



MVEST After-Action Report for The Marin Valley Fire of September 30, 2016

Executive Summary

The first major wildland fire the Marin Valley community has ever experienced was effectively and professionally managed by the NFPD (Novato Fire Protection District) with cooperation and assistance from NPD (Novato Police Department), Marin Valley Park Management, and MVEST emergency volunteers. 20 acres of mostly grassland adjacent to the Marin Valley community was blackened but there was no residential property damage, and no reported injuries.

MVEST was demonstrably up to this challenge, but a number of both fundamental restrictions and procedural shortcomings have been identified that could have been problematic had the challenge been greater. Remedial measures to these issues are proposed.

Incident Overview

Shortly before noon on Friday, September 30, 2016, a fast-moving, wind-driven wildfire posed an imminent threat to the Marin Valley community. The incomprehensible speed at which this threat was developing raised great concern among residents, and provided the initiative for some MVEST personnel to self-organize and respond.

Objectives of Response

Responding MVEST volunteers had two successive objectives: Help ensure the safety of park residents until NFPD arrived; then facilitate conveyance of safety information and instructions from NFPD and NPD to Park Management and subsequently to park residents.

Synopsis of Performance

Initial MVEST activities included observing the movement and action of the advancing blaze; notifying the more directly affected residents of the ensuing threat; and establishing radio communications within and among the more immediately threatened MVEST Block Captain Zones. Upon arrival of NFPD, MVEST personnel continued to arouse residents; and in addition, received and relayed instructions from NFPD and NPD authorities to residents via radio, as per MVEST training, to Park Management for automated broadcasts to residents by telephone, SMS, and/or email.

MVEST Zones 1, 2, and 3 were active during this incident, whereas Zones 4, 5, and 6 were not. Radio communications within the active zones were reported to be very good by the respective Zone Chiefs. In addition, communication among zone chiefs and MVEST Command was instrumental. Communications of instructions from NPD and NFPD to the community were effective, albeit somewhat confusing as the instructions changed—as did the fire threat and the availability of park egress—faster than communication could be relayed until both Chief Tyler and the Park Manager had been issued MVEST radios and could communicate directly with one another.

Analysis:

Outcomes

In the end, about 20 acres burned along the north edge of the Marin Valley community and the west edge of the adjoining Mar Vista community. Flames approached to within about 10 feet of several homes, however property damage was prevented; and, there were no reported injuries.

Critical Tasks

Critical tasks for MVEST centered first on quickly raising awareness of the more directly affected residents to the fire threat and coordinating among one another by radio; communicating public safety instructions from NFPD to Park Management and the community; and likewise communicating traffic management instructions from NFPD and NPD to Park Management and the community.

Most Notable Successes/What was Learned?

Aside from the precision, professional, albeit challenging and complex response by NFPD, the next most notable success was the “weed-wacked” buffer zone provided by Park Management earlier in the year. The ominous approaching flames dwindled substantially upon contact with this buffer zone.

MVEST Communication within Zones 1, 2, and 3 were effective. The presence of a Zone Chief is apparently critical to effectively mobilizing those MVEST volunteers within the respective Zone. Similarly, communication among Zones 1, 2, and 3, and MVEST Command were very effective. Radio communications among MVEST volunteers proved to be notably successful and instrumental in facilitating timely, critical emergency communications.

The critical chain of communication between NFPD and Park Management (*de facto* MVEST Command) was greatly facilitated by providing both NFPD and Park Management with MVEST radios.

Zone Chief 1 was particularly instrumental in relaying traffic management information from NPD to Park Management.

Most difficult challenges and how were they resolved?

It was fortuitous that only Zones 1, 2, and 3 were at apparent immediate risk of the fire, as all three of these Zone Chiefs were present to mobilize their respective Zone volunteers. As Zone Chiefs 4, 5, and 6 were neither present during the incident, nor had pre-established plans to cover the Zone Chief function in their absence, there were no effective mobilizations or responses from these latter zones.

The overall Marin Valley community behavior was very responsible. However, NFPD instructions changed more quickly than the community could be informed to respond. This caused some confusion in itself, and exacerbated resident traffic that hindered fire apparatus mobility. This situation improved when Chief Tyler and Park Management were issued MVEST radios.

The central problem with regard to NFPD instructions was due to the rapid and erratic action of this fire. While this situation would normally trigger an evacuation order, the main park entrance was fully occupied by fire apparatus, making it inaccessible by residents. Meanwhile, the fire was in the process of occluding the emergency exit off Meadow View Dr. This presented the only remaining option, to congregate at the clubhouse.

The most elderly and fragile Marin Valley residents were also the ones most confused and disoriented by the incident. These interactions placed a high demand on volunteer time and patience at a time both were in short supply.

What was not satisfactorily resolved?

MVEST has been operating under two restrictions, in the absence of which, MVEST response and effectiveness may have been significantly improved. MVEST is currently without a means for quickly alerting the community in general—and the MVEST volunteer community in particular—of a rapidly ensuing emergency such as this fire. MVEST has twice requested, and has twice been denied, the installation of a community siren or similar spontaneous community alarm mechanism.

MVEST has recently begun to consider establishing an account with Dialmycalls.com as one possible system for quickly alerting MVEST volunteers, but the details of this system have yet to be worked out.

MVEST has been specifically denied the capacity to “self-mobilize” by the City of Novato, yet this very first emergency response by MVEST clearly identifies the need for pre-authorization to do so. As a consequence, self-mobilization has not been prominent in MVEST emergency planning and training. As a result, MVEST volunteers were less prepared for this emergency than they might otherwise have been.

On-street parking was a hindrance to emergency apparatus in this incident. The issue of on-street parking has been addressed several times in the past by Park Management, the City of Novato, and PAC, yet the problem persists, and was a demonstrated liability in this incident.

Probably the most extraordinary events of the day were the ones that did not occur. The wind carried many live embers beyond the fire and into the park. The entire community was EXTREMELY FORTUNATE that none of these embers came to rest in any of our many remaining juniper bushes. This incident could have easily and quickly taken a disastrous turn, even with the immediate presence of professional responders.

While MVEST and many park residents have actively pursued removal of juniper plants and other “pyrophytic” vegetation, the Marin Valley community has much work ahead to mitigate the extreme hazard that those remaining plants pose.

Recommendations for Corrective Actions:

Planning and preparations

A “Defensible Space” must be established and maintained for every home in Marin Valley, partly due to their proximity to every other home, and for the community as a whole. The MVMCC community should work closely with the City of Novato, NFPD, and Park Management

as partners to pursue “National Firewise Community Recognition,” the purposes of which include establishing and maintaining residential defensible space, along with other fire prevention, preparedness, and mitigation measures.

Park Management should be assured of the full capacity to conduct and enhance the annual maintenance of the fire buffer zone for the full perimeter of the park.

The on-street parking issues should be revisited. Chronic on-street parking should be considered for restriction and enforcement.

As neither exit was available in this incident for park evacuation, a third alternative should be identified and incorporated into Marin Valley emergency plans.

Leadership and organization

The City of Novato should weigh its possible liability issues against the presently demonstrated residential health and safety benefits of MVEST self-mobilization. All trained MVEST emergency volunteers should have access to DSW (Disaster Service Worker) protection. MVEST volunteers should be able to perform the volunteer emergency services they are trained for, without the threat of forfeiting their DSW benefits.

The City of Novato should reconsider the request by MVEST for a rapid community alarm system, and at the least, consider a suitable alternative to a siren if such remains to be ill-advised.

MVEST, while performing acceptably in this incident, needs to aggressively:

- Pursue greater participation by the Marin Valley community for both volunteer members and for community acceptance, cooperation, and support
- Enhance MVEST structure, organization, and volunteer training to better accommodate the range of incidents likely to be encountered
- Pursue better means and training for more efficiently interacting with our high *per capita* very elderly neighbors during an incident
- Enhance community emergency preparedness and training

Conclusions:

The Marin Valley community is extremely fortunate to have the high caliber of professional emergency responders that we enjoy. At the same time, there is ever too often an important, if not critical, role to be performed by trained emergency volunteer organizations such as MVEST.

The fire is out; no property was lost; and no injuries were reported; but the job is far from over, and in some respects will never be. Many lessons were learned from this fire by all concerned, none the least, by MVEST. We are committed to pursue and master these lessons, and prepare our community and ourselves for the next.

The MVEST Steering Committee