

## A Conservation Perspective on Fire Management

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**Abstract.** The expanding interface between housing and wildlands is the cause of most of our fire management problems. Improved land use planning is desperately needed. The State Department of Forestry and Fire Protection should take aggressive steps to prevent additional conflicts with natural processes, including the application of economic disincentives against further incursion into the fire zone.

**Keywords:** Fire management; land use; prevention; urban/wildland interface.

The Endangered Habitats League is an organization of southern California conservation groups and individuals dedicated to ecosystem protection and improved land use planning. After listening to the presentations at this conference, and reviewing draft policies for fire management at the state level, I am struck by the need to focus more on prevention.

Clearly, once development occurs in an area with a fire-dependent ecology, conflicts between natural systems and people are inevitable. As the urban/suburban/wildland interface has expanded, it has become impossible to use controlled burns, and re-seeding for erosion control becomes more of a legal issue than a biological one.

The current State Department of Forestry and Fire Protection policy seems to be: You build it and we will protect it, at any cost and at public expense. This policy must change in forceful ways. We must recognize that people don't belong in areas that will inevitably burn, and take steps to prevent further incursions.

Several avenues for action are suggested. The simplest approach, but with limited likelihood of success, is to educate local governments on the need to refrain from approving development in areas ill-suited for them.

On the legislative level, it may be possible to strengthen the safety element of the State General Plan, and enforce the requirement of local governments to follow these mandated policies by use of litigation.

Also, a policy of protecting life and limb, but not structures, may be appropriate for housing which does not follow future guidelines.

Perhaps the most fruitful method is to shift the cost of fighting these fires to those who would build in fire zones. Fighting wildfires in southern California is an ultra-expensive military-style operation, with huge costs in terms of equipment, aircraft, personnel, etc. These tens of millions of dollars in cost should be assessed from those municipalities and/or landowners who persist in building in intrinsically unsafe locations. There is no reason for the public-at-large to subsidize this lifestyle. Economic disincentives would be effective, legally defensible, and sound public policy.

A relatively straightforward idea is to amend the California "Fair Plan", which allows homeowners in high fire hazard areas to purchase subsidized insurance — insurance which otherwise might be unaffordable. This subsidy should be reduced for existing policies and new policies prohibited. Without the "Fair Plan" subsidy (initially meant to facilitate rebuilding after the Watts riots), many would undoubtedly choose to live elsewhere.

A policy focusing on prevention would help bring rationality to a system that refuses to recognize the laws of nature.