

July '07 Speakers:

- I. Randy Collins, Fire Chief, Healdsburg
- II. Barry Dugan, Managing Editor of Healdsburg Tribune
- III. Don Fletcher, Sonoma County Sheriff's Deputy

I. Randy Collins: "Fire Safety on Fitch Mountain"

The chief passed out a brochure written specifically for Fitch Mountain residents and elaborated on its nine points, as follows.

"Defensible Space": "Limb up" trees to create at least 10 feet between the lowest branches and the ground. Cut brush. Thin out fuels. (The pamphlet "Living with Fire in Sonoma County" lists fuel-rich and fire-retarding vegetation.)

"An Escape Plan": Evacuate via North Fitch Mountain side if the fire is on the south side, and vice versa. The designated evacuation center is currently the high school, but may change to Fitch Mountain Elementary. Be patient—give the Red Cross time to get set up.

"Animal Evacuation Plans": Know how you're going to get pets you're your vehicle. Don't jeopardize a human life to go back in after an animal. Take pet meds with you. Animals are becoming a major issue with shelters, and they are trying to deal with it—patience is needed there too.

"Make a List": Plan to take irreplaceable items. Have copies of up-to-date insurance policies, deeds of trust, etc., all together in a briefcase you can grab easily.

"Don't Wait—Evacuate": The County's City Watch program, which should be ready by October, can make 3,000 recorded calls per hour. But don't wait for a call or visit if things seem bad.

"A Safety Zone": We all know how bad the roads are. One disabled vehicle could block the evacuation route. Your home can be a temporary shelter as the flame front passes. Then assess the situation. If there's a small fire that can be handled with a garden hose, take care of it. But if it's anything bigger, get out of there. In some neighborhoods, like Camp Rose, people could assemble by/shelter in the river. Q: Who services the fire hydrants, and do they work? A: County Department of Public Works. Ask them how recently they've been checked. (Healdsburg does it once a year.) Q: In a low water year, is there enough water in the river for helicopters to scoop up? A: The pilots are pretty good at finding deep pools. Q: What local resources would respond, and how fast? A: The Healdsburg Area Mutual Response Zone draws from Healdsburg, CDF, Dept of Emergency Services, and Geyserville,

with 10 engines, bulldozers, air tankers, etc. The tankers come from Sonoma Airport, the copters from Boggs Mountain near Napa. They have about a 10-minute ETA, unless they're involved with other incidents. Q: Is there still a tanker at Rio Lindo Academy? A: No. They have an old fire truck, but no longer a manned brigade.

“Get Involved”: The more knowledgeable you are, the safer you are when (not “if”) the fire comes.

“Mark Your Home”: A clear number can make a huge difference in a medical emergency.

“Keep Roads Clear”: Don't let parked cars block them. Call the CHP if necessary (551-4100). Q: Can firefighters move vehicles? A: We'd try—maybe with a bulldozer? Q: Who takes care of downed No Parking signs? A: Public Works.

Other Concerns: Q: Would it be effective to form a committee so things get done? A: That depends on energy, etc. Connection with FMA board would help. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.... Comment (C) from Audience: Fire Safe Sonoma has a training program called Volunteers in Partnership. Q: If you're aware of fires or firecrackers on the beach, what to do? A: Call 911 (or, from a cell phone, 431-3366). “You are the best eyes and ears we have out there.”

II. Barry Dugan, “Reflections on Two Decades of Writing about Water”

Water supply is the most critical issue in Sonoma County right now, environmentally, socially, politically, and economically, and it is “joined at the hip” to wastewater. Dugan first wrote about it in April 1986, reporting on a response to a lawsuit about reducing flow in the river. The first bureaucrat he reached at the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) rephrased the issue as “coordinated flows.” The powerful SCWA's emphasis has always been on engineering, with only recent nods to ecological protection. (Their web site is interesting, if you speak engineer.)

A quick overview and chronology of the Russian River (RR) water system: The whole system is a false ecology. Most of the water flowing past us is not from the RR basin. In 1905 a project was created to divert water from the Eel River for hydroelectric power and, later, water supply. That water goes into Lake Pillsbury and then to Lake Mendocino. The diminished flow of the Eel has had a long-term effect on that river's fishery. The SCWA was created by voters in 1949 as a separate entity, although its board and the County Board of Supervisors are one and the same. The agency controls almost all water in the RR basin. Coyote Dam at

Mendocino was built in 1959. Warm Springs Dam and Lake Sonoma were completed in 1986, and supply most of the water for Sonoma County. The 1990s is when concern about the environment and fish started having an effect on water supply and water politics; Chinook and Coho salmon and steelhead trout were listed as either endangered or threatened, and the EPA began issuing mandates about flow. Currently all public agencies in Sonoma County have been told to reduce water usage by 15%, due to concern that Lake Mendocino is being drawn down so fast in this dry year that there will be no water to discharge for fish in the fall. Officials are also having to regulate water coming down Dry Creek, because too much water in the creek (released from the dam) is not good for migrating fish. The SCWA is probably going to build a pipeline down the middle of Dry Creek Road, from Warm Springs Dam to the Russian River. Q: What is the correlation between dam building and flooding? A: The highest river flood level was in 1986, in Guerneville. The SCWA was originally created for flood control, and only secondarily for water supply. I don't think dams prevent floods.

The SCWA is now charged with supplying water for 600,000 people in Sonoma and Marin counties. Thus, water taken out of the Eel watershed, hundreds of miles away, provides water to the North Marin and Marin County water districts. Soon there won't be enough water to go around. How much longer can the RR basin sustain increases in population and still maintain the quality of life and quality of the environment? Q: Why does the water agency continue to sell water to Marin while they're asking us to reduce our usage? A: Because they can. The SCWA is getting the money from it. It has long-term contracts with the Marin water districts. His understanding is that North Marin wants to opt out soon. C: North Marin participated in paying for building the dam, so they'll stay in. The county's contract runs until 2036; their consumers are paying the highest water rates in the area.

Q: Does the water agency control access to the river? A: No, only on property that they own, such as at Wohler Bridge, where they have huge intakes. Q: There are many places where water is being drawn out and not being paid for. How is that being addressed? A: The State Water Resources Control Board recently listed as many as 200 illegal diversions between Lake Mendocino and Healdsburg. Many are large wineries; some are small vineyard owners--everything from pipes pumping water out of the river itself, to illegal wells, and ponds and creeks that are illegally damned and diverted. It takes years to get a permit to take water from the river, so citizens find it easier to go ahead illegally and say, come prosecute me. The problem is not really being addressed at the state level; there may eventually be a negotiated deal with an amnesty period. Water rights are a complicated issue in California. Some towns in Sonoma County (like Windsor) still don't have vested water rights. Healdsburg has some water rights, but in some instances they're subordinate to the water agency's.

And on to the wastewater issue: The SCWA got into the wastewater business several years ago and took over several small wastewater districts, such as Forestville, Monte Rio, Occidental, and Guerneville. It is currently proposing the North Sonoma County Agricultural Reuse (NSCAR) program, the second-largest public works project in Sonoma County history (after the creation of Lake Sonoma). The project entails fifty miles of pipeline to ship billions of gallons of highly treated wastewater to agricultural users for irrigating crops, at an initial cost of \$400 million. Some people in agriculture and the wine industry welcome the idea of a permanent source of water, because the reality is that urban users will probably be given higher priority for getting scarce water than grape growers in Alexander Valley (AV) or Dry Creek. Environmentalists are skeptical about the proposal, to put it mildly. There is not enough scientific evidence to say that treated wastewater is safe. A special concern are “emerging contaminants,” things that are not now being measured or regulated and have been known to cause serious health effects in small doses, such as endocrine disruptors that have caused documented female-ization of fish. And this is water that they’re proposing to allow to build up in the soil and put on crops and produce world-class wine with.

C: We know there are big “spurs” or pipes already in place on the property of big players, like Gallo, and huge tanks have already been built, so this (NSCAR) is something that’s been in the works for a long time. A: You’re right. The Geysers pipeline was built by federal utilities on behalf of the regional wastewater system, and they assured us there would be no discharge to the river from it. They’ll say now that’s not really what they meant. But spurs/turnouts were built at the time at 101 in Geyserville, and at the AV Bridge, and probably other places. Almost all the water for the Reuse project will come from the Geysers project. There’s no agreement with Santa Rosa (SR) in place to make that water available, but this “boondoggle” is proceeding. The draft EIR has been reviewed, and there were public hearings. It will be a year before the final EIR is complete, and another 2 or 3 years before construction starts. C: SR built the Geysers project when they got in trouble for discharging into the water, and now, after they got bailed out, they’re starting this other project—this doesn’t seem quite right. A: No, it doesn’t seem right. The Geysers pipeline and Reuse project are separate projects. But SR “assured” (not promised) us that they wanted to stop dumping their wastewater, which we used to call “sewage,” into the river. Now it’s called “recycled water,” and it’s becoming a valuable commodity, putting SR into a position to bargain with the water agency about pricing. C: Monthly sewer charges are astronomical now. A: And they’ll keep going up. The City of Healdsburg is behind the curve and it’s costing a lot of money to catch up.

Q: What is the State of California doing about these issues? A: “Well, they’re addressing it at the administrative and bureaucratic level.” [Laughter] C: “...People should go up there and raise some hell and find out what they’re going to do about it.” A: “I agree. I’ll be on the bus with a camera.” It’s frustrating to work with a Byzantine bureaucracy, with people trying to protect their jobs. Going to a Board of Supervisors meeting would be closer than going to Sacramento.

C: The National Marine Fisheries agency is a very big player in the water scene, trumping even state agencies. A: Yes, they issue the regulations and demands, such as cutting flow, that involve the fish. Q: Do they have priority over the Army Corps of Engineers as to controlling releases? A: The Corps controls the water up to the flood control level; below that it’s controlled by the water agency. (The “Press Democrat” weather page shows the levels of Lake Sonoma, currently at 92%.) Q: Why is so much water being released from Lake Mendocino now, like over 200 cubic feet a second, instead of 85? A: As of July 1, the low flow went into effect.... Q con’t: I was just passed some numbers—that must mean for me to be quiet. [Laughter] Q: Is low flow the future we can look forward to? And what is the likelihood that the AV turnouts will be used to release effluent into the river? A: Yes, although there’s been an expensive study done about raising Coyote Dam to increase the capacity of Lake Mendocino, which is about 10 years away, at least. I’d say the likelihood of using the AV turnout is more than 100%. In addition to the NSCAR project, SR is also looking into building storage ponds near the Alexander Valley Bridge, on Jordan property, for releasing wastewater in the winter. Q: What is the status of the proposed cooling towers out by Chalk Hill to reduce the temperature of wastewater released into the river? A: It’s no longer considered feasible to send water a great distance and then cool it; last I heard they were considering cooling it at the source.

Q: If River Rock Casino expands its operation with a resort hotel, where would they get their water? A: That’s a good question. I think they have a source of well water on their property. C: They have a sewer treatment plant up there that’s unbelievable! Q: Is it true that the aquifer of the river is 70% collapsed? A: I can’t say. The aquifer is invisible, and there are a lot of things going on there. The US Geological Survey is finishing a study of the AV water supply—how much is stored annually, taken out, and how much is available. They’re finding that the margin is getting smaller and smaller. In the 1980s and ‘90s there was a battle over river gravel mining. It was said that the deep pits damaged the aquifer and thus affected the clarity and purity of the water. But I don’t know that anyone can say that it’s collapsed....

C: Your presentation is great, but we need to do something after we walk out the door. The people should take a stand! A: Give me 600 words by Monday and I’ll put

you in the paper next week. The Tribune's editor is Kerri Russell (kerri@sonomawest.com).

III. Deputy Don Fletcher, "Handling Problems on Fitch Mountain"

Fletcher is a "direct-contact" deputy who works for the Sheriff's Department in the Community-Oriented Policing unit, and he has recently been assigned to this general area. His zone is from Larkfield to Cloverdale. He'd never been to Fitch Mountain until he came up last week and wrote some parking tickets. He works Tuesday through Friday during the daytime. He's glad of this opportunity to answer questions about what service the mountain residents can expect from the Sheriff's Department, and he'd like to find out what problems we are having here.

The Fitch Mountain area had only 112 calls for service from June 2006 to May 2007, only 2 a week, which is pretty low. There were a couple of burglaries, but nothing major. All the cars he cited last week were from out of the area. He handles everything from junker cars to drug sales with guns. He's sorry that the property owner who wrote the email got no response when needed at the beach. It may have been due to a problem with staffing. From 2 am to 2 pm there are only two deputies at a time to handle an area that stretches from Shiloh Road to Cloverdale. At 2 pm one more comes on; then at 4:00 a fourth comes on duty, and a graveyard guy comes on at 9:30. With so few patrolmen available, they have to respond by priority. Loud noises (priority 3) loses out to a shooting elsewhere. Fighting would bring Healdsburg police, the CHP, and Windsor deputies.

He will be glad to come up and write tickets, but on a publicly maintained road with No Parking signs posted, the CHP is the primary agent for that. If an illegally parked vehicle is blocking the road or an emergency vehicle couldn't get through, they'll remove it. On posted private property, you can call a tow truck yourself, but you need to notify local law enforcement so they'll know it's been towed and not stolen.

Q: About the problems on Del Rio Beach--can there be daily surveillance there, and help when needed? A: Of course. The lifeguards are not police officers, and they should call us if there's a problem they can't handle, like drunks or people who won't leave when the beach closes, etc. That is the job of the Sheriff's Department. Deputies WILL come, unless they're already on another, priority call. He will report the need for extra oversight at Del Rio, especially on busy weekends, when he goes back to work. Note that Deputy Fletcher doesn't have a key to the Del Rio parking lot gate (yet).

Q: What are our rights about trespassers going across our property to get to the river? A: You need to post signs clearly marking it as private property. Then you

can call the Sheriff and lodge a complaint and have trespassers arrested, or simply have them warned and roused off the property. Property owners whose land includes “deeded access”—a public right-of-way to the water—can call the Sheriff for underage drinking, etc. They’ll be cited and their car will be towed and they won’t come back.... Rowdy floaters are hard to pin down to one place, but you can call and give a direction. No open fires or even barbeques are allowed on any beaches now—call the fire department to report any. You can’t drink alcohol in public unless it’s a designated event or at a park where it is allowed. C: Residents have to show some responsibility too, following the rules themselves and having their guests do so also.

Residents can call in suspicious vehicles that you don’t recognize, especially at night. C: 2:30-7:00 seems to be a big time for partying kids during the summer. Dope-smoking kids often park on Riverview 4ish. Speeding is a problem, especially at night.

Fletcher’s number is 732-0171.