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Tough Times? The Face of Success.

When times get tough, the tough get learning.

Thursday March 18, 2010 was the kind of spring day you brag about to Eastern relatives. A high of 76°. Blue skies. A gentle breeze. While the rest of the nation dealt with winter, twenty-five Californian men and women gathered; their thoughts turned towards summer and preparing for wildland fire.

On this particular Thursday, a small group of the Contra Costa and Alameda County landscape industry gathered to sharpen their skills. They came from Martinez, Clayton, Antioch and Pleasant Hill. The group included certified arborists, professional landscape designers and horticultural consultants. There were work crews specializing in debris removal. Others had talents in managing commercial landscapes, open space lands and residential gardens. While their numbers might be considered small, by the end of the day their efforts would prove their might.

At 7:30 AM the men and women met in the Hillside Center in scenic Rossmore, Walnut Creek, California to begin what they thought would be a standard contractor training program. Through donuts and coffee they slowly awakened to visions from Hell. While the emphasis was on what we as humans can do, this group of twenty five was reminded of the power of nature's wrath. Assistant Fire Marshal Leroy Griffin, Oakland Fire Department engaged the audience by pointing to various participants and coaxing them to raise their hands. "You!" Three people further down the row – "You!" Skip back two rows – You! After a compressed 10 minutes the room was scattered with hands in the air. Then Chief Griffin revealed his purpose. Each hand in the air represented a structure lost during that terrible day in 1991. Every 11 seconds, during the Oakland Berkeley Hills "Tunnel Fire" a home was lost to wildland fire. The hands dropped.

Next, Battalion Chief Michael Bond, El Cerrito Fire Department provided images to vividly explain why those hands, that represented families and their worldly possessions, had been scattered through the room. He talked about why some houses were winners when a fire burned through the



community. He described why others homes were lost. He detailed how the actions taken by homeowners and landscape contractors could change the outcome when a wildland fire burns into a neighborhood. He translated the “government speak” of local regulations into language these men and women could use to make a difference.

Soon questions were flying in response to more compelling images. The audience was becoming a work crew. Maria Morales of Safe Solutions, Martinez California showed pictures worthy of the best do-it-yourself home improvement show. She had participants crush juniper needles to smell their resins. She held up a cutting from a *ceanothus* to show how the small leaves and airiness of the plant foils combustion. The group’s energy was rising. Carol Rice from Wildland Resource Management Inc., Walnut Creek, California further explained about Best Management Practices that not only make safer homes, but also protect endangered plants and animal species. She ended the presentations reminding the group that, “By working together we can have a lot!”

After a quick lunch, the participants hit the road. Destination – Acalanes Adult School. On a steep slope, 10 elite members of the group showed off their professional skills. Chainsaws whined. Branches flew. Chippers roared. Three hours and a lot of sweat later, defensible space emerged. Later this summer, if a fire should be started accidentally in the parking lot from a car’s hot tail pipe, the homes of the senior citizens located upslope have a better chance of being winners.

At the end of the day, the men and women drove home tired, but satisfied after a day well spent. Their work will endure. Until it is time to maintain this defensible space next year. Have you thought about your defensible space yet? These crews are now trained and ready!

For more information, see our website www.diablofiresafe.org or contact Cheryl Miller at (510) 536-0143. The 2010-2011 Defensible Space Program is funded courtesy of a National Fire Plan grant through the California Fire Safe Council.

*Working and living in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties
means learning to live with wildfires.*

*DFSC is a non-profit organization whose mission is to
reduce the impact of wildland fire in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.*

*While we cannot stop the next wildfire, we can help prepare to reduce potential damage and
speed recovery by bringing together residents, agencies and resources.*

Partners in this training included:

*Acalanes School District
Arthur Young Debris Removal
Bodhaine Disking & Grading
CAL FIRE Santa Clara Ranger Unit
California Fire Safe Council
City of Oakland Fire Department
Concepts for the Garden
Contra Costa Fire Protection District
Diablo Lawnscape
D&H Landscaping*

*Ed Crownholm Hauling Pros
El Cerrito Fire Department
Fairweather Gardening Service
Hills Emergency Forum
Horticultural Services Ltd..
Kensington Fire District
Moraga-Orinda Fire District
Plant Decor
Professional Landscape Management
Rossmoor, Walnut Creek*

*San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District
Safe Solutions Group
Sequoia Landscape Specialities
Simonds Design
Terra Linda Design
US Forest Service
Waraner Bros.Tree Service
Wildland Resource Management Inc*