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Annual Fire Safety Issue

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Saving the Planet, One Student, One Steward at a Time

Residential Wildfire Safety

Temperatures are heating up. Those of who live in and care about San Diego County's wild areas will have wildfire and related safety issues on our minds for the next several months. This annual fire safety issue of the EDI newsletter provides important information about residential fire safety, especially in Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) areas. Next, we describe what happens on some conserved lands to help protect residential neighbors. Finally, we provide you with several resources if you want to expand your fire safety knowledge or activities.

Residential Fire Safety: When it comes to protecting your home, current fire science indicates that multiple factors are important. Vegetation management often receives the most emphasis and is sometimes misunderstood to mean complete vegetation clearing. This is neither the correct approach for fire safety nor does it support the habitat in WUI areas that many of us love to live in or near. Very detailed discussions of the important fire safety factors, as well as political, historical, and financial influences on fire policy are available on the website of the California Chaparral Institute: <http://www.californiachaparral.com>.

Here is an excerpt:

1. **The primary mechanism for homes igniting during a wildfire is glowing embers.** Embers can travel miles from the fire front. This is why wildfires jump ten-lane interstate highways and over large lakes. In a detailed report from the Institute for Business and Home Safety (2008), it was explained that "Wind-blown embers, which can travel one mile or more, were the biggest threat to homes in the Witch Creek Wildfire. There were few, if any, reports of homes burned as a result of direct contact with flames." The Witch Creek Fire occurred in north San Diego County in 2007.
2. **The concept of "defensible space" by itself is not an adequate solution for Southern California.** It presumes wildfires are small and firefighting resources will always be available. This is not realistic. The most damaging wildfires are typically large events that tax firefighting agencies. Chances are there may not be a firefighter available to use the defensible space. It is best to create a "survivable space" in which the home can survive on its own. This means fire-safety needs to focus on fire-resistant construction as well as proper fuel management.
3. **Striping the land of native vegetation leads to erosion and the growth of invasive weeds.** Weeds demand continual maintenance to control. Once dried, they pose an extended fire risk since they are much more flammable than properly thinned native vegetation.
4. Lightly irrigated, properly thinned and spaced shrubs can act as a "green" fire barrier, absorbing heat and deflecting oncoming embers. Bare, open space cannot do this.
5. There are a number of reasons one decides to live next to a natural environment; peacefulness, enjoyment of wildlife, uncluttered vistas, native wildflowers, a chance to take an evening stroll through nature. Although an easy target, native vegetation is not the enemy. We are next to it because of it. Therefore, it makes sense to build a home that is adapted to the environment in which it exists. Consequently, **the first place to start when trying to protect your home from wildfire is from the structure out, not from the wildland** in which includes:
 - a. Proper attic vent construction (to keep out embers), non-combustible roofing (to resist embers), enclosed eaves (to defend against embers), and the removal of flammable objects such as wood fences, patio furniture, wood decking, etc. (to prevent ignition by embers).
 - b. Making sure the first 30 feet around the home is free of flammable materials and is landscaped with fire resistant vegetation.
 - c. The next 70 feet should not be stripped to bare ground. Selectively thin the native vegetation, remove the dead wood, maintain a loose canopy, without disturbing the soil. Make sure to avoid ornamentals such as Mexican fan palms and low growing acacia. Burning material from these species are well known by firefighters for being responsible in igniting homes.

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Fire Safety, continued...

How Conservation Agencies Help Protect their Neighbors: Governmental and non-governmental conservation agencies respond to various legal requirements related to habitat conservation and protection. Balancing these mandates with being good neighbors in terms of fire safety is important to all agencies and managers. Below are examples of strategies conservation agencies may employ to help keep the surrounding community safe from wildfire.

- Work with appropriate law enforcement agencies to prevent illegal motor vehicles, homeless camping, and ignition of fireworks, all potential sources of wildfire.
- Control invasive, non-native grasses that are one of the most easily ignited fuels.
- Thin vegetation adjacent to neighbors when an occupied dwelling is within less than the prescribed distance from the boundary of the conserved area (the exact distance varies with different fire and conservation agencies).
- Cooperate with all fire agencies to provide access if a fire occurs.

If you live adjacent to conserved land and have concerns about vegetation, contact the Earth Discovery Institute, provide us with your address, and we will assist you in finding the correct land manager to respond to your concerns.

Preparedness Tip from the Fire Safe Council of California

- Store at least a three-day supply of drinking water and food that does not require refrigeration and generally does not need cooking.
- Store first aid supplies, portable radio, flashlight, emergency cooking equipment, portable lanterns and batteries.
- Prepare a list of valuables to take with you in case of evacuation; if possible, store these valuables together to save time later.
- Pre-plan an escape route from your home and neighborhood. Designate an emergency meeting place for the reunion of family members escaping in separate vehicles, and establish a contact point to communicate with concerned relatives.
- Practice emergency exit drills regularly.
- Make sure that all family members are ready to protect themselves with STOP, DROP AND ROLL if their clothes should catch on fire.

Wildfire Prevention, Preparation, and Safety Resources

California Chaparral Institute; <http://www.californiachaparral.com/>

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, aka, CalFire; www.fire.ca.gov/

California Native Plant Society, San Diego Chapter,

CNPS Policies, Guidelines, and Resources for Post-fire Recovery and Revegetation; <http://www.cnpsd.org/fire/index.html>

Fire Safe Council of California; www.firesafecouncil.org

Fire Safe Council of San Diego County; <http://www.firesafesdcounty.org/>

Native Plant Landscaping to Reduce Wildfire Risk: Recommendations for Landscaping Near San Diego's Canyons and Wildlands; <http://www.cnpsd.org/fire/ReduceFireRisk.pdf>

San Diego County Family Disaster Planning; http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/oes/community/oes_jl_familyplan.html

San Miguel Consolidated Fire District, Fire Prevention: <http://www.smgfire.org/prevention.htm>

University of California's Homeowner's Wildfire Mitigation Guide; <http://ucanr.org/sites/Wildfire/>