



## March 2024 Newsletter

# *Reducing Wildfire Risks*

Notes from PMKCA's 2024 annual membership meeting.

Joe Clarkson

PMKCA President



*Fire Captain Peter Andrade speaks to PMKCA members at the January Annual Meeting*

On January 30<sup>th</sup> PMKCA held its 2024 general membership meeting. Invited speakers presented valuable information to the attendees on several topics, some of which will be covered in the future, but this report covers the presentations and discussion about reducing risks from wildfires.

Captain Peter Andrade, one of three fire captains at the Honoka'a Fire Station, started the discussion about wildfires. He pointed out that the area served by the Honoka'a Fire

Station (fire response and EMT) is quite large. For fire response, from Mile Marker 48 (near Waimea) to MM 32 (Kainehe, or “Donna’s Cookies”), and EMT deployment from MM 42 to MM 21.

Captain Andrade then described the types of trucks and equipment located at the Honoka’a station, as well as other equipment (helicopters, for example) available in fire situations. For big fires, firefighting equipment and vehicles may come from all over Hawaii Island to fight the fire.

He explained that Volunteer Fire Companies (our own VFC “8 Alpha”) can assist when they are activated by the Fire Department and are sometimes first on the scene at new fires. He talked about the two major tactics used in fighting wildfires – “offensive” and “defensive”. Offensive tactics are used to keep an active fire from spreading. Firefighters are deployed directly along the edges of a fire and use water to suppress fire activity. Defensive tactics are focused “ahead of the fire” to establish defensible lines, fire breaks, or to stage equipment. “If you see us standing around far from the fire lines,” he said, “don’t think we are doing nothing! We’re ready to fight the fire from the best position.”

Captain Andrade answered quite a few questions about fire safety and preventive measures that property owners could take, including how owners on catchment can fit their water tanks with connections so that local water supplies can easily be accessed by the firefighters. “We’re always looking for water.” Most water for tankers and pumpers comes from county hydrants, but it is often the case that there are no hydrants near a fire.

Helicopters generally lift water out of ponds, reservoirs or portable tanks. Those residents who wish to make their own sources of water available should contact the fire department to discuss that possibility with them.

One question concerned evacuation procedures. The fire department concentrates on fighting fires, but will notify the police department and civil defense when an evacuation is needed. People are notified by officers going door to door, text and email notifications for those who elect to receive them, and by radio and television announcements.

Everyone should be aware that grid electricity may not be available during a fire, either because the fire has damaged grid equipment or because the electric utility shuts off power as a safety precaution. When grid power is out, phone and email may also be unavailable. This can make emergency communication difficult. We should all ensure that we can keep our cell phones charged even with the power out. Backup battery “power banks” that can keep a phone charged for several days are available for twenty to thirty dollars.

Jim Millar, captain of the Pa’auilo Volunteer Fire Company 8-Alpha, spoke about his introduction to the “Firewise Program,” a US-wide initiative to educate communities in fire prevention, train residents in fire prevention practices, and to honor communities

with the distinction of being a “Certified Firewise Community.” Jim, with his fire-fighting experience, is part of a three-person team within PMKCA (also Eric Burkhardt and Ruth Bennett) that is considering whether our mauka Pa’auilo and Kalopa communities would benefit from becoming so certified.

Jim attended a two-day training session to learn about becoming a “Wildfire Home Risk Assessor” – a person qualified and certified by the Firewise program to, at residents’ requests, evaluate homes and properties for their wildfire risk potential and make suggestions for improvements. Jim described in general the types of risk considerations residents might wish to know about – the potential for airborne flaming embers to ignite materials around their homes, trees and flammable landscape plants too close to structures, home structural materials and other flammable items.

Jim also talked about issues with access by fire-fighting equipment. Access by the heavier fire department vehicles can be limited by low weight-capacity wooden bridges. Affected roads in the PMKCA area are all of Kukuipapa, a half-mile stretch of Paauilo Mauka, the upper half of Pohakea Mauka, and all of Pohakealani).

Jim said he could see the value of these risk assessments, either under the auspices of Firewise or otherwise. Whether the whole commitment of time and effort is appropriate for a diverse community of our size is still being considered; but PMKCA sees the value in providing more education, tools, and methods to our community members so that we are all safer when, inevitably, a wildfire is on our doorsteps again.

Melissa Harmon of Kamehameha Schools (KS) was unable to attend the meeting but sent a report to the attendees. KS owns many thousands of acres of land along the Hamakua Coast, including planted eucalyptus forests (9,700 acres are still forested) and understory plant fuels (guinea grass) on prior sugar cane lands. Those lands have been the origin of recent wildfires in the area and have been a concern to residents mauka of the forests. KS reported that there have been many projects to clear trees and plant fuels away from the highway, from Honoka’a (Mamane St) to Kainehe and on to O’okala.

Melissa also reported on the leases that KS had contracted with local ranchers to manage cattle within KS lands, reducing the risk of fires in the eucalyptus. KS also collaborates with the County Council (Heather Kimball), Hawaiian Electric (HECO), and the Hawaiian Wildfire Management Org (HWMO) whenever their missions and goals coincide.

One question raised at our meeting concerned fire department access to KS land during emergencies. According to Melissa’s report, “Our KS Land Operations team has a relationship with the Hawai’i County Fire Department and they coordinate access to the lands managed directly by KS (including vacant KS lands). In the event of an emergency and combos/keys not working, KS has authorized HFD in the path to cut locks/chains. Access to lands that KS leases out to tenants is managed by the tenants themselves.”

PMKCA will follow up on all aspects of reducing the risks from wildfires. As much as possible, we will post what we learn on our PMKCA.org website. We invite anyone within our mauka Pa’auilo and Kalopa area to join us in working to make our community and homes safer from wildfires.



**PMKCA Meetings & Events**

***Board of Directors Meeting***

***Thursday, April 11, 6PM***

***Location: Denning’s house, 44-3220 Kula Kahiko Rd.***

Members with interests or concerns are welcome to attend. Contact any Board member for details.



***Join PMKCA or Renew Your Membership for 2024!!***

PMKCA dues are only \$20 per calendar year and help support so many great community activities. To join or renew, click the "Visit" link below and select "Membership".

**[Visit PMKCA.org](http://PMKCA.org)**

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