

# The Newsletter of the



January 2020

## President's Message

From where I sit, 2019 was a year to put in the rearview mirror. The first inkling was the St. Valentine's Day downpour that was followed two weeks later by the real deal. On February 27th we got it from all sides: The river hit 29 feet, flooding houses, and dormant tributaries came to life on the mountain, bringing down road-closing quantities of water and debris over and over, all along the road. Then a beautiful spring and summer were followed by some scary fire weather. The FMA and your COPE team worked with the County to schedule an evacuation drill. Well, we got it on the books only to have the fire gods decide, "It's almost Halloween! Hell with a drill—let's go for the real thing!" The evacuation was a frightening week: Go find someplace else to live for an indeterminate period along with 180,000 neighbors, give up electricity and gas, lose your cell signal and internet connections—oh! and fear for your house and belongings the whole time. We learned a lot, and it convinced me that the work COPE is doing to strengthen our connections with each other and offer opportunities to learn things that will help us be more resilient is clearly worth the effort. And since the County can't seem to find the money for vegetation management on our roads, we have submitted a grant application to CalFire to do some aggressive clearing along the main road and on wooded parcels over the next 3 years. We'll know in March if we got the grant. If we get it, we'll need your help. Keep your eyes peeled in 2020.

*Happy New Year! (Is it too late to say that?) Take care in 2020. —Pat*



**Sheriff's Lt. Mike Raasch (left) and CalFire Battalion Chief Ben Nichols (right) were among those who spoke at the post-fire debriefing at the Villa on Wednesday November 13th.**

## Family Fun Night on January 26th!

Sunday the 26th (the Sunday before the Super Bowl, as is our wont) should already be highlighted on your new 2020 calendar as the date of the 6th Annual FMA Fun Night. Don't miss the fun! And invite a Fun Night "newbie" to come with you!

If you haven't already told Ellen you're planning to come, please do so via [ellensilge@yahoo.com](mailto:ellensilge@yahoo.com) or 431-0814 and tell her what you'd like to do for the party, to complement the following schedule:

5:15—Set up begins (*helpers welcome!*)

6:00—Gathering: Deposit your potluck offering (*green salad or dessert/fruit*) and check out the Silent Auction items (*more items or offers of services needed*)

6:15—Pasta topping voting (*only one cook-off entrant so far; we need more crockpots of pasta sauce, vegies, meatballs, etc.—be creative!*) and dinner eating



7:00—Find Someone Who ... mixer

7:25—F-M-A Bingo: Two rounds of three Letter bingos and one blackout (*we could use a some more fun "White Elephant" prizes, as well as a couple of larger ones*)

8:15—Silent Auction closes

8:30—Everybody helps clean up! (Parties with school-age kids excused)

Our dinner menu is pasta with toppings, breadsticks, green salad, and dessert. Beverages will be coffee, tea, juice, and some sodas (the Silges somehow ended up with lots of Diet Coke this holiday season). **Please bring your own mug or other drinking vessel.**



**Photos from 2019 Fun Night courtesy of Bo Simons**



## **COPE (Citizens Organized to Prepare for Emergencies) Year in Review**

***by Priscilla Abercrombie and Carol Morrill***

Your COPE leaders here on the mountain and all over northern Sonoma County have been very busy again this year. We had a couple of house fires on Fitch Mountain in the spring that put us on edge, then the 1.5-acre fire on Hassett Lane that led to evacuations in the surrounding areas. That felt like enough, but then the Kincade Fire occurred in October leading to mass evacuations including Fitch Mountain. As you know, the fire was as close as Toyon Drive across the river. Those on the south/east side of the mountain still see the burn scar, and upon returning home were able to see the fire retardant that helped stop the spread. That was close!

After the fire, we had a potluck debrief at the Villa with fire officials from CalFire, Geyserville and Healdsburg; the Sheriff; Supervisor Gore; and about 100 members from the FM community. The discussion was intense as our officials described their management of the event and members of the community discussed what went well and what we need to improve upon. The information collected from the meeting was brought to the larger COPE Northern Sonoma County Leadership group (comprised of COPE community leaders, fire officials, law enforcement, nonprofits, etc.). Our issues along with those raised by the other COPE communities (about 15 now) were discussed in our November meeting. In our December meeting we prioritized the issues we want to act on in the next year. In January the groups will start to meet and plan for action. Just to give you a sense of where we are headed, the top 5 of the 13 are:

- Improvements in vegetation management on private and public property
- Formalize evacuation sign and home preparation protocol
- Assess GroupMe hierarchy and protocols for membership in each group/level
- Enhance communication – cell, Internet, HAM, NOAA, Info Sources (e.g., FB pages, web sites, etc.) and flowchart where each fits into web of intelligence sources for staying informed before and during an emergency
- Work with the Sheriff on more granular and standardized zoning for evacuation as well as a protocol for phasing evacuations for elderly, disabled, and those with special needs

FMA and FM COPE and the Mark West Springs Fire Safe Council under the direction of Fire Safe Sonoma submitted a \$1 million grant application for vegetation removal along FM Road, our primary evacuation route. It was a lot of work including acquiring written permission from landowners along the road to be submitted with the grant. Thanks to all of you who sent in your letters!

COPE was well received this year. We have broken the Fitch Mountain community into neighborhoods with a leader representing each area. COPE leaders contacted their groups during the fire through various methods such as the GroupMe app and emails, which better prepared everyone for evacuation. The COPE communities had their go-bags ready, their houses prepped, and continued to receive alerts and other pertinent information. COPE continues to recruit new members to our “family.” If you haven’t yet joined, please do so. See the FMA website for more information about COPE, who the leaders are, and to download a survey to give to your leader. We live in an area at risk for many natural disasters (fire, flood, and earthquake, to name a few) and being able to help one another is key to getting through these emergencies. Be a part of COPE and make our community safer and better prepared!

## The Beat Goes On! Concerns and Committees ...

### Road Work

We continue to track the ponderous process of addressing The Slump and the Now-Only-Half-Plastic-Covered Slide on North Fitch Mountain Road. As Supervisor Gore again promised at our Kincade Fire debriefing on November 13th, these projects should be completed in 2020. On December 31st we were told by Johannes Hoevertsz, the Director of Transportation and Public Works, that the firm had been selected for design of the repairs, and the contract would be awarded in the next couple of weeks. Join me in crossing your fingers that this winter's weather doesn't bring one or both down before they get fixed. As for the rest of the road, the number and severity of slides in February, along with some lobbying from the FMA, resulted in the Board of Supervisors including North and South Fitch Mountain Road in the County's 2020/2021 Pavement Preservation Program. With 1,300 miles of road in the County, it was in no way a slam-dunk that our beleaguered 2.5 miles would get the attention it deserves. On August 4th, a tag-team of FM residents walked Hoevertsz and a pair of his engineers along the entire 2.5 miles, pointing out all the areas where the drainage has failed or doesn't even exist. We made it clear over and over that before they slap another layer of asphalt on Fitch Mountain Road, they simply must address the unmanaged movement of water that comes off the mountain when it rains.

—Pat Abercrombie and Al Pucci

### Del Rio Woods

The Del Rio Committee only met with Regional Parks staff once in 2019 to review plans for the remaining ADA improvements and the installation of interpretive signage. Further work is waiting for funding. Our traditional October assault on Arundo donax at the park was delayed due to one of PG&E's planned power outages (there's a connection, honest). And then it got lost entirely in the aftermath of the Kincade fire. We still managed to have a couple clean-up events to augment Regional Parks' regular maintenance. Three small directional signs were placed on Fitch Mountain Rd. in the vicinity of the park to help lost visitors find their destination instead of driving back and forth around the mountain adrift. We will schedule an Arundo event in the spring once the river has receded and the weather looks stable.

—Cathy Hodgson and Pat Abercrombie



Early November, Camp Rose Beach. (Photos by EGS.)

### Septicians

The only thing that seems to move slower than road repairs is septic regulation changes. Nothing significant has happened since our last report in June. There is some movement to remove our stretch of the Russian River from the list of impaired waterways, but that doesn't look in any way like a path to relaxing the planned efforts to eliminate cesspools and non-performing septic systems, particularly within a couple hundred feet of the river. Some of us may very well receive notices in 2020 initiating the Water Board's program of Basic Operational Inspections that must be done every 5 years. If those inspections uncover cesspools or inadequate septic systems, upgrades or repairs will be required. It appears that generous grace periods will apply. We'll keep you posted.

—Pat Abercrombie



## CSA41-Fitch Mountain Water Advisory

**By Donita Proctor**

*[Much of this has been e-sent via the Fitch Mt. Info list, but it bears repeating. —Donita]*

Your small but mighty Water District Advisory Committee had our quarterly meeting on 12/11/19 with the County and Russian River Utility (RRU), which manages our infrastructure. As we reported right after the fire, two of our three 100,000-gallon water tanks were nearly drained due to a combination of losing power at one pumping station and extraordinarily high water use given that we were evacuated.

We were told that when RRU workers drove the mountain to look for where all the water was going, they found a number of properties with multiple sprinklers and hoses running continuously on buildings and on vegetation, presumably to fend off the wildfire if it came through. We're not fire scientists but the types of wildland fires we are experiencing cannot be defeated by a sprinkler. **Siphoning water from a community water system to supply unmanaged sprinklers puts everyone in that community at risk as the pressure at our hydrants, hydrants that CAN actually be effective fighting a spot fire, is severely diminished.**

We have seen some studies suggesting that external fire sprinklers can be useful, but only if these sprinkler systems have dedicated on-site water sources (pools, ponds, tanks) and are activated by heat-sensitive valves that only turn on when the property is at imminent risk of burning. Those who put continuously running sprinklers out, please reconsider if we get in this jam again. Your neighbors will thank you.

Other lessons learned from the fire evacuation and PG&E power losses are being addressed. The County's Department of Transportation and Public Works and your committee are exploring placing a large propane tank and a 25-kw generator near the current vaults on Latimer Road. We will keep you posted on the findings and recommendations.

The efforts to address water loss are finally paying off. Over the past 12 months the average monthly water loss has been 11%. Typical water loss in small systems like ours is 16 percent (EPA/Water Audits and Water Loss Control for Public Water Systems).

Replacing the meters has aided in identifying household leaks and alerting the homeowners. It also has better measured low-flow water passing through the meters that was previously not being registered.

The situation is not 100% solved, as about 67 of the new digital meters are not consistently transmitting data. Those meters are continuing to be read manually by the vendor. It is thought that replacing the meter lids will solve the issue in most cases. RRU is continuing to address this by selectively replacing metal lids with fiberglass lids and then monitoring the signal transmissions with the vendor. For any meters still not connecting effectively, a new generation antenna called LTE-M may solve the issue for the few remaining non-reporting meters.

So far, we have only a small number of customers taking advantage of the website and smartphone application Eye on Water. We encourage you to learn more and to sign up for this service by going to:

<https://helpeyeonwater.com>



**Photos by Pat Abercrombie**

## Update on Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve

*by Kate Symonds*

The City of Healdsburg has made substantial progress on the design of access improvements to the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve. The Design and Construction Drawing Plans for the formal Preserve entrance near the Villa Chanticleer lower parking lot have been completed. The consultant submitted the plans to the City in November. The construction of the improvements is expected to go out to bid mid-2020, with work beginning soon after.

The City of Healdsburg Fire Department is working with City staff and LandPaths to reduce fire fuels in the Park and Preserve. The fuel reduction work will be similar to last year's project; hired crews will remove brushy vegetation and smaller trees adjacent to the trails to reduce "fire ladders." Staff will also focus on eradicating non-native invasive broom, and chopping or burning debris piles along the fire road. The City will give notice to the public prior to such work. Early this month I hiked the Preserve with some LandPaths people flagging certain plants, such as the rare Napa false indigo shrub, with pink tape, so as to not be disturbed during the fire fuel reduction work.

LandPaths continues its monthly stewardship days, when community volunteers led by capable LandPaths staff help improve trails and drainage, reduce fuel loads, and remove nonnative plants on Fitch Mountain. These stewardship days are a good way to meet other people and work together on a common cause to improve our Open Space Preserve and reduce fire danger. Check LandPaths' website ([www.landpaths.org](http://www.landpaths.org)) for these stewardship dates.

The first wildflowers should be coming out soon on the Mountain! Watch for early blooming milkmaids, with their delicate, four-petaled, white-to-lavender flowers, and the Western hound's-tongue, with its deep blue flowers with white centers. If a flower is light blue with yellow centers, it's probably the non-native forget-me-not.



**Winter in the Alexander Valley**

This photo isn't from this past winter, but it's my favorite "Sonoma County in December" picture, taken just beyond the Alexander Valley Bridge several wet years ago.

—Ellen

## FMA Leadership

### Trustees:

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Donita Proctor: 431-8789, [donitaproctor@gmail.com](mailto:donitaproctor@gmail.com)  
Al Pucci: [apucci@gmail.com](mailto:apucci@gmail.com)  
Kate Symonds: [kate@terraserve.net](mailto:kate@terraserve.net)

### Officers:

Pat Abercrombie, President: [patabercrombie@comcast.net](mailto:patabercrombie@comcast.net), 473-8217  
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Dana Eaton, Secretary: [dana@eatonstudios.com](mailto:dana@eatonstudios.com), 433-4630  
Marty Silge, Treasurer: [martinsilge@yahoo.com](mailto:martinsilge@yahoo.com), 1840 Redwood Dr., 431-0814

### Volunteer Leaders:

#### Committee Chairs

COPE: Priscilla Abercrombie, [pdanp@comcast.net](mailto:pdanp@comcast.net); and Carol Morrill, [carolmorrill@comcast.net](mailto:carolmorrill@comcast.net)  
Del Rio Woods: Pat Abercrombie, [patabercrombie@comcast.net](mailto:patabercrombie@comcast.net); and Cathy Hodgson  
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### An FMA Treasury Snapshot

As of 12/31/19, the FMA had \$9,868 in its accounts (\$4,704 in checking and \$5,164 in savings [\$4,258 restricted and \$906 un-restricted]).

**For FMA archives and updates, go to**

[http:// www.FitchMtn.org](http://www.FitchMtn.org)

