



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association

Photo courtesy of Karl Backus

Monthly News & Updates

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July 2021 Newsletter



Stories from the Fire

**By Joe Clarkson,
PMKCA President**

The Gerrish Family

Sharon Gerrish, her husband, Grant, and two of their three daughters were in Laupahoehoe when they got a frantic call from their daughter at home. Hattie reported that there was a fire below their property (located at the end of Manienie road). At first, Sharon was not unduly concerned, but when Hattie called again and told them that she could see flames moving towards the farm, she realized that the fire was serious. Everyone jumped in the car for the ride home, but they only got as far as Kukaiau before they ran into a line of traffic. Both lanes of the belt highway were blocked, all traffic was stopped, and a huge column of smoke was visible in the distance.



Sharon and Emma showing Joe their burned out makai fence line at the edge of a vast burned area.

At first, they attempted to drive to Antone De Luz Road so they could drive up and get to within a shorter walk to their property from the end of the road, but the police would not let them pass. Sharon and Emma decided to walk home from Kukaiau. Grant and Leila turned around and drove back toward Hilo to drive around via the Saddle Road.

Sharon and Emma walked along the highway to the base of Antone De Luz Road, where they encountered Kelleyerin Clabough, who was evacuating her horses down the road in a trailer. Kelleyerin arranged a ride with Dereck (an Antone De Luz road resident) who kindly volunteered to pick them up and take them to the end of the road.

Even though the wind was blustery, the mid-afternoon sun made walking uphill very hot. Sharon and Emma had walked about one third of the way up Antone De Luz Road when Dereck picked them up. As they drove up the hill, they could see fire burning through the grass and trees near the edge of Lau ranch. The fire was moving alarmingly close to their route home. At the end of the road, Sharon and Emma walked along old cane haul roads and gulch crossings through the Lau ranch to their property.

When they arrived, they saw a wall of thick smoke and rapidly moving flames approaching their farm and home on three sides. All of the animals were ready for evacuation. Hattie and some neighbors had gathered all their livestock in a paddock closest to the front gate. If and when they left, the cattle and horses were to be let loose (with permission) on the Lau ranch, the chickens, rabbits, and dogs would go with them in their vehicles, and the wide-ranging guinea fowl could fly to safety. Sharon started gathering important documents, photo albums and precious family memorabilia. She was pretty sure their house would burn. Her unease was increased even more by a report that a fire truck trying to reach the fire could not negotiate a curve on Manienie Road and had to go back.

The flames rapidly approached through the thick guinea grass on fallowed land below, reached the lower boundary of the Gerrish property, destroyed all the flammable posts and braces of their boundary fence, but then reassuringly died down, not finding any fuel in the shorter grass of their grazed pasture. They watched intently as the bulk of the fire rapidly moved off downwind.

Sharon was even more reassured by the arrival of her husband and Leila just before dusk and also by the arrival of a bulldozer manned by Mark Mendes, who offered to build a fire break if necessary. Sharon and family were pretty sure it would be necessary, because

part of the fire was now burning up the hill to windward of their property, just on the other side of a gulch running down their property line. A little later Shane DeLuz arrived with a second bulldozer, along with other volunteers including Jacob Mendes and Alika Paiva (and others for whom they did not get names). The Gerrish family had never been so happy and relieved to see bulldozers before in their lives!

It was now night and the flames to windward seemed even more threatening as they lit up the sky. The Gerrishes and their friends sprayed water on and around their house while they nervously watched to see whether the flames would cross the gulch. The smoke was bad but not so bad as to drive them from their farm.

By the wee hours of the morning, it became clear that the flames and smoke were dying down and the fire would not cross the gulch onto their land. Their home was safe. The weary family was grateful to finally be able to relax and go to sleep in their very own beds.

The Gerrish family would like to thank the brave volunteers and especially the bulldozer operators who came to their farm and stayed past midnight to fight the fire if it crossed the gulch. They also thank friends and neighbors who helped get our animals ready to evacuate, and everyone else who offered help, and all the firefighters who fought the Paauilo fire!

Volunteer Fire Company 8A

Company Eight Alpha (8A) is a group of volunteer firefighters operating under the supervision of the county Fire Department. Captain Jim Millar has led the volunteer group for the last 18 years and has long been an officer or board member of PMKCA.

Jim told me that company 8A got the call to action at about 12:30 in the afternoon. Along with Jim, volunteers Matthew Baguiran, Hugh Montgomery and Roger Acdal were assigned to help protect the houses above and around the Paauilo Post Office ("manager's houses" from plantation days). At the same location, a D-9 bulldozer was working to scrape guinea grass and brush away as a fire-stopping break between the fire and the houses. The company watched as multiple piles of small logs caught fire and burned one after the other. These piles of wood were tree tops left over from logging operations completed a few years ago. The company's job was to make sure no blowing embers crossed the line and caused new fires that could continue burning toward the houses.

Around dusk, it was clear that the houses were going to be safe and 8A moved operations to Pohakea Road, which was directly downwind of the fire front and was being used as a fire break. The D-9 dozer also moved to that area and continued creating fire breaks along Pohakea Road and above Paauilo School. The volunteers helped extinguish flames that approached the road and made sure that no sources of ignition crossed it.

At the peak of the firefighting effort eight companies of firefighters, including two volunteer groups, worked on the blaze. They came from as far away as Hilo, Waikoloa and South Kohala and were supported by two helicopters. The helicopters carried water from a nearby irrigation reservoir at the end of the Hamakua Ditch to more inaccessible hot spots in the fire. After the county water tank supplying Paauilo hydrants got very low, tanker trucks were added to help move water from the Honoka'a area. Several more bulldozers from the surrounding community were called in to clear fire breaks ahead of the fire.

At 4 am it became clear that the fire would not cross Pohakea Road. Company 8A was relieved and the volunteers went home for some well-deserved rest. Jim told me he got to bed at the first light of dawn and was sound asleep at 8 am when he got a call to mobilize for a fire in Kukuihaele. The company was stood down while he was en route, so he turned around and went back home to sleep. After the initial effort to contain the fire, the 8A volunteers continued to address flare ups and hot spots at the Pa'auilo fire several times during the following week.

We should all be thankful for the efforts of all those who worked to combat the fire. With the blustery winds of that day, if the fire had crossed Pohakea Road, the 1,400-acre fire could have easily doubled in size and threatened numerous homes in the Pa'auilo Mauka and Ka'apahu communities.

We should also be aware that the volunteer fire fighters are sometimes the first on the scene of a fire. They are often the difference between a small fire that is quickly extinguished and a much larger and more dangerous fire that could destroy homes and endanger members of the community.

Captain Jim Millar encourages anyone who is interested in becoming a volunteer to contact him and begin the process of joining the group (Jim's contact information is at PMKCA.org). Company 8A is an important asset to our community. We need to support it as much as we can.



Members of 8A and their equipment at their Pa'aulo station.

From left to right: Thomas Au (recruit 1st day) Jim Millar, Ryder Millar, Brysen (Maka) Heidenfeldt (1st day as our new County Training Captain), Matt Baguiran (Just accepted to the 50th Recruit class for HFD), Wesley Morakane (one signature away from becoming an active VFD member).

Not shown are: Hugh Montgomery (recently retired, but was active during Paaulo Fire), Rodger Acdal, Bruce Mosher (recently retired), Garrett Kababik (works in California during the summer. Also Braiden Malicki (recruit taking picture).

Vehicle on left: BT8A 9 (Brush Truck), 1990 Ford F450 400 gallons capable of running 2- 1 1/2" attack lines and one 1" Brush line with one 250 gpm pump. Donated to us by Salinas Rural FD of California.

The other truck is E8A (Engine), a 1989 truck with 500 gallons, capable of running 2- 1 1/2" attack lines and 2- 1" brush lines with a 250 gpm pump as well as an auxillary pump for pump and roll operations. Donated to us by Cal Fire. Both trucks are 4WD.

Ruth Bennett

Ruth Bennett, at her isolated off-grid home off of Pohakea Mauka Rd., had watched the fire develop below and east of her. She and her neighbors shared opinions about the fire and contingency plans, should the fire reach them. As the fire advanced in their direction, Ruth called the Honoka'a Fire Department and offered the 25,000 gallons of water in her catchment tank if needed. She wondered whether anyone knew about their three homes located on a dead-end road over a quarter mile off the county road.



Thick smoke from the fire burning through eucalyptus and guinea grass less than a mile from Ruth's home.

Late in the afternoon, Ruth was visited by a police officer who advised her that the area was under a "recommended" evacuation order. Even in her alarm, she expressed her gratitude. "Thanks for knowing that we're back here!" She and her neighbors consulted and evaluated their risks and assets (Ruth's water tank, her neighbor's tractor) and all decided to stay.

The sounds of the firefighting efforts were close - bulldozers, helicopters and unexplained explosions - as a staging area was set up at the top of Pohakea Rd. about a half mile away. Smoke filled the air and ashes drifted down around her as Ruth went out to feed her sheep. A loose horse ran by, whinnying. Frightened by the noise and smoke, it had escaped its pasture and was running uphill as far as possible. (Its owner eventually was able to capture the horse and bring it home the next day.)

"What if I have to leave? Where are the carriers for the cats? What about the sheep? What papers should I collect? Why haven't I thought this through before now?" As Ruth was preparing for a possible departure, she got the news that the fire had been contained and was no longer the imminent threat to her area. She relaxed to the oddly comforting sound of helicopters and bulldozers in the distance and the smell of burning forests. The following day, on a trip down the hill, she saw that the fire had burned to the edge of Pohakea Rd. in several locations. It was a sobering close call, worth the effort in implementing a proper emergency preparedness plan.

*Note to our readers: Hawaiian Electric, with assistance from Emergency and Civil Defense agencies on all islands, has produced a new **"Handbook for Emergency Preparedness."** The handbook provides vital information and a variety of tools and suggestions that will help residents to prepare for an emergency ahead of time, to safely withstand the immediate impact, and to recover quickly and securely.*

You'll find a link to the Handbook on our website, www.pmkca.org. From the home page, click on "More".



**PMKCA Board of Directors Meeting
Thursday, July 8, 2021, 7PM**

The meeting will be held via a ZOOM conference. If you have any interests or concerns and would like to attend, we encourage you to email any Board member for details on joining the online meeting.

PMKCA July General Meeting and Potluck Picnic
Saturday, July 31, 2021, 11am - Kalopa Park Pavilion

Pending any dramatic change in Covid status on the Big Island, the PMKCA general membership meeting, potluck and bingo bonanza will be held *ONCE AGAIN* at Kalopa Park pavilion on July 31st, beginning at 11 am. We ask that all those attending be fully vaccinated.

Renew your membership in PMKCA for 2021!
(It's easy to do and it's only \$20 per year - but so easy to forget!)

You can find payment options, including an easy PayPal link, on our website, www.PMKCA.org. Under "Home", click on "Membership/Dues".

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