

ISSUE #5: BUILDING AND FIRE CODE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Problem:

Since the first wildland/urban interface fire destroyed 584 homes in Berkeley in 1923, California has lost well over 18,000 residential structures and hundreds of lives to similar fires. Suffering a disproportionate share of California's life and structure loss is San Diego County, which accounts for 20%. Past studies have shown that with proper vegetation clearance and building construction, over 95% of structures threatened by wildland/urban interface fires would survive unharmed. Yet most cities in San Diego County do not have fire and building codes to address these issues.

Solution - New Structures

The County of San Diego, cities of Solana Beach, Del Mar, and most fire districts in the County have adopted a modified version of the International Urban-Wildland Interface Code. Structures built to these new standards and threatened by the recent fires were generally unharmed. Universal adoption and enforcement of this code by all cities in the county would greatly reduce structure losses to future wildland fires.

Solution - Existing structures

The adoptions of new codes and regulations will not immediately resolve the wildland/urban interface fire problem in San Diego County. Unfortunately, tens of thousands of structures have been built without regard to the wildland fire threat. Adoption of new building codes will only resolve the problem for the new structures built under these codes. For existing structures, the two most critical actions are creating 100-feet of defensible space by removing highly flammable vegetation and replacing it with fire resistive vegetation, and the replacement of combustible roofing. These two items will provide a greatly improved level of wildland fire protection for these homes. This can be accomplished in two ways. First, fire departments within the County need to greatly increase their enforcement efforts. These enforcement efforts need to include both highly flammable native and ornamental vegetation.



Second, the insurance industry should charge significantly higher rate for structures that do not have proper clearance or fire resistive roofs. This would provide an economic incentive to correct these deficiencies and make the structure more resistive to wildland fire damage.

Sustainability:

After past large fires, jurisdictions have adopted improved fire codes and added fire inspectors. Unfortunately, problems arise when jurisdictions are unable or unwilling to maintain and enforce these new code requirements.

Typically, new codes are passed and enforcement is increased after a large fire or similar catastrophe. After awhile, the public's attention is drawn to a different issue and industries impacted by the new codes (like the wood roof industry) are able to successfully lobby and rescind the improved codes.

Additionally, enforcement efforts are often curtailed due to budget pressures that reduce the number of inspectors. This trend should be reversed by bolstering staff to ensure that appropriate enforcement and mitigation measures occur.

References:

State of California Blue Ribbon Commission Reports 2003 and 2008

2006 International Wildland-Urban Interface Code