

Rocket sparks hillside blaze

8/10/99

By Neal Ross

A malfunctioning model rocket touched off a five-acre burn west of Sonoma Monday afternoon – and a California Department of Forestry official said the blaze is a warning for Valley residents not to be deceived by recent cool temperatures.

“This should be a real lesson to you, that even with the weather that we’ve had, you put some wind on the fire and it’ll burn real well,” CDF Battalion Chief Roy Sprague said Wednesday. “...This incident, had the weather been the normal weather we experience, could have been a major fire.”

Monday’s blaze began shortly before 5:15 p.m. on an Elderberry Court hilltop in the exclusive George Ranch subdivision, after a model rocket fired by two young boys came down on the nearby Robert Imhoff property.

The flames, fueled by dry grass and pushed by an offshore wind, quickly spread downhill. Thick, white smoke bunched up and hung cloudlike just below the ridgeline, covering almost the entire southern half of Sonoma Mountain. Numerous Sonoma residents reported that they could smell the fire from within the city limits.

A total of 10 engines and 36 firefighters from CDF, and the Valley of the Moon and Sonoma fire departments – along with a water tender apiece from Schell-Vista and Glen Ellen – converged on the hillside, containing the blaze by 5:37 p.m. Their efforts were aided by two Santa Rosa-stationed CDF water-bomber airplanes, which dropped a total of 1,000 gallons to halt the fire’s downhill advance.

“It pretty much burned the open meadow area, skirted the tree line and didn’t damage the trees,” said Valley of the Moon Fire Chief John Keane, adding that no injuries or structural damage resulted.

White pennants of smoke issued in the fire’s wake, as rake-wielding firefighters scrambled down the blackened hillside. Nearby, Sprague quietly but firmly reprimanded the two amateur rocketeers, whose names and ages were not released.

While commending them for confessing their misdeed, Sprague pointed out the enormous expenditure of time, manpower and equipment their actions caused.

“The kids involved were real upfront about it, and so was their mother,” Sprague said later, adding that CDF authorities may eventually charge the family for the cost of quenching the blaze.

“We typically don’t make that decision at this level, (but) if I had written a citation, it would have been automatic,” he said. “I have cited juveniles before, and their parents – when these things happen, the parents are as liable as the kids.”

Keane said the lesson seems to have sunk home with the boys, who apologetically visited the Valley of the Moon and CDF firehouses Tuesday. “They came in with cookies and sorry notes,” he said.

Despite the Valley’s recent cool spell, Sprague said the 1999 fire season is just getting started – due largely to the fact that the year’s heavy rains ceased in mid-April, giving grass and brush an additional six weeks to dry out.

“As soon as this weather pattern breaks, we’re going to see all sorts of activity,” he said. “People need to pay attention and not think that because it’s cool and overcast, it won’t burn. ... It’ll burn.”

But Sprague said most local residents seem to be aware of the Valley's ever-present fire threat, and are taking the proper prevention steps – keeping a 30-foot “defensible space” around homes and other structures, capping chimneys and combustion engines with spark arrestors, and trimming low-hanging tree branches.

“I think people overall, every year, are probably fairly fire-conscious in the Valley,” he said. “Not all people, because you never get everybody concerned. (But) a lot of people are treating this like, ‘Yeah – we could have a fire tomorrow.’”