

## **Not My Fault: When and if the call to evacuate comes, what will you do?**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
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If you learned that a mandatory evacuation was in effect for your area, what would you do and how long would it take you to leave? Spend a moment to answer honestly. The alert flashes right now – what would you do? If you are like me, you would probably spend a few minutes wondering if the message was really meant for me and then be confused about what to do.

This is the situation that has confronted thousands of Californians over the past week as fires have rapidly expanded. In some cases, residents were first placed in an “evacuation warning” status. This is a heads up alert – you don’t have to leave yet, but may have to do so soon. It may give you hours or even a day or two to gather your wits about you, collect valuables, pack the car and figure out where you need to go. But for many people, there was no time to get a handle on the situation. The fires had flared fast and unpredictably and they had minutes to get to safety.

This year’s fire season is early and vicious but shouldn’t be a huge surprise. Temperatures are at record levels, there is ample fuel in our parched woodland areas and it takes only a small spark whether from lightning, a vehicle malfunction, or intentional human malice to set it ablaze. So why are most people like me and unprepared to leave in a few moments notice?

Social scientists in the disaster management fields have been studying this question for decades. There are many reasons why people don’t take preparedness actions including cost, lack of knowledge, concern about property security and other demands on your time. But the most important reason that pops up in study after study is how people perceive risk. How seriously do I believe in the threat? Is this a threat that will personally affect me or my family? Is the threat imminent or something that probably won’t happen for a long time? Even when academically we know the threat is there, deep down in our soul we just haven’t bought it.

There have been many personal accounts and heart-wrenching stories over the past week. An LA Times

interview (7/27) with a Redding Hospital Mercy Medical Center executive caught my eye. Rick Plummer had spent many hours at the Carr Fire command post working on hospital evacuation planning and didn’t return to his home in west Redding until 11 pm Thursday evening. By then the fire was a half-mile away and he had only minutes to collect a few things and leave. His account - “You hear about it and people that have gone through it, but until you’ve gone through it yourself, I don’t think you can 100% appreciate walking through your home and deciding what to take and what not to take.”

For Rick Plummer, a professional with responsibility for patients and staff at the hospital, the acceptance of personal risk only came home when faced with flames nearly licking at the doorway. But by then, it was nearly too late. He did take the most important action – he evacuated and he survived. But I am sure that if given the chance to redo his actions, he would have put evacuation planning at the top of his priorities and made sure he knew what to take with him.

For those of us under the cool fog blanket of the North Coast, it is even harder to perceive that we have a wildland fire risk. But coastal fires have occurred in the past and will again in the future. Conflagrations in 1908 and 1945 burned all the way to the coast with “cinders falling like confetti in Eureka,” (Humboldt Times October 1945). And fires aren’t the only reason you may need to leave your home in a hurry – tsunamis, floods, winter storms or human-caused threats may all require you to take quick action.

For the remainder of the year, I am going to suggest one action each week that you can take to making you and your family safer. Today’s suggestion is a simple one and one that I have already done. Sign up for emergency notifications. It’s a no-brainer that you want to know if a hazardous situation is developing and be forewarned if you need to evacuate. But notification isn’t automatic – you have to sign up with your county in order to get texts, phone calls or email messages alerting you that something may be amiss. In Humboldt County, call (707) 268-2500 or go to [humboldt.gov/alerts](http://humboldt.gov/alerts). In Del Norte County, (707) 464-7213/ <https://preparedelnorte.com/resources/Everbridge>. In Mendocino County, <https://member.everbridge.net/index/892807736722865/#/signup>

There are slight differences from county to county but all of them allow you to register multiple addresses such as work, home, children’s schools or other family members’

contacts. Voluntary questions include whether you have special skills such as medical/emergency response training or if you have any access or functional needs. You will only receive messages when a warning has been issued for the area you have specified – the system isn't used for alerts elsewhere or general preparedness information. And some threats – like a tsunami after a large local earthquake – have too short a fuse for the system to work. In that case, the ground shaking and shaking and shaking should be all the notification you need to head for high ground.

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