



Decide now: Stay or leave

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When fire comes—and it will—do you stay and fight, or do you leave? The answer, according to retired Ramona Air Attack Battalion Chief Steve Butler, is “yes,” provided you have done some serious thinking about whichever one you chose.

“My personal preference is to stay and fight, but you can’t make that decision when the fire is half a mile away. You make it now— and I mean now—and then there are actions to take to ensure you don’t handicap yourself with inadequate planning when the time comes,” said Butler.

After 36 years of firefighting, much of it fighting wildfires from the ground and the air, Butler has been quietly going to meetings, including Kiwanis and other community groups, explaining the steps that need to be taken to provide the most effective defense that is possible for most people against loss by wildfires.

Butler focuses on three options:

- Evacuate your home and leave Ramona.
- Evacuate your home and stay in Ramona.
- Stay and defend your home against the fire.

“Make the decision now,” said Butler. “If you have health issues, especially ambulatory or breathing problems, your decision should probably be to leave the Ramona area. But don’t leave that decision until the last moment when all the roads are clogged with cars. Decide on that option now, and leave early.”

If you decide to evacuate the house, it does not automatically mean that you leave Ramona.

Provided there is no standing combustible material such as trees, wooden fences and outbuildings, the fire front will usually pass through in about one minute. Spend that time in your own or a neighbor’s swimming pool.

If a pool is not available, go to an open space such as the airport, the golf course or even downtown Main Street. Remember, cautioned Butler, the golf course is private property, but if you are there, take shelter in a water hazard or the middle of a large fairway.

“I have seen fairways burn, but that is an unusual situation,” he said.

Plan now for the open space options that are best suited to you, and have alternate routes to get there depending on which way the fire is traveling. And remember, fallen trees or power poles can block the way you may wish to go.

According to Butler, statistics show that your house is three times more likely to burn if you evacuate. That is because embers, anywhere from one quarter to several inches long, are left untended if you leave, and they cause most of the houses to be lost.

“Remember, the firemen can’t be spending a lot of time putting out the fire in your house, other than to prevent it spreading to neighboring properties. Their job is to fight the fire as a whole and get it under control,” said Butler.

But many of the embers that cause extensive damage can be beaten back by a home owner, especially if the home owner has a pool, pond or water tank, and has been a little proactive beforehand.

Many people turn their sprinklers on and leave, thinking it will help. “It really doesn’t,” said Butler. “The sprinklers do little good. All you are doing is helping drain the water tank, which is counter-productive.”

So you’ve decided to stay and fight. Butler believes that many officials support this option, provided proper preparation has been made, but it is not possible to make it a policy issue because of liability. No one can force you to leave your home, unless, Butler cautioned, there are minor children on the property. You are not allowed to endanger their lives by your decision to fight the fire. Make prior arrangements for them to be taken to friends or relatives who are outside the danger zone.

Next is that oft-mentioned defensible 100 feet around the house.

“Take that seriously,” said Butler. “It needs to be at least 100 feet, more if you live on a hill. I have seen flames 150 feet long racing up hills—maybe only for a few seconds, but sometimes, that’s all it takes.”

“I know there are protective gels on the market that you spray on a surface and the gel swells up and holds water. The idea is that if an ember hits, the ember goes out. But in the experiments I have seen and done, especially with the low-humidity Santa Ana winds here, the water evaporates within a few hours and leaves you with little protection unless you are there to respray the surface with water,” said Butler.

“I am not trying to turn everyone into a fireman,” said Butler. “But just as the government says it is a good idea to have a fire extinguisher in your kitchen and smoke detectors in your home, it is a good idea to have a

few tools handy and a little knowledge available that will help protect your home from wildfire.”

The 100 feet of defensible space does not mean that your property must be turned into a desert, Butler stressed. There are lots of landscaping options that are both attractive and fire safe, he said.

So, the fire is coming. Have at least two people—husband and wife, neighbors—working together in case one is injured. Your job is to put out embers. Dress appropriately: long-sleeved cotton shirt, leather jacket if you have one, long pants, leather gloves, preferably boots, goggles, a head covering to keep embers out of your hair and a bandana for your lower face.

All lawn and patio furniture should be in the garage or thrown in the pool. In high winds they can become projectiles that injure people or break through windows and glass doors permitting embers to enter the house, and the battle is almost lost.

If the fire front is going to cross your property, stay outside putting out embers as long as you can. But when the radiant heat is too hot on your face or ears, go inside the house, which needs to be fully closed up, and take hoses with you to prevent fire damage. “I don’t care how hot it is inside, it will be a lot hotter outside when that front goes through,” said Butler, who cautioned people to be vigilant and not get caught at the last minute.

“That’s what happened to people in the big Australian fires. They were driving along the back roads and it got so hot in their car that they jumped out—and died,” said Butler.

“Provided you have cleared combustible materials from the property, the fire will quickly pass, then go outside and check for embers, which can come from more than a mile away,” said Butler. “I recommend you put a smoke detector in the attic. If the ends of a tile roof, down near the gutters, are not closed off, embers can quickly be sucked up under the tile and into that attic. Have a ladder in place so you can check the attic occasionally, and another in place to give access to your roof.”

Finally, have a backup plan, said Butler.

“If you have decided to stay and fight but find that it gets too scary, have a backup plan to evacuate, but stay in Ramona— maybe a school is nearby with large open spaces, or a shopping center parking lot. Just make sure you have adequate water (three gallons per day per person), food and important papers in the car, and the car pointing in the direction you wish to leave.

“Then,” he said, “leave.”

And for those people not prepared to take these precautions, Butler suggests they make the decision to evacuate right now, and that they do it at the first sign of danger, “or,” he said, “they will spend hours on the road behind thousands of other vehicles.”