



Poway Home Spared by the Witch Fire

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

San Diego County, California



Poway, CA - Ken and Bonnie Constable will never forget the terror they experienced the morning of October 23, 2007, when a wind driven wildfire came up to their front yard. Remarkably, their home was spared, and even though they lost a well house, a water tank, and many trees, there were no major damages to the house itself.

"We never thought we'd get a fire this close," said Bonnie Constable, "We are very thankful we still have a home."

The Witch Fire, also known as the Witch Creek Fire, originated in the Witch Creek Canyon near Santa Ysabel and threatened many communities in central San Diego County. The fire burned 197,990 acres, destroying more than 1,000 residential structures and 509 outbuildings. The Witch Fire followed almost the same ravaging path taken by the Cedar Fire in 2003 according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The Constables received the reverse 911 call to evacuate the morning of October 22 before the fire had reached their area. By that night, they could see the fire coming over the hills, so Bonnie took the dogs and left to stay with her mother in the southern section of Poway.

Ken decided to stay and was awakened in the middle of the night by one of his neighbors, warning him that the fire had reached the west and south side of his property. Ken, his sons, friends, and some men in the neighborhood helped firefighters combat the fire as much as they could. They were successful in keeping it from all of the homes on their street.

The Constables have lived in their home in Poway for almost 30 years. They bought the home three years after it was built and have done many improvements over the years to make it safer. The 2,800-square-foot home, which is solar-powered, has a stucco exterior and a Class A fire-resistant (clay tile) roof.

Some of the improvements include an asphalt driveway in front of the house, concrete slab on the sides, and a pool area in the back separate the house from fruit trees and grassy areas, creating a defensible space. A defensible space around a home provides firefighters enough space to work, and it also prevents fire from transferring from one fuel source to another.

One of the main reasons why the Constables' home did not burn was due to the fact that they removed weeds from their property, considerably reducing ground fuel. This prevented the fire from propagating too fast. Ice plant at edges of their property also proved to be efficient in stopping the fire, according to Ken Constable.

The Constables learned that the pine trees in their front yard were extremely flammable. They were burned so badly they had to be cut down. They grow a variety of fruit trees, including avocado trees. Afterwards, they were happy to see that the avocado trees were not as flammable as the pine trees.

Additional future mitigation measures include to installing a pump for the swimming pool enabling them to use the 27,000 gallons of water for firefighting and to enclose the eaves on all sides of the house. They are committed to doing what they can to make their home safer.

"I'm sure we'll be better prepared next time," said Ken. Bonnie agrees as she reflected on recent events. "You always think of a lot of things after-the-fact," she said. "There's always more you can do to protect your home, but you do what you can."

The value of the property almost 30 years ago was just under \$200,000 and it has increased in value to nearly \$1,000,000. Besides the irreplaceable personal things that can't be measured in a dollar amount, the preventive measures taken by the Constables helped save their largest investment – their home.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region IX**

State: **California**

County: **San Diego County**

City/Community: **Poway**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**

Hazard Type: **Fire; Wildfire**

Activity/Project Type: **Building Codes; Vegetation Management**

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/2000**

Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**

Funding Source: **Homeowner**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Yes**

Federal Disaster #: **1005 , 10/28/1993**

Federal Disaster Year: **1993**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **1731 , 10/24/2007**

Repetitive Loss Property? **No**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/hazard/wildfire/index.shtm>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/>

Main Points

- The Constables' home was threatened by the 2007 Witch Fire.
- Due to mitigation efforts, there was no major damage.
- Some of the improvements include an asphalt driveway in front of the house, concrete slab on the sides, and a pool area in the back separate the house from fruit trees and grassy areas, creating a defensible space.
- One of the main reasons why the Constables' home did not burn was due to the fact that they removed weeds from their property, considerably reducing ground fuel.
- Additional future mitigation measures include to installing a pump for the swimming pool enabling them to use the 27,000 gallons of water for firefighting and to enclose the eaves on all sides of the house.
- They are also going to remove flammable trees and items from around their home and their water tank.
- Besides the irreplaceable personal things that can't be measured in a dollar amount, the preventive measures taken by the Constables helped save their largest investment – their home.



Aerial View of Constables' property



Constables standing in asphalt driveway