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Drawing the line: Locals train for fire season

Neal Ross | Sonoma Valley Sun

Imagine that you're walking through a hay field south of Schellville, along a smoky red line burning gold into black with a sound like a million pounds of frying bacon.

Heat licks up your legs as you stumble over the uneven ground with a water-heavy hose on your shoulder, pointing the nozzle wherever you can find a target. The hose's other end is attached to the fire engine behind you, which pushes you irresistibly along the flame's path of travel. The first five minutes are exhilarating, the second five tiring, and the subsequent time becomes an unending mélange of smoke and fire.

Now imagine doing that for days on end, up and down hills and through tangled forests, stopping only for a 15-minute catnap wherever you can find it ... and you'll have some small idea of what local and state firefighters have been dealing with this year.

"To get our personnel out to do live-fire exercises like this just better prepares them for the actual events," said Spencer Andreis, division chief with the Sonoma Valley Fire and Rescue Authority. "The fire season's still early – so the more training we can get under our belts prior to the height of the fire season's impact, the better."

Andreis and six firefighters (plus a Sun reporter and photographer) are on the last day of a recent weeklong training session. Two "Type 3" brush engines and a water tanker stand just off a dusty road almost indistinguishable from the surrounding hay field, with vast black patches here and there marking where nearly 80 firefighters from a handful of Sonoma Valley fire departments – Kenwood, Glen Ellen, Eldridge, SVFRA, Schell-Vista – have been lighting and quenching fires in quick but weary succession.

Also participating in the extinguishment exercises has been the local Cal Fire crew from the Highway 12 station near Glen Ellen. "They've been real stretched thin also," Andreis says.

"We've gotten one engine from them, but that's about all they've had in their station all season." Each engine has three people attached to it – a driver and two-person hose crew. Andreis trudges across the field for a hundred yards or so, then bends down with a liquid-fire "fuzee" (an igniter used to initiate the burning of a propellant). Soon the air is dancing from the rising heat, and dirty brown smoke boils into the sky as six-foot flames begin licking up another acre-sized morsel.

"To fight the fire, you can flank it – do a pincer attack where both engines take each flank and meet in the middle," says SVFRA Capt. Jeff Paganini, gesturing as the fire begins burning in earnest. "And then there's a tandem attack we follow, which we're going to do – he's going to take the lead, and we're going to follow him up [along one flank]. ... If he misses something behind him, I'm there to pick up the slop."

Paganini adds that while both attacks are standard practice, the day's moderate winds dictate the choice of tactics.

"Normally in these conditions at this time of year, Cal Fire doesn't want us attacking the head [flame front]," Paganini explains. "They want us to flank the fire, because it's a lot safer going up the edges than cutting across the head."

Once the fire takes hold, the engines and their crews rumble forward, spearing the advancing flames with intermittent silver gushes. Inside the truck's cab, the air is cooler, but not by much – when the wind shifts, all that can be seen through the windshield is a blank gray-brown and

swirling black ash.

Kate Bruno, daughter of SVFRA Capt. Mike Bruno, watches Andreis set another fire from the fire truck's comparative shelter. It's her first year as a volunteer firefighter, and although Bruno says she's learned a lot, she adds that nothing can compare with hands-on training.

"I get to be on the nozzle and put out some real fire," she says, adjusting her helmet and opening the engine door. "This is a great learning experience, and here I go."