



## FIRE PROTECTION STARTS IN OUR OWN BACKYARDS

Southern Californians were accustomed to seasonal wildfire news stories, especially over the past five years of drought.

With the exception of the Harmony Grove fire in 1996 that took 116 homes near San Marcos, for most city and suburban dwellers, they were news stories from another universe, threatening homesteads and forests in the outbacks of Ventura, San Bernardino or East San Diego Counties.

Neighborhood evacuations meant a few ranchers coming down from the hills. Big fires were an assumed risk of rural life.

Before this week, the City of San Diego's most devastating fire raged through the Normal Heights neighborhood 18 years ago, destroying 76 homes.

And so residents in newish planned communities sprawling from the Mexican border to Oxnard and Riverside felt secure in manicured neighborhoods of stucco homes that always came with at least one government mandated fire station funded by development fees.

Political polling told us year after year that voters in these areas were most concerned about traffic, water pollution and rapidly disappearing open space. Crime blissfully registered close to last. Why even ask about fear of fire?

Tiled roofs, wide streets and verdant sod lawns buffered new suburban communities from the vulnerable natural open space surrounding them. Or so they thought.

Homeowners have tempted the fates—flammable landscaping, untreated wooden backyard structures, unabated weeds and illegal wood patios extending into protected open space abound in communities like Carmel Valley and Rancho Penasquitos.

And then the red-tiled roof security blanket was ripped off this dozing population last weekend when the 45 mile long fire trail called Cedar connected the city of San Diego with rural Julian. We should never think the same way again.

Burning at a roaring 6,000 acres an hour, the Cedar Fire that began way out there hit the neighborhoods of Scripps Ranch way over here with such astounding ferocity that 350 homes vaporized within hours.

Evacuations were now about neighbors just over the hill along I-15 in homes just like ours. Where but for fortune and the skillful intervention of San Diego firefighters the winds could have carried embers into the rain starved open space network between Carmel Valley and Rancho Penasquitos with even more catastrophic results.

While talk radio was buzzing with Gray Davis bashing for allegedly causing federal air support delays, San Diego's good citizens and public safety workers were taking care of business with amazing equanimity, self-reliance and only God knows how, good humor under the worst of conditions. Their fingers were firmly pointed in the dyke.

The community website [www.scrippsrancho.org](http://www.scrippsrancho.org) posted free

assistance offers from all over San Diego—computer data recovery help, a two bedroom condo in Solana Beach, animal care and hands to hold were among the services listed.

The terrible reminder that most San Diego communities were built around native lands susceptible to brush fires should motivate homeowners and community landscapers to reevaluate choices that make neighborhoods more vulnerable to fire than necessary.

All too often, personal taste has taken a stubborn second to common sense in landscape choices.

Southern Californians love their exotic palm trees, even if dried fronds, when ignited, send the most dangerous fire threat, flaming embers, flying like missiles. Eucalyptus trees, prized for their historic relationship with some communities, are filled with oil that literally explodes on contact with fire. Ditto pine trees, even treasured Torrey Pines.

And, the city's neighborhood code enforcement department has been woefully short on resources to effectively enforce laws that are in place.

Scores of illegally constructed wood patios hang over the perimeter canyons edging many neighborhoods, a fuse waiting to be lit. Wood dog houses, gazebos, play houses, and decks cover open space easements.

Reasonable fear of fire should win out over the need to expand the back forty, but the folks who believe they can encroach on the public's property are either suicidal or oblivious.

Strolling through the canyons and mesas now protected as wildlife corridors and habitat preserves is a scary revelatory experience, particularly during Santa Ana wind conditions.

A dearth of resources to manage those lands has left them littered with sun reflecting glass shards, charred logs from illegal bonfires, remnants of nomadic vagrant camps, cigarette butts and tracks from off-road vehicles whose exhaust pipes routinely rip through water-starved chaparral.

Even in the best of conditions, native habitat burns during its natural evolutionary course. This happened ten years ago in the hills over Carmel Valley—fortunately without incident to nearby homes. Today the area is brimming with stunning wildlife, but most residents are clueless about the devastation that could have occurred.

Communities designed around native lands can significantly lower their fire vulnerability by replacing fire prone landscaping, adhering to strict brush management guidelines and taking far better care of the open space we fought so hard to protect and dearly cherish.

There will be plenty of political buck passing and demagoguing when the smoke finally clears—where was the air power, centralized safety coordination, back-up human resources, on and on.

As the blame game winds up, let us remember that fire protection begins in our own backyards.

**Brush management guidelines can be found on the City of San Diego website at <http://www.sannet.gov/fireandems/pdf/canyonhills.pdf>**