in public service.

With this publication, the East Bay Regional Park District acknowledges the valor and professionalism of all District employees who were involved with the disastrous Oakland Hills Fire in October 1991. They fought it directly on the front lines, worked in support and logistics, assisted residents who lost their homes and loved ones, and dealt with myriad administrative challenges of post fire recovery. We also salute the firefighters and other staff in Oakland, Berkeley, and the dozens of other jurisdictions who joined to battle California's worst urban wildfire.

For the future, the Park District pledges continued dedication to a well-trained, professional fire department, working in concert with other public agencies to save lives and property.

And in cooperation with other agencies we also pledge commitment to the cause of fire prevention in the East Bay Hills. The District's approval in 2010 of its fire hazard mitigation plan shows that our commitment is genuine and enduring.

There is no guarantee that the East Bay Hills will not face another devastating fire. But the Park District and the other agencies responsible for fire safety along the wildland urban interface have worked together since 1991 to be far better prepared. We vow to continue this cooperative effort.

Thanks again to the Park District employees, and those of the cities, the special districts, and the state, who faced the ultimate firefighting test in 1991.

Robert E. Doyle

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert E. Doyle". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "R" and "D".

General Manager
East Bay Regional Park District





East Bay Regional Park District firefighters gather on Tunnel Road on October 21, 1991.

Front, left to right: Fred Martin, Warren Schultz, Bill Nichols, Steve Quick, Jack Kenny, Jovan Magpoc.

Middle, left to right: Tim August, Dave DuBow, Gary Martin, Dan McCormick, Steve McClean, Laura Comstock, George Isaeff, Anne Rockwell, Jeff Wilson, Di Rosario.

Back, left to right: Vince Green, Anne Scheer, Dave Looney, Kevin Goe, Sue Ferrera, Dennis Waespi.

Behind sign: unknown firefighter from another agency.

The Oakland Hills Firestorm - 20 Years Later: Our Story

Many years have passed since the catastrophic Oakland Hills Firestorm raged through the hills in October 1991, but for the East Bay Regional Park District staff who fought it, the memories are still vivid.

Facing the largest wildland urban interface fire in the Bay Area's history, the Park District staff responded in an exemplary, even heroic, fashion.

It all began on Saturday, Oct. 19, 1991, with a small fire on private property in the Oakland hills. The cause has never been conclusively determined. There was little wind, and Oakland firefighters extinguished the blaze with mutual aid from Park District crews and the state.

But smoldering embers reignited the next morning. Fanned that day by strong easterly winds, the fire soon became an inferno.

At its height, 1,500 firefighters and 450 engines from all over Northern California were fighting the fire. By the time it burned out, it had consumed 2.5 square miles of mostly residential neighborhoods. Twenty-five people were killed and 150 injured. The fire destroyed 3,469 homes and apartment units and 2,000 automobiles. Ten thousand people were evacuated. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that the fire cost \$3.9 billion in present-day dollars. It is still considered the

largest single fire in California history in terms of cost, homes lost, and people killed.

Responding to mutual aid calls from the Oakland Fire Department, virtually every available firefighter and public safety officer in the Park District, as well as many other District staff and volunteers, helped to fight the fire or assist evacuees. Some 60 Park District firefighters and 48 police officers were involved at one time or another. Working in concert with other fire departments and citizen volunteers, they were able to save dozens of homes from destruction.

While firefighters from Oakland, Berkeley and numerous other cities had the overwhelming task of facing the wind-blown flames head-on, Park District firefighters were deployed along Grizzly Peak Boulevard, Claremont Avenue, and other streets high in the Oakland-Berkeley hills, where they fought to keep the fire from spreading north, south, or eastward into Contra Costa County.

Park District police officers evacuated fire zone residents, directed traffic, and kept unauthorized persons away from the danger area. Evacuating homeowners who were reluctant to leave, even in the face of advancing flames, was an especially difficult task.

The following stories are just a few from Park District employees who were on the fireline:



Top: The glow of the Oakland Hills firestorm was visible from San Francisco, more than 10 miles to the west.

Bottom: Potentially deadly downed power lines on Contra Costa Road above Lake Temescal.

The Stories

The first day

The Park District's involvement began on Saturday, Oct. 19, when District firefighters responded to assist Oakland on the original fire, which had burned up a very steep slope from the backyard of a house on Buckingham Boulevard to a water tank near Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

Park District Fire Lt. Di Rosario recalls that it was a windless day, but the fire was very hot. It burned through brush, pine, and eucalyptus dry from years of drought, but reached no houses. It consumed three to five acres before it was stopped.

Park District Fire Chief Joe Rubini was present during the Saturday fire. After evaluating weather reports, he ordered extra Park District firefighters to report for duty Sunday.

During the mop-up phase, Rosario and his crew started scraping a line of bare ground around the fire perimeter, extinguished hot spots, and left about 1,000 feet of Park District hoseline in place in case of need.

Late in the day, Oakland fire commanders concluded that it had become too dark and dangerous for fire crews to work through the night on the steep slopes in the burn area. They left hoselines in place, and Oakland fire companies checked the scene during the night.

A contingent of students from the Oakland fire academy had been assigned to help out overnight, but they were cancelled, and the Oakland Fire Department told the Park District firefighters to go home. They did, but they had serious concerns, so Rosario drove around to some of the residents and told them to call Oakland right away if the fire flared up again.



Top, left to right: Dan McCormick, Jeff Wilson, Bill Nichols, Di Rosario, and Kevin Goe, October 27, 1991.

Bottom: Looking across the steep gully above 7151 Buckingham from east to west. The flare-up occurred under the pines at right, center.

The fire rekindles

Sunday, Oct. 20, dawned hot and bright, with high winds from the east blowing towards residential neighborhoods.

Oakland fire crews had returned to the burn area early Sunday morning, and started working hot spots.

Park District Fire Lt. Kevin Goe was en route to duty at Station 1 at Tilden Regional Park when Park District dispatchers radioed that Oakland wanted District firefighters to pick up the hose they had left in place the day before.

Goe drove up to Grizzly Peak Boulevard near its intersection with Marlborough Terrace, where he met fire lieutenants Rosario, Jeff Wilson, Bill Nichols, and firefighter Dan McCormick. Oakland's Deputy Chief Donald Matthews and other Oakland firefighters were there, too. "When we got there, the wind was howling and there were smokers [hot spots] everywhere," Rosario remembers.

The group decided to let gravity help them. They would pull the hoses downhill to Buckingham Boulevard, then roll them up on the street. Accordingly, Wilson drove his fire rig to the bottom of the hill and Nichols came along in his Park District pickup truck, which had some empty diesel fuel cans in the back. Nichols, park supervisor at Martinez Shoreline, had driven to Tilden Regional Park that morning to fill them before diverting to Buckingham.

Because of all the wind and smoke, "our guys felt we should have been laying hose, not picking it up," Nichols said. "The mop-up that hadn't been done [on Saturday] came back to haunt us."

Considering what happened next, it is not an exaggeration to say that all hell broke loose. Just as the firefighters started hauling hose, the wind rose and the fire flared up on the west side of the burn area. "Flames just started popping out of the ground," Rosario said. Wilson connected a hose to his engine and they began to fight the fire. The hose left behind from the day before had been disconnected and was tangled, incapable of flowing water.

Rosario saw pine needles fall to the ground, catch fire, and rise again in a reverse cascade, a strangely beautiful sight. Then he heard a rumble like an oncoming train. A grove of trees exploded into flame, igniting leaves on house rooftops. From Nichols' perspective, "the whole hillside behind us blew up." Goe watched flames rise from a Monterey pine, turn 90 degrees downhill in the wind, and torch another row of trees that blew flames right into a house.

The scene was surreal as the firefighters scrambled frantically to do whatever they could. Wilson saw residents out in their bathrobes sipping coffee and retrieving morning papers. "A lot of them had no idea what was going on, because it happened so quickly," he said.

Rosario credits McCormick with saving his life. As they were advancing on flames with a hose, Rosario inhaled a blast of hot air that closed his throat. McCormick grabbed the nozzle and squirted water right in Rosario's face. That did the trick; he was able to breathe again. McCormick and Nichols dragged him back to the street.

McCormick is modest about the incident. He said he grabbed the nozzle from Rosario, adjusted it to spray mode, and let the wind blow water into Rosario's face.

"McCormick was a new firefighter, and he did a really great job," Wilson declared. "We sort of bonded that day."

Someone shouted, "We've got to get out of here." It wasn't a hard decision, McCormick recalls.



Top: A massive smoke column builds above the Caldecott Tunnel and Highway 24 after the fire rekindled on Sunday.

Bottom: Flames spread along Gwin Ridge as smoke builds over Claremont Canyon.

Trapped by the fire

Getting out of the rekindled fire turned out to be impossible. Wilson tried to drive out on Marlborough Terrace, the way he had come in, with McCormick and Rosario aboard. But all the houses were on fire, telephone poles were gone, electrical wires were down. You couldn't see more than 20 feet. Rounding a corner, they encountered a transformer about the size of a refrigerator suspended by power lines five feet above the road, bobbing slowly up and down.

Wilson backed up a block and a half on a winding road. To turn around, he had to drive into a burning carport.

Following Wilson in his Park District pickup truck with Goe aboard, Nichols had to turn using the same burning carport. At one point two Oakland firefighters jumped in the back of Nichols' truck, then jumped right out again when they saw the diesel fuel cans, thinking they were full. There was so much smoke that Goe asked, "Will this engine run without oxygen?"



A partially deployed tent shelter at a pool house next to 7151 Buckingham.

"We were thinking, 'We might have cut this a little too close,'" Nichols remembers.

All five Park District firefighters ended up at a wide spot on Buckingham Boulevard near the Tunnel Road intersection. There they were joined by Oakland Fire Captain Jeff Davis, eight or nine other Oakland firefighters, two civilian volunteers, and six local residents who had not been able to escape.

At that spot they fought the flames for several hours. There was fire all around. Falling power lines sparked and flashed in the smoky darkness. Houses and garages in that hillside neighborhood were up on pillars, and as the supports burned through, the firefighters could hear garage contents, including refrigerators, washing machines and automobiles, crashing down the steep slopes.

The firefighters were able to save two houses at the intersection. They had a water supply from a working hydrant for an hour or so. Eventually



The pool located at the house next to 7151 Buckingham. Oakland firefighters and the property owner hid here as the fire passed over at 1 p.m. Wilson, Goe, and Nichols subsequently found this group and escorted them down Buckingham.

two Oakland firefighters and a woman appeared out of nowhere. The three had taken refuge from the fire in a nearby swimming pool, from which the firefighters now drew more water. The woman's house was destroyed.

The situation was dire. Winds were so strong that water from hoses would be blown aside before it reached flames. On top of everything else, an alarm in one of the houses was ringing incessantly. Goe finally went in with an axe and chopped away the electric wires.

"The heat was incredible," Goe said. He remembered lying on his back in the street, holding a hose, with his water-soaked pants steaming.

Rosario, Goe, and McCormick cleared away landscaping and jute netting from one of the two houses, which was vacant, then set a backfire to save it without use of water, because at that point they didn't have any. Once the house was secure, they sheltered the civilians inside.



Jeff Wilson backed down this driveway at 7151 Buckingham with Nichol's help to reposition his truck to escape the flames.

Frances Saves the Payroll

The weather seemed very strange at Lake Temescal on Sunday morning, Oct. 20, Park Supervisor Frances Heath recalled. “It was almost ominous how dense and quiet the air was. A lot of people said they had a foreboding.”

When the fire from Saturday reignited, the smoke and flames were clearly visible from the lake. The only staff on duty were Heath and a lifeguard.

By noon, Heath could see the fire burning in the houses across Highway 24 from the Temescal swim beach. Five minutes later the fire had jumped the freeway and ignited brush on the slope by the park’s north entrance. As Heath and the lifeguard approached, flames roared up the hillside and into ridgetop neighborhoods. The fire later also crossed Highway 13 into the park.

Heath suffered from asthma, but said she wasn’t too concerned. In case of need, she borrowed a respirator from the lifeguards’ office.

Pandemonium prevailed during the next several hours as Heath and other Park District staff helped park visitors to evacuate, ferried District vehicles to safer locations, and tried to cope with increasing numbers of sightseers who chose Temescal as the

perfect spot to photograph the advancing flames. For a time, she had to evacuate Temescal herself.

Many people seemed to be unaware of the gravity of the situation. Out of concern for this, Heath drove around the park neighborhood, urging residents to gather their valuables and leave.

She also was able to accomplish two critical tasks. She set a sprinkler to run continuously, wetting down the roof of the Beach House and Park District controller’s office containing all the original contracts and financial records. She also removed the money from the safe in the park office.

Heath considered trying to save the park office, shop building, and a couple of small storage sheds, but decided there were too many trees and other flammable materials around. All were destroyed in the fire, but the Beach House was unscathed.

Steve Jones, the District’s chief of park operations at the time, arrived at Temescal about 4:30 p.m. with District Assistant General Manager Jerry Kent. Heath drove up to them through the smoke and destruction. “Don’t worry, boys, I saved your paychecks,” she declared.

In doing so, she also saved a historic building, constructed by Depression-era work crews, which was the District’s first in-park headquarters. Besides earning accolades from the District, both for her actions and her eloquence, Heath received an award from the insurance company whose policy covered the building.

The experience changed her outlook. “Ever since then, I’m more apprehensive about the possibilities of disaster happening,” she said. “It sort of shapes your perception of what’s actually possible.”



After taking protective actions in the park, Temescal Regional Recreation Area Supervisor Frances Heath drove her pickup around the nearby neighborhood, warning residents about the fire danger.

Nichols gave full credit to Captain Davis. “Talk about a battlefield leader,” he said. Davis stayed calm and focused, directing the firefighting.

After the fire passed over, Nichols and Davis drove down Tunnel Road looking for a way out. They had to use a winch to clear the road of debris that had crashed down the hillsides. At Charing Cross Road they discovered the burned body of a woman.

They covered her and placed her in Nichols’ truck. Farther down, there was a dead man. They took both bodies to a temporary morgue at the high school on Broadway.

Wilson, Goe, Rosario, and McCormick drove down Tunnel Road, too. The apartments at the bottom next to Highway 24 were still burning, with nothing left but foundations. They drove onto Highway 24,

which was deserted except for a Caltrans vehicle parked in the middle of the freeway, fully ablaze.

As they headed east through the Caldecott Tunnel, Goe could look back and see smoke and flames. The tunnel took a turn, and his view was obscured. “It was just like the gates of hell closing,” Goe said. Ahead of them the sky in Orinda was blue and clear.



Top: A Park District Fire Department pickup truck, burned but still serviceable. In the background, the firefighter checks in at the command post on Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

Bottom: Seated in foreground, from left—Paul Miller, George Isaeff, Jovan Magpoc. Seated in background, from left—unknown firefighter from another agency, Vince Green, Stephen Gehrett. Leaning against truck, from left—Anne Rockwell and Sharon Corkin.

“You’re alive!”

There was an emotional reunion when the Park District firefighters who had been trapped reported to a command post set up at Grizzly Peak Boulevard and Fish Ranch Road. Other Park District firefighters had heard reports of fatalities, but no names had been given and radio contact was impossible. From firelines on Grizzly Peak Boulevard, they could see down into the inferno and feared their friends had died.

Rosario, Wilson, and McCormick were sent back into the burn area with an Oakland firefighter to check on a report of a firefighter down. They found Battalion Chief James Riley and a woman he had been helping to evacuate, both dead. It appeared that a falling power line had electrocuted them. The Oakland firefighter was very distraught; besides Riley’s great popularity and respect department-wide, he had been a personal friend. Another victim of the fire was Oakland Police Officer John Grubensky, whose body was found on Charing Cross Road.

Over the next two or three days, the firefighters received various assignments to put out spot fires. Along with the tragedy, there were moments of comic relief. Wilson remembers spending the night with a crew at property off Grizzly Peak Boulevard. The residents owned some St. Bernard dogs and peacocks. Freed from their enclosures during the fire, the animals burst out of the brush, peacocks pursued by dogs. The firefighters could hear birds and dogs running off into the distance, then returning to their home, bursting through the brush again, dogs still in pursuit. “It was the most bizarre thing you would expect at three in the morning,” Wilson said.

Holding the perimeter

When the fire rekindled on October 20, Oakland Deputy Chief Matthews had assumed command as operations chief, Battalion Chief Riley (who later was killed in the fire), was assigned as division commander, and Battalion Chief Ronald Campos coordinated logistics from Oakland's fire dispatch center.

Park District firefighters not trapped by the outbreak fought the fire along a line of defense four or five miles long between Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve and Claremont Canyon, keeping the flames out of university lands, Tilden Regional Park, and Orinda.

Dennis Rein, who was a Park District police officer and a District fire department lieutenant (and future District fire chief), set up a command post at the intersection of Fish Ranch Road and Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

Joining residents on a rooftop, Rein had watched on Saturday as firefighters fought the first blaze. Then he had returned to his police patrol.

On Sunday, Rein's day off, he was paged at home and told to report for fire duty. As he drove towards Orinda on Bear Creek Road, he could see a column of smoke in the Oakland hills, "very large and starting to build."

Rein drove west on deserted Highway 24, ascended Fish Ranch Road, and began to set up the staging area. At first he was the only person there. Then Park District Firefighter Jack Kenny showed up driving a fire engine with a 1,000-gallon tank. Rein assigned him a crew including Park District Firefighter Anne Rockwell, and sent them out on Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

Kenny was not a fire department officer. "I got a game day promotion," he said. The Jack Attack,



Fire jumps Highway 24 and flares up in Temescal Regional Recreation Area.

as his crew came to be known, fought to protect the KPFA radio towers and prevent the fire from jumping the road and burning towards Orinda.

Once they had established a perimeter, Kenny took a moment to look west to see where the main fire was located. "Everywhere I looked there was nothing but chimneys and smoking building foundations," he said. "That hit me hard."

San Francisco firefighters later told Kenny they had been at the '49ers football game at Candlestick Park when ash from the fire started floating down on the crowd.

Down in Claremont Canyon, Park District Fire Captain Don Goodenow was with District firefighters trying to protect houses on Alvarado Road and Amato Avenue, a very dangerous area.

The Park District contingent included Bob Bouska, Brian Cordeiro, Dave Kalahale, Dimitri Montalvanos, Chris Garrett, Britt Thorsnes,

and others. Using wildland firefighting techniques, they were able to save many homes.

At one point, with flames all around, they had to evacuate the neighborhood. As Goodenow drove out, a downed power line ripped the light bar off his truck.

Fire Captain Tim August made multiple trips with a water tender to supply the Park District firefighters on Alvarado Road, fighting the fire himself as well. When the tender's electrical system burned out, August found a tow truck driver to tow the rig. On Claremont Avenue, with the tender pump dead, August had the tow truck driver raise the tender as high as possible, then used gravity to fill an Oakland fire engine. August, the Oakland firefighters, and citizen volunteers extinguished the fire before it crossed Claremont Avenue towards Berkeley. Just as they did, the wind stopped. August saw the citizen volunteers drop to their knees and break down in tears.



20 years later, in front of the Beach House (left to right): Paul Miller, Jerry Kent, Di Rosario, Terry Watts, Frances Heath, Anne Rockwell, Annie Kenny, Kevin Goe, Bea Soria, Warren Schultz, Sue Ferrera, Dan McCormick, Mark Ragatz, Jack Kenny.

“I don’t know if it was tears of joy or sadness,” August said, “I think it was definitely both.”

Firefighters were well supplied with food. “There were these wonderful nuns on Fish Ranch Road handing out food,” Goodenow remembers. And residents of the Lomas Cantadas neighborhood, which had not been affected by the fire, set up a kitchen at the Tilden steam trains, cooking and serving to firefighters whatever they could scrounge from their pantries, like spaghetti with a chili topping. “The best food you ever ate,” Goodenow recalls.

Back up on Grizzly Peak Boulevard, Fire Lt. Anne Scheer was in charge of an all-female team of other Park District staff. Early on they had tried to drive to the Fish Ranch Road command post, but had to retreat because there was fire all around, including on the asphalt road. “It was so dark I couldn’t decide if it was night or day,” she said. “It was a weird, eerie dark, lit up from the bottom.” They discovered the flames had melted the tires on their fire truck. Later, someone changed the tires for them.

Setting up at Grizzly Peak Estates, Scheer’s crew had an assignment similar to the Jack Attack, putting out spot fires and preventing an eastward spread.

Later they were ordered to put in a fireline from Grizzly Peak Boulevard to Claremont Avenue. They were assigned a civilian contractor, a bulldozer operator named Bill Everett. Scheer said the slope was so steep that the dozer began sliding down it sideways, but Everett was so skilled that the cut was successful anyway.

After that, they worked with a prisoner crew from the state. The prisoners didn’t seem used to working with female firefighters. “But they

were great,” Scheer said. “They worked like dogs.”

At one point, Scheer and Wilson decided to go for coffee. “Everyone wanted coffee,” she said. “All they had was this crap coffee.” So they drove to a restaurant on College Avenue in Berkeley, learning, along the way, how devastating the fire had been. When they walked into the restaurant, their Nomex uniforms, dirty from firefighting, identified them. “Everybody just started applauding.” They got all the coffee they wanted, free of charge.

Scheer hadn’t seen her young children for several days. Someone brought cell phones to the fireline and said the firefighters could phone home. Scheer’s son answered. He said, “Hi, Mommy! You’re not dead! Good! Want to talk to Al [his sister]?” Scheer still teases him about that.

Other Park District staff members were posted elsewhere around the perimeter of the burn area. Mark Ragatz and Jerry Kent held the line at the south end of Grizzly Peak Estates. Bea Soria was on Broadway Terrace with a unit from Lawrence Livermore Laboratories. Temescal Park Supervisor Frances Heath single-handedly saved the historic Beach House at Lake Temescal.

Fear was certainly a factor, but more in retrospect. Anne Scheer’s assessment was a common one: “It was more traumatic after, than during, I think. During, you’re just busy.”

Park District police had a substantial role, too. From near his home in Benicia, Officer Jon King (now a lieutenant) could see a huge column of smoke rising from across the Carquinez Strait. Called in to duty along with all other police officers, King worked virtually without sleep for several days at traffic checkpoints keeping unauthorized people out of the fire area.



Water-dropping helicopters played a critical role in checking the fire’s spread and saving numerous dwellings and other structures.

“We heard about our firefighters making real brave stands, saving homes,” he said.

One of King’s jobs was to obtain enough food to feed lots of firefighters. King and Officer Robert Worthington drove twice to the Orinda Safeway supermarket and spent \$9,000 to \$10,000 on fruit, sandwiches, water, granola bars, and other easily handled items.

After the fire, King was assigned as liaison officer at a search and rescue command post at Lake Temescal. They had the difficult task of dealing with people who had lost everything in the fire.

“It was so sad.”

Chief Rubini was out of town when the fire rekindled on Sunday morning. Traffic jams and detours delayed his return until about 2 p.m., when he arrived at the Fish Ranch Road command post. In early evening, incident command responsibilities were transferred to him from Lt. Rein.

Park District Police Chief Peter Sarna also responded to Fish Ranch Road, and by agreement with Oakland, assumed overall command of police and fire operations on that flank

of the fire. Ultimately the Fish Ranch Road location became the nerve center for a multitude of firefighting support services.

The Park District helicopter unit also served a vital role on both days of the fire. At CDF’s request, the helicopter unit eventually assumed responsibility for managing air operations under extremely difficult flying conditions. Crews made many overflights of the fire to assess the situation and provide information for command decisions.

“District firefighters performed professionally and heroically throughout the firestorm, in some cases saving both property and lives,” Chief Sarna said in an initial report. “Police officers responded to assist Oakland police units in evacuation, traffic control, and site security duties.”

For everyone involved, the firestorm was a memorable experience. And they said that all the tedious training really paid off. “For us as a department, I think that was our finest hour,” Rosario said. “We shined.”

“The thing about our department back then was that no matter where you were or what your assignment was, you were with a friend,” Nichols said.

“The neatest thing for me was the realization that the Park District really did get it right,” Rein declared. “It was a wild couple of days. I’m glad we survived it.”

Prior to the Oakland Hills firestorm, the catch phrase in the Park District fire department had always been, “I’ll see you at the big one.” Afterwards it was, “See you at the second biggest.” “We knew that was the biggest fire we’d ever see,” Wilson said.



Left to right: Lt. Kevin Goe, Oakland Fire Captain Jeff Davis, and Lt. Bill Nichols on Buckingham Blvd., October 27, 1991. Captain Davis organized firefighting efforts near the fire’s origin with the District’s fire department, Oakland Fire, and civilian volunteers after mop-up operations were overwhelmed by the raging rekindle. The home at bottom, left is one of the two homes saved at the scene.



20 years later, left to right: Steve Quick, Anne Scheer, David Kalahale, Mike Avalos, Ralph Trujillo, Bill Nichols, Brian Cordeiro.

Mark and Jerry Fight the Fire

A chance encounter while responding to the Oakland Hills firestorm brought together what turned out to be a great firefighting team: Park District Assistant General Manager Jerry Kent, and Reservations Supervisor Mark Ragatz.

Kent had been notified that a fire in the Oakland hills had been extinguished successfully on Saturday. He learned more through informal channels later that day, when he hosted a barbecue for some of his staff at his Lafayette home. One of the guests was Bea Soria, who had helped to fight the fire. “Bea showed up kind of smoky,” Jerry said.

On Sunday, Kent received a call from Steve Jones, chief of park operations (now retired) who told him that there was another fire in the canyon above the Caldecott Tunnel and it seemed significant. Kent decided to check it out. Using his Park District sedan, he drove up Pinchurst Road to Skyline Boulevard.

Kent was wearing the worst possible clothing for firefighting: a Hawaiian shirt, loafers, and polyester trousers. And he had recently injured both knees in a fall in his garage. But he was not without firefighting experience. While attending college in Oregon, Kent had spent two summers as foreman of a fire suppression crew fighting forest fires.

And he had served in the Park District fire department for 11 years until management duties required all his working time.

Kent first encountered a motorcyclist on Grizzly Peak Boulevard. He later learned that the man was Joe Whitehouse, a Grizzly Peak resident and member of the Oakland Open Space Committee. Whitehouse estimated that about 15 houses were ablaze. The entire canyon was covered in dense, black smoke, obscuring the view. They later learned that the total loss was more like 800 houses during the fire’s first hour.

Then Kent saw flames advancing through brush toward a house on the downhill side of the road. Lacking firefighting equipment and water, all he could do was watch as the house burned down. Kent drove off in search of firefighters.

Meanwhile, Ragatz had been called to firefighting duty, along with every other available District firefighter. At about 1 p.m., he was ordered to take his engine from Fire Station 2 on Redwood Road and meet Oakland fire units on Skyline Boulevard.

As he drove north alone on Skyline, Ragatz became increasingly concerned as glimpses of the fire from roadside turnouts revealed its magnitude. He could see smoke streaming from the Oakland hills towards San Francisco. Ragatz had fought fires before, but nothing as huge.

“That was the scariest thing I’d ever done,” he said. “Being on your own and coming into something like that was extremely unnerving.”

Ragatz found that Skyline Boulevard had been blocked a short distance north of the intersection with Grizzly Peak Boulevard. While he was asking Oakland police officers which Oakland fire units were closest, Kent drove up.



The saved home and charred underdeck at 5940 Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

“Mark!” Kent said. “Come with me! I saw some houses back there that we can save.”

“Having Jerry appear calmed me down and gave me some confidence and feeling that now we can do something,” Mark said.

Ragatz and Kent drove back to Grizzly Peak Boulevard. There, they saw that the fire had almost reached the crest of the ridge; two houses on the downhill side were burning. Both were lost.

Fortunately there was a working fire hydrant right below the house at 5940 on the uphill side. Ragatz parked his “brush rig,” connected a hose to the hydrant, and started to work. Kent helped some residents connect other hoses to the engine to protect their homes, which were not yet burning. Ragatz fought the fire, Kent and the homeowners dragged hose for him, Kent said.

Then the fire jumped Grizzly Peak Boulevard farther north, circled around, and started to burn under the back deck at 5940. No one was home, so Ragatz and Kent forced entry and laid a hose through the garage out to the back deck.

Using tools from the garage, Kent chopped a hole in the stairs leading off the deck so Ragatz could spray water under the deck and extinguish the flames.

When Ragatz directed a blast of water at the fire burning beyond the deck, it flared up. Ragatz stepped back and into the hole, fracturing his thumb when he fell. That turned out to be the most serious injury suffered by any Park District staff while fighting the fire.

Still, Ragatz was able to extinguish the fire burning farther down the hill. All the water made the slope so muddy that he had to use his fire hose as a rope, while someone pulled him back up the hill.

Bea Joins the Fire Crews

Bea Soria, who had smelled of smoke at Kent’s barbecue the day before, also fought the Sunday fire. To do so, she postponed a trip to Tacoma to see one of her sons, who was about to enter the U.S. Air Force.

Soria, a trained firefighter, was told to join any fire unit she could find. Leaving her vehicle at Temescal, she joined a crew from Lawrence Livermore Laboratories and fought the fire in the Broadway Terrace neighborhood. They took good care of her. At one point, when she was almost overcome by smoke, two of them dragged her away from the flames and gave her oxygen. They were equipped with respirators. She wasn’t.

Soria found the fire “so devastating, but at the same time a beautiful sight.” The burning pines looked like Christmas trees. It was so hot that her soaked firefighting clothes were completely dry within an hour.

Released from duty at 11 p.m., she had no way home. Then a U.S. Navy volunteer gave her a ride,

in all her fire gear, on the back of his motorcycle. She retrieved her auto from Temescal the next day, and made the trip to Tacoma in time.

“I’m so happy to be back in my home. Thanks for saving it.”

– A grateful resident

Many firefighters, including Soria, received thank-you notes from residents. Hers, from a woman on Morpeth Street, read in part, “I’m delighted and was surprised to know one of our capable firefighters is a woman. The men speak highly of your abilities. I’m so happy to be back in my home. Thanks for saving it.”

After several hours of firefighting, Kent radioed the command post on Fish Ranch Road to send some firefighters to replace Ragatz, who was driven to Eden Hospital in Castro Valley.

Ragatz and Kent were mutually complimentary. “Just his cool and calm was real helpful to me,” Ragatz said. “He helped to refocus me a couple of times.”

“It was Mark that did it,” Kent said. “I was an invalid at that point.” Their work and that of the homeowners

essentially stopped the fire at the upper end of Thornhill Canyon and saved about a dozen homes along the ridge.

After Ragatz left, Steve Jones arrived in a District jeep and offered Kent a ride. They drove down to Lake Temescal through Thornhill Canyon, where firefighters were still fighting the fire, house by house. At Lake Temescal they met Park Supervisor Frances Heath, whose greeting – “Don’t worry, boys, I saved your paychecks” – has earned her lasting fame.



Top: Temescal Park office's burned rubble.

Middle: Tony Smith (in hard hat) inspects the neighborhood.

Bottom: The charred remains of the Temescal Regional Recreation Area's entrance sign.

The aftermath

There were five major investigations after the fire, from which emerged dozens of recommendations. Among them were the use of compatible firefighting equipment, standardization of radio communications, better incident command structure, and emphasis on ember-resistant roofing materials and defensible space around homes.

The Hills Emergency Forum, established in 1992, brings together all the agencies responsible for fire safety in the Oakland-Berkeley hills.

Also as a result of the 1991 fire, the state set up a Standard Emergency Management System, which gives agencies an organizational framework to deal with major disasters, and which has been adopted at the federal level.

After the fire, Chief Rubini participated in half a dozen interagency committees that worked to improve fire prevention measures and standardize equipment. Communication had been a major problem during the fire, Rubini said. Personnel from fire departments with different radio frequencies simply couldn't talk directly to each other.

Another system that came into its own after the fire was Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Rubini's wife, Lucy Woolshlager, who was the District's aquatic specialist, had taken a class in peer counseling. She conducted debriefing sessions for all the District firefighters.

"Just as we have repeatedly said in our nation's post-9/11 world that 'We shall never forget' when it comes to homeland security, that same phrase is true when it comes to the Oakland hills fire," said Chief Tim Anderson, the Park District's assistant general manager for public safety.

"While we will never have the ability to prevent the 'perfect storm' Diablo weather conditions, we can and must work together within our communities to control fuel conditions on the ground and take other preventive measures to mitigate the effects of another fire. First responders must be interoperable in every aspect: communications, training, compatibility of equipment, preparedness, and especially through mutual cooperation."

Jerry Kent, now retired, was the Park District assistant general manager for operations at the time of the fire. Kent has studied the fire extensively during the intervening years, writing papers and speaking at public agency meetings.

"Large fires in the hills had been predicted consistently before the 1991 fire," he said. "But what actually happened was unimaginable."

"The Saturday fire was totally different from the Sunday fire," Kent added. "Saturday was an uphill fire in low to no wind. Sunday was a downhill fire in high wind."

When the Diablo wind came up on Sunday, it fanned the flames. "The minute it got in the pines and brush, it was unstoppable."

"Even with firefighting improvements, when faced with a fire in high winds moving through crowded residential neighborhoods on steep hillsides, there will be times when firefighters will not be able to do much," Kent noted.

"It's a very complicated issue," he said. "It will be very difficult to mitigate the significant fire hazards that currently exist in some wildland and residential areas of the East Bay hills over the next 50 years or 100 years as global warming increases."

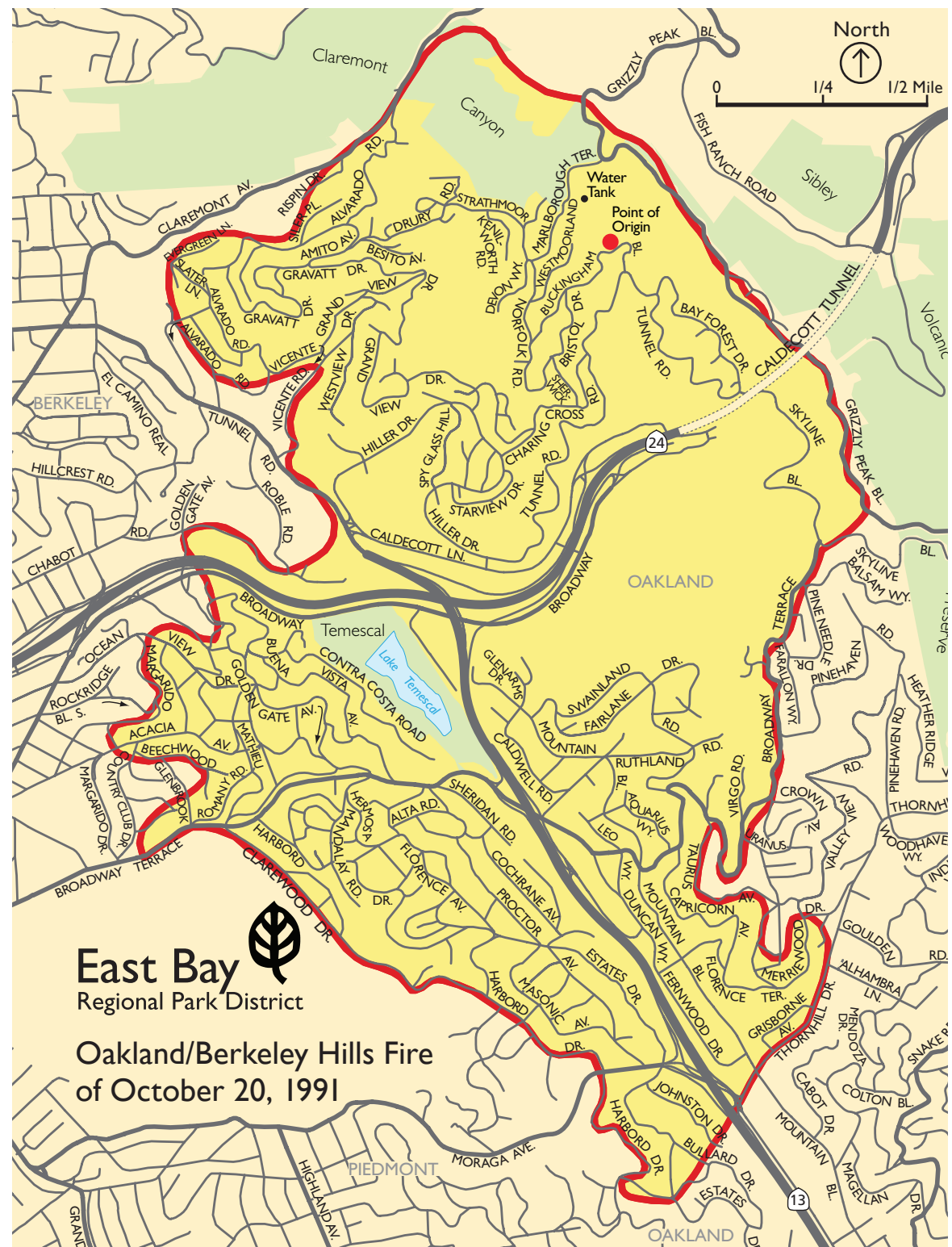
“Tangible progress does not happen all at once,” Kent said. “Rather it builds over years of sustained effort. The Hills Emergency Forum has been instrumental in providing leadership since the 1991 fire, making significant improvements in firefighting readiness.”

Kent noted that voters approved the District’s Measure CC, which provided funds for fire hazard mitigation in the East Bay hills. And after five years of hard work and citizen input, the District in 2010 approved a Wildfire Hazard Reduction and Resource Management Plan as its share of overall fire safety in the area.

“The Park District employees who were involved in fighting the fire that day were heroic,” Kent declared. “Some of them are lucky to be alive. The District has to be mindful of the risks faced by employees in fighting fires. None of us were prepared for an emergency of that scale.”

On Nov. 5, 1991, the Park District Board of Directors unanimously approved a resolution of commendation and thanks to all District employees “for exemplary service during the East Bay hills fire and its aftermath.”

For more stories and photos of the Park District’s involvement in battling the 1991 Oakland hills firestorm, see www.ebparcs.org/about/history.



Map Key	
	Fire Boundary
	Fire Point of Origin
	Estimated Fire Burn Area
	Regional Parklands

East Bay
Regional Park District

**Oakland/Berkeley Hills Fire
of October 20, 1991**



The Oakland Hills Firestorm

20 YEARS LATER: OUR STORY

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