

Angwin residents say they dodged a fire disaster



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As the Valley Fire lit up the Angwin sky over the weekend, some residents of Napa County's small mountain community were hit with mandatory evacuations while virtually everyone prepared for the worst.

Evacuations were briefly ordered for the eastern part of Angwin and made advisory in others until Tuesday. As the fire crossed out of Lake County into the northeast tip of Napa County and smoke blocked out the sun, residents grabbed pets and family keepsakes and fled to safer areas.

"If the fire had gone two miles, it would be in Angwin in a matter of minutes," said resident Duane Cronk, who has lived in the small, unincorporated town with his wife, Mary, for 52 years. The Cronks evacuated to stay with friends in St. Helena on Saturday.

Lori Dunn and her husband Randy were getting ready to crush the grapes from their Angwin vineyard when sheriff's deputies ordered them to evacuate. While Lori Dunn went to spend the night with family in St. Helena, Randy Dunn insisted on staying.

“I left. Randy stayed,” Lori Dunn said. “He told the policeman he wouldn’t leave. We have a fire truck and he bulldozed around the area and cut down trees. He felt quite confident that we were safe.”

With Angwin only having one major road, traffic congestion could have made it hard to get out if the town of 3,000 had been subject to a mass evacuation, according to resident Donna Morgan.

“Howell Mountain Road is almost the only road out of Angwin,” Morgan said Tuesday. “If it was ever blocked with people evacuating, it could be really difficult to get out. I’m feeling very relieved today. All I can say is, ‘God bless our firefighters.’”

Angwin’s all-volunteer fire department went into high gear to be ready to fight off the blaze, with help from Napa County firefighters.

“When the fire broke out, we staffed up the station and opened our own information center,” said Capt. J.R. Rogers in a press release. The station was staffed for more than 36 hours until it was determined that the fire wasn’t likely heading this way any longer.

Angwin’s public elementary school closed Monday and Tuesday to protect its 78 students.

“I feel really fortunate that the school was spared,” said school Superintendent Cheryl Lynn de Werff. “We don’t have buses, so we couldn’t move out kids fast. As the superintendent, I have to keep the kids safe.”

Napa County fire chief Barry Biermann said that drought conditions have made the wildfire problem worse than usual in California this year, and the fire risk will not go down as long as the drought persists.

“Until we get significant rainfall, the fire threat will not diminish,” Biermann said. “I don’t know when we’re going to get out of this fire season.”

Biermann urged Napa County residents not to use yard equipment with metal blades, especially on hot days, not to drive their cars off of roads, and to be very careful with campfires, cigarettes, and other small fires.