



Spot fires burned throughout the foothills for weeks following the initial blaze Nov. 8. The Camp Fire, which claimed at least 86 lives, was fully contained Nov. 25.

PHOTO BY MELISSA DAUGHERTY

“When they cut them down, they lop off all the branches and leave them on the ground or in the slash piles—which, if anything, makes the fire danger worse.”

So far, the ability of crack firefighting crews to pounce on small brush fires before they turn into full-scale infernos is probably all that’s kept the area from becoming a moonscape these past few decades.

Crist has described witnessing the hair-trigger preparedness of area emergency teams, but Brown says fire conditions on that particular day were very cooperative.

“It was fairly early in the morning with almost no wind,” he said. “If the arsonist had done his thing with a 15 mph wind, we’d still be mopping up.”

In other words, all the men and equipment in California won’t be able to stop a fire on the Ridge if

some drooling cretin gets weird with a pack of matches on a bone-dry day in October with 100-degree temperatures and 30 mph winds.

Obviously, though, the more firefighters and equipment we’ve got up there, the better. And one of the best weapons against a catastrophic Ridge fire, argues who else but Thomas, is the California Conservation Corps crew stationed at the Butte Fire Center in Magalia.

This outfit, with its three 17-person firefighting crews and accompanying equipment, narrowly escaped the state budgetary ax a couple of years back and remains in the area only because our elected officials tend to scream bloody murder every time somebody talks about closing it down.

“This is our bright point up here, our hope,” says Thomas, who expresses great admiration for local fire departments but doubts their ability to respond in time once a really bad fire takes off.

During the aforementioned fire drill in June—during which 600 people and 60 fire engines battled a

simulated fire driven by relatively mild, 10 mph winds—fire crews were unable to knock down the blaze to the supervisor’s satisfaction.

“Steve Brown and I sat up on Adrian Drive and watched the fire burn right over us,” he said. “We told the fire to take an hour off and let the firefighters catch up with it. A real fire wouldn’t be quite so accommodating.”

Fire crews reported artificially low response times, Thomas contends, because crews were alerted to the drill in advance and parked their fire engines in strategic locations before it began.

Nonetheless, Thomas was impressed with the ability of the various agencies involved to communicate with each other and plot strategy together. “Everything went like clockwork as a drill,” he says, “but as a test it was a complete failure, in my opinion.”

Failure or not, until somebody cuts loose some funding and builds that highway extension, preparedness is about all they’ve got up there.

Sure, Thomas is no doubt pumping this thing for all the political exposure he can muster, just as any elected official would. But anybody who talks with him will find that he’s genuinely horrified at the thought of all those casualties and frustrated at the failure of so many people to take heed.

As for the dire predictions of our fire officials, these people aren’t crying wolf. It’s going to happen, and it’s going to be bad. □

**“The public needs to understand that I’m not going to kill any of my firefighters to save a house somebody built at the end of a long dirt road with a deck hanging out over the canyon and brush growing all around.”**

—County Fire Warden Steve Brown

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