

THE ROLE OF FIRE SAFE COUNCILS IN CALIFORNIA

by Yvonne Everett

In many wildland ecosystems, fire is a natural phenomenon that brings a redistribution of resources and renewal. Species such as Coulter pine (*Pinus coulteri*) depend upon fire for their survival (Stuart and Sawyer 2001). Yet fire is potentially hazardous and destroys valuable resources. For many years the response was clear. Any wildland fire that could be put out was put out. Now, after over a century of often successful fire suppression, overwhelming scientific evidence that fire helps to sustain ecosystem function and biological diversity, as well as skyrocketing suppression costs, are convincing arguments for “let burn” policies in wilderness areas.

However, the wilderness is no longer so far away. As the fingers of our housing developments extend into ever more ridges surrounding expanding communities, we are reaching deeper into wildfire territory. In 19 states, over 50% of homes are now in this wildland-urban interface (WUI), led by California with 5,087,909 houses counted in the WUI in 2000 (Stewart et al. 2006). While some of us bemoan the lack of local government planning that

allows this expansion to continue, most of us still expect fire services to fight fires in the WUI to protect lives and homes.

But fighting wildland fire in the WUI is complicated. Structures and unknown caches of explosive or toxic household materials make fire fighting very dangerous. When residents evacuate their homes in the face of wildfires, they block road access for emergency response personnel. And despite their training, skills, and resources, fire services are often overwhelmed by the scale of wildfires in the WUI. For all these reasons, the single solution approach of relying entirely on suppression for fire management needs to be revisited.

One response to the increased threat of wildfire in the WUI has been the emergence of Fire Safe Councils. These are locally-based groups of volunteers whose goal is to reduce wildfire hazards to communities. Today, there are over 150 Councils in California. Some are neighborhood homeowner groups; others are county level associations of fire service professionals. There are rural councils focused on fuel

treatments and urban groups specializing in public education. While some have paid staff, most are volunteer-led. Councils carry out a wide range of critical fire preparedness activities that are beyond the capacity of fire services.

A recent survey of Fire Safe Councils in California focused on where Councils are located, what types of activities

they carry out, and what Councils see as their greatest challenges (Everett and Fuller 2010). The study indicated that Councils are very widespread, that they carry out a range of critical activities, and that they face similar challenges.

The responding Councils were located in 19 California counties, from San Bernardino in the south to Del Norte in the north. Most counties have one county-level Fire Safe Council and often numerous community-level Councils. San Diego County, for example, with nearly three million people, includes a county-wide Fire Safe Council that serves as an umbrella for over 50 community Councils (Fire Safe Council of San Diego 2010). Often local representatives of state or federal agencies have assisted in local Council formation.

Council membership is diverse and often includes members with significant skills and experience. The majority of community-level Councils indicated having 8-20 regular active members. Almost all indicated that most or all of their members are private landowners. Over half reported volunteer fire department members and or professional fire service staff among their regulars. Over half of the Councils reported having active or retired federal, state, and local government representatives as council members. Half of the Councils include members from community based non-governmental organizations. Most of the Councils reported that they commonly collaborate with other organizations.

Fire Safe Councils reported activities in three general categories: public education and outreach; planning for wildfire; and implementing risk reduction activities.

Councils reach many thousands of people with fire preparedness and

Members of the Trinity Fire Safe Council meet to work on defining the wildland urban interface for their wildfire protection plan. All photographs courtesy of the Trinity Fire Safe Council unless otherwise noted.





ABOVE: Bull Pine prescribed burn carried out by the Orleans-Somes Bar Fire Safe Council on private land in the Six Rivers National Forest. Photograph courtesy of the Orleans-Somes Bar Fire Safe Council • RIGHT: A number of homeowners along Highway 3 in Long Canyon teamed up with the Trinity County Fire Safe Council to reduce fuels around their homes and along their access road. After the rest of the neighbors saw what it looked like, they requested assistance with their defensible space too.

safety brochures and newspaper inserts, booths at county fairs, and programs for local schools and neighborhood and community meetings. Workshops and training days on creating defensible space and chipping fuels are common, often organized with agency partners such as CalFire. Some Councils also reach out to other Councils. For example, since 2003 the Northern California Councils have held four well-attended gatherings for regional networking and peer training.

Planning and finding support for their activities are major Council activities. The 23 Councils who reported on funding had raised \$12,919,066 for their work over the last decade. The majority of funds (63%) came from federal sources

and from state government (20%). Federal monies came largely through the California Fire Safe Council, an incorporated nonprofit organization that helps to distribute federal agency grants (Fire Safe Council 2010). Additional federal dollars were distributed in counties with large proportions of federally managed lands by Resource Advisory Committees, with funding provided by Congress under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000. Most of this money, \$9,956,050, was used to treat fuels, while \$666,100 was used for public outreach. The remaining \$2,324,700 went to Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) preparation and other planning.

CWPP is a federally promoted



protocol for community-based fire preparedness planning under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003). Communities prepare their plan in collaboration with agency and local officials (Communities Committee et al. 2004; Ganz et al. 2007). The plans usually identify projects to reduce fuels, protect structures, develop evacuation plans, and the like. Communities with a completed CWPP proposal endorsed by local government are



Shaded fuel break on federal land next to private parcel. This homeowner lost his fire insurance until the Fire Safe Council was able to get permission from the USFS to complete the thinning.

more competitive for federal funds administered through the California Fire Safe Council's Grant Clearinghouse. All of the ten county-level Councils reporting had either completed CWPPs or were working to complete one. Half of the 18 community-level Councils had also completed a CWPP.

Fire Safe Councils reported diverse fire preparedness and response projects, including emergency communications, facilitation of emergency response, home improvement, and fuel reduction. The specific activities carried out by a particular Council depend on local needs and capacity. The most emphasized activity was fuels treatment. Eliminating fuels and access points for fire on and around structures is widely accepted as a critical factor in reducing losses to wildfire (USDA 2007). At the time of the survey, 23 Councils reported having completed fuel reduction work on 25,647 acres. Fuel reduction was largely on private lands immediately adjacent to

structures or along access roads. The Councils reported that at least 3,655 landowners were participants in these fuel reduction treatments.

While Fire Safe Councils are responding to the increased threat of fire in the WUI, they also face significant challenges. The most widely reported challenge was increasing and maintaining community awareness and participation in Council activities. Respondents struggled with how to generate and maintain public interest in fire management issues. In areas with many absentee landowners, it has proven challenging to reach them and gain permission to treat their land. But for projects that involve creating a fuel break for a neighborhood or along an access road, contiguous properties must be treated. Finding funding, especially for fuel reduction projects, operational expenses, and liability insurance, was the second ranked challenge for Fire Safe Councils. Fuel reduction—and especially convincing landowners to reduce

fuels on their property—was a third key issue. To many, fuel reduction is controversial. Some people simply don't want to bother to do the work. Others are concerned about its environmental impact, such as destabilizing slopes by removing native vegetation or of habitat loss caused by clearing.

It seems clear that Fire Safe Councils in California are playing a critical role in community-based fire management that complements fire service activities. It is to be hoped that over time increased education, fire preparedness, and ecologically appropriate fuel reduction activities will enhance our ability to live with fire, even as we work to halt the expansion of the WUI.

REFERENCES

Communities Committee, National Association of Counties, National Association of State Foresters, Society of American Foresters, and the Western Governors' Association.

COUNTY FIRE SAFE COUNCILS IN CALIFORNIA

There are over 150 local or “community-level” Fire Safe Councils in California and most have a link to a county fire safe council. County-level councils with websites active in 2010 are listed here.

Alameda Diablo Fire Safe, <http://www.diablofiresafe.org/>
Alpine Fire Safe Council, <http://www.alpinefiresafe.org/>
Amador Fire Safe Council, <http://www.amadorfiresafe.org/>
Butte County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.thenet411.net/>
Contra Costa Diablo Fire Safe Council, <http://www.diablofiresafe.org/>
Fire Safe Council of El Dorado County, <http://www.edcfiresafe.org/index.php>
Humboldt County Fire Safe Council, http://co.humboldt.ca.us/planning/fire_safe_council/fsc_default.asp
Kern River Valley Fire Safe Council, <http://www.krvfiresafecouncil.org/News.htm>
Lake South Lake Fire Safe Council, <http://www.southlakefiresafecouncil.org/about.htm>
Lassen County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.lassenfiresafecouncil.org/>
Eastern Madera County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.maderafsc.org/html/contact.htm> (out of date)
Fire Safe Marin, <http://www.firesafemarin.org/links.htm>
Mariposa County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.mariposafiresafe.org/>
Mendocino County Fire Safe Council, <http://firesafemendocino.org/>
Monterey Fire Safe Council, <http://firesafemonterey.org/>
Napa Communities Firewise Foundation, <http://www.napafirewise.org/>
Fire Safe Council of Nevada County, <http://www.firesafecouncilnevco.com/>
Orange County Greater Laguna Coast Fire Safe Council, <http://www.lagunacoastfiresafecouncil.org/>
Placer County Fire Alliance, <http://www.placerfirealliance.org/>
Plumas County Fire Safe Council, <http://plumasfiresafe.org/>
Riverside County—see Inland Empire Fire Alliance, <http://www.fireinformation.com/>
Sacramento County Folsom Fire Safe Council, <http://www.folsomfsc.org/about.us/our.mission.php>
San Benito County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.sbfsc.org/>
San Bernardino County see Inland Empire Fire Alliance, <http://www.fireinformation.com/>
Fire Safe Council of San Diego County (37 councils), <http://www.firesafesdcounty.org/localfscs.html>
San Francisco Peninsula Fire Safe Council, <http://www.rlinc.org/rlinc/firesafe.html>
San Luis Obispo County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.fscslo.org/>
San Mateo Fire Safe, <http://www.smcfiresafe.org/>
Santa Clara Fire Safe Council, <http://www.sccfiresafe.org/FAQs.htm>
Santa Cruz Soquel Fire Safe Council, <http://www.soquelfiresafe.org/aboutus.php>
Shasta County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.westernshastarc.org/scfsc.html>
Sierra County Firesafe and Watershed Council, <http://www.scfswc.com/>
Fire Safe Council of Siskiyou County, <http://www.firesafesiskiyou.org/Public/HomePage>
Trinity County Fire Safe Council, <http://www.tcrd.net/fsc/index.html>
Tuolumne County Highway 108 Fire Safe Council, <http://www.tuolumnefiresafe.org/>
Ventura Ojai Valley Fire Safe Council, <http://www.firesafeojai.org/>
Yuba County Watershed Protection and Fire Safe Council, <http://www.co.yuba.ca.us/firesafe/default.htm>

2004. *Preparing A Community Wildfire Protection Plan: A Handbook for Communities in the Wildland Urban Interface*. http://www.safnet.org/publications/cwpp_oct08.pdf California Fire Safe Council Annual Report. <http://www.firesafecouncil.org/about/schedminutereport.cfm>.

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