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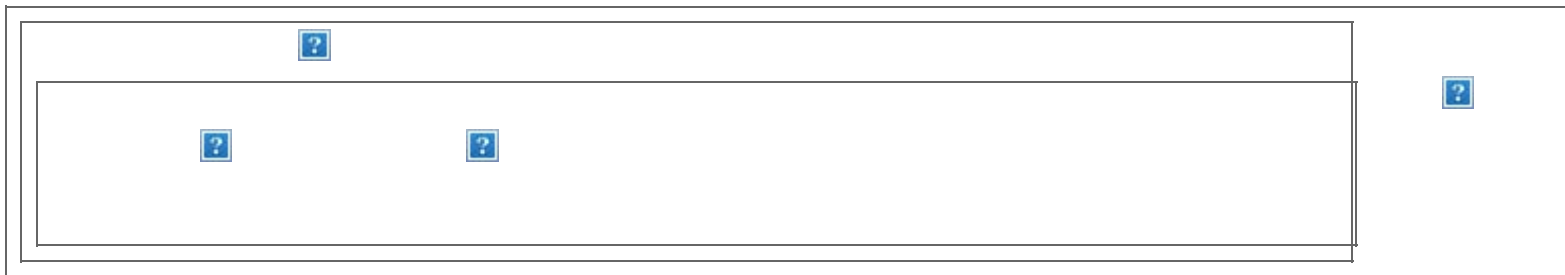


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Rising from the Ashes: Lessons Learned from the Southern California Wildfires of 2003

Oliver Chi

The statistics at right represent tens of thousands of individual tragedies that occurred as a result of the wildfires that ravaged southern California last year. These figures represent people who lost loved ones, homes, and businesses, and they represent individuals whose lives will never be the same.

In the aftermath of one of the worst fire seasons on record in the history of the state of California, the statistics are indeed mind-numbing. State and insurance-industry figures show that the nearly \$3 billion in fire insurance payouts that will eventually be made makes the most recent fires the costliest since flames ravaged San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake.

Fifteen large fires spread throughout five counties.
 More than 750,000 acres were consumed by flames.
 Destroyed were 3,640 homes, 33 commercial properties, and 1,141 other structures. And 24 lives were lost.

As southern California begins to examine how such a disaster could occur and ways in which officials can prevent future fires from raging out of control, much of the focus in published media reports has pointed to two issues: a lack of funding for fire suppression activities and the techniques needed to bolster fire suppression services.

The Most Basic Questions

Although a focus on fire suppression is indeed necessary, now is also the time for local, state, and federal government organizations to revisit a number of fundamental issues as they relate to fire management, land development, and building codes before the historic 2003 conflagrations fade into the oblivion of a short-term institutional memory. Public officials have a unique opportunity to implement a new fire management system. Indeed, the current political landscape might necessitate such a decision.

Officials in San Diego have already begun to recognize that the deadly wildfires have not changed citizens' and elected officials' deep-seated opposition to tax increases. In Escondido, the city council in early December 2003 shelved plans to put on the ballot a \$40 million general-obligation bond issue that

would have provided the funds needed to build a new police and fire administration building, along with several fire stations. The pullback came after polling indicated that voters would likely defeat the proposal.

San Diego County Supervisor Ron Roberts also scuttled his plan to ask voters to fund a fleet of fire helicopters, concluding that a tax increase had little chance of being approved by the public.

When we also factor in the instability in Sacramento with regard to the California State Legislature's funding the vehicle license fee (VLF) backfill—the State Legislature has replaced the reduced VLF revenues with general fund allocations on a dollar-for-dollar basis—to cities and counties, local government officials are faced with a familiar paradoxical dilemma: dwindling resources and increased demand for services.

Although this is an unenviable situation, might it not be possible for localities to look at such circumstances as providing an exciting challenge?

Does the fact that money is in short supply necessarily mean less service? If we continue to operate as we have in the past, the answer obviously is yes. But therein also lies one of the solutions to this problem: finding new ways of service. This opportunity to navigate a course through difficult times is part of what makes the public management profession so fantastic and rare. We all owe the public we serve our absolute best, and this means constant revision, constant innovation. Perhaps the time has come for us to consider alternatives that will supplement fire suppression.

As David Morris, founder of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, Minneapolis, Minnesota, has put it: “To paraphrase the late economist Ernst Schumacher, the smart person solves the problems, the genius avoids them. Preventing disease is easier and cheaper than treating it. Preventing crime is easier and cheaper than treating it.”

And preventing fires is easier and cheaper than treating them.

Fire Protection

The fire catastrophe in southern California highlighted the error of relying so heavily on reaction, as opposed to mitigation and prevention. As people have built into highly flammable back-country areas, they have demanded ever more fire protection. But while advances have been made in fire suppression technology and tactics, the end-result of this kind of buildout has been that conflagrations are larger and more intense and thus that the capacity to protect property and life is reduced.



NASA's satellite photo of the California wildfires of 2003 show that the fires were so large that for several days smoke filled air basins with unhealthy air.

Photo courtesy of ORBIMAGE, Orbital Imaging Corporation.

Are there other approaches to fire management that can be incorporated into mainstream use? A particularly effective strategy was actually on display at the Otay Fire, which began in southern San Diego County. This particular blaze, which consumed 46,291 total acres, was burning at an extremely rapid pace until it moved south of the U.S./Mexico border into Baja California. Abruptly, the Otay Fire laid down, soon after it had crossed into Mexico.

Why did the Otay Fire stop so suddenly? Richard A. Minnich, a professor in the department of earth sciences at the University of California at Riverside, points out that although the regions to the north and south of the U.S./Mexico border are similar in vegetation and climate, the major difference is that fires in Baja California are allowed to burn unfettered across the land.

In this region, there are 10 times as many burns on the landscape as in southern California, but these fires are 10 times smaller and seldom greater than 5,000 acres (as a comparison, the Cedar Fire in San Diego County consumed 273,246 acres).

These small fires function in a self-regulating system that usually occurs in normal weather during the summer months, when the average humidity is at 20 to 40 percent and winds blow at around 10 mph. The fires, which burn at modest intensities, create a patchwork mosaic of sorts, similar to a quilt. The older patches, which over time have accumulated enough fuel, burn. Younger patches, which lack sufficient combustible material, stop the progression of the fire.

In California, fire prevention has created a different sort of ecological pattern. Professor Minnich notes that suppression by initial attack began in the early 1900s with great success because the newly developed national forests had inherited a fine-grained mosaic like that now seen in Mexico. But this process of suppression by initial attack, which stopped large fires from occurring, also served to homogenize the forests, eliminating the balance of old and young patches of growth.

Fuel for fires, which had before been contained in smaller areas, now extend to entire regions. Catastrophic fires began in the 1920s, with more outbreaks in the 1950s, 1970, 1993, and now again in 2003.

Fire Containment

Empirical evidence confirms this theory. A century ago, the San Bernardino National Forest contained about 50 trees per acre. Today, there are more than 500 trees per acre, creating numerous areas clogged with fire potential. If we factor in the effects of the bark beetle infestation (approximately 400,000 acres of the San Bernardino National Forest are currently afflicted with bark beetles), what we have is a disaster waiting to happen.

The success of fire containment, therefore, seems to have had unintended consequences. By initially suppressing fires, we have limited the number of conflagrations but enhanced the intensity of those that do escape the initial barrage to put it out. A forest fire today can in most instances burn at will once it reaches about 100 acres, beyond which the energy of the fire exceeds the energy of suppression by orders of magnitude.

In such large fires, suppression actions have little effect on the spread of the flames, as most of the effort becomes focused on protecting life and structures. Moreover, successful initial attacks to put out fires almost always occur in normal weather, meaning that most mass fires that do escape will do so in the worst weather possible—in California during the autumn Santa Ana winds—a fact that helps give life to rapidly spreading fires of high intensity.

History has shown that fire is an inevitable and natural process. Public administrators must begin to shift the focus away from relying so much on suppression and begin to embrace both fire prevention and mitigation. Cities, counties, state, and federal agencies, who jointly have jurisdiction and control over rural areas subject to wildfires, must in the future be more proactive, not reactive, by developing planned-burn mosaics.

State and local officials note that strict brush clearance laws and the county's growth policies both played crucial roles in the county's ability to protect property and lives.

As we have seen in Baja California, this strategy does work. Controlled burns can be used to limit the accumulation of fuel over time, thereby decreasing the intensity of those fires that escape initial suppression efforts. In addition, such a strategy can be planned months in advance, so landowners can

take precautions. Proper weather and timing can also be selected.

Of course, there are legitimate reasons why current administrators have not already engaged in controlled burns. The threat of lawsuits if structures are destroyed during a planned burn—coupled with the stringency of environmental regulation—has in a sense handcuffed local governments from engaging in good fire management tactics.

Liability should not be placed on localities or their managers. Why should such entities be culpable for a natural process and responsible for a homeowner's personal decision to live in a dangerous location? Instead, the burden of responsibility should be placed on those who choose to live in such areas. Perhaps this would provide an additional incentive to build or buy in safer places.

Regarding environmental regulations, perhaps the time has come to revisit some of the policies currently on the books and see if a little more common sense can be applied. Vern Hazen, an ICMA Range Rider, has cited a particular occurrence from several years ago near his home in Ramona, where the homeowners' association was asked by the fire marshal to clear the area alongside a road. This vegetation was deemed to be a fire hazard. Two years ago, however, San Diego County cited the homeowners' association for following the instructions of the fire marshal because the area cleared contained a vernal pool (a seasonally flooded depression found on soil with such an impermeable layer as a hardpan, claypan, or volcanic basalt, which often is habitat for endangered species). The association was ordered to revegetate and reirrigate, which the homeowners did. But during the most recent fires, a blaze began from this same revegetated area and spread to destroy two houses.

In the future, there must be closer monitoring of urban developments extending into the backcountry, with any such expansion governed by stringent building codes. San Bernardino County has recognized the need for such building-code enhancements and in mid-December of 2003 gave preliminary approval for new standards for its foothills and mountains, requiring new homes to have double-paned windows, nonflammable roofing, and fire-resistant materials for walls and decks, among other things.

Fires destroy homes once flames move inside, especially through the roof. Hence, housing should have no flammable exteriors; stucco exterior walls, along with tile roofs and eaves, have proven to be an effective model. It should be noted that the city of San Diego has not banned shake-wood roofs. After this disaster has been inventoried, it is likely that we will find that most of the houses destroyed had flammable roofs and/or wood siding.

Local governments should also work in earnest to discourage dispersed settlement in the backcountry. As a rule of thumb, if the terrain is too rugged to permit consolidated development, then, in all likelihood, it should not be developed at all. Good planning practices today should also consider mitigating urban sprawl by developing within city centers.

Monetary and Regulatory Incentives

Another area that public officials need to be more cognizant of is that of home-insurance premiums. Perhaps some mechanism could be developed whereby home-insurance costs are commensurate with the true hazard of the land. It might be possible to develop constraints on the insurance-company practice of subsidizing risky development in the backcountry, through the premiums of those living in safer flatlands, by redlining those policyholders who reside in flammable regions.

In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which in the past has offered low-interest loans to promote reconstruction, should apply strings to these loans this time around by requiring fireproof housing and consolidated development. In cases where it is possible, people living on especially flammable lands should be encouraged to live elsewhere.

In an ideal world, development into the backcountry would be scarce, and controlled burns would be used to keep areas clear of excess brush. But the current environment in which localities operate often discourages the use of controlled burns.

For instance, the city of San Bernardino, ground zero for the Old Fire (which consumed 91,281 acres, destroyed 993 homes and 10 commercial properties, injured 12 people, and killed six individuals), had received federal funding in 1995 to use controlled burns to clear out overgrown brush, which experts warned had become a virtual sea of fuel waiting to ignite. It took seven years for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conclude that the burns would not jeopardize rare animals and plants, a decision that came a few months before the outbreak of the Old Fire. When the blazes began, the city had just begun

the process of preparing public hearings on the issue of controlled burns.

With the unique ability to convert overgrown and potentially fire-hazardous grass, weeds, and brush into pastoral landscapes simply by peacefully eating the hot fuel, goats might be an alternative to the preferred method of controlled burns.

By any standard, seven years' wait for approval is a long time. According to an article in the Los Angeles Times, "Fish and wildlife officials in the Carlsbad office acknowledge that they took too long to process the city's permit, saying some former employees may have dragged their feet because they opposed controlled burns." Given such bureaucratic resistance to good land management practices, public officials might consider a possible alternative to achieve safer communities.

Goats

Some localities have employed companies that use an innovative approach to fire mitigation. While goats have been successfully used to control vegetation for thousands of years, it was not until recently that management techniques were developed to organize planned goat grazing as an effective method of land management.

Using goats to achieve fuel-load reduction is certainly a fresh idea in California, one that does have its share of advantages. Proponents maintain that managed grazing replicates the positive effects of natural wildfires by creating a patterned mosaic over entire regions. As herds move slowly through the backcountry, forest, rangeland, and urban interface zones, the animals are able to carve their way through dangerous brush and undergrowth to fracture the continuity of flammable cover, resulting in natural firebreaks and sustainable fire protection.

Supporters also point out that managed grazing can be used at any time of the year, even during a rainy season, and can remove heavy fuel loads in areas where brush is too thick to penetrate. This strategy also eases many environmental concerns.

Goats have been called the only environmentally friendly, solar-powered, self-propelled weed eaters that also produce no fossil fuels, noise pollution, or fire hazards. With the unique ability to convert overgrown and potentially fire-hazardous grass, weeds, and brush into pastoral landscapes simply by peacefully eating the fuel, goats might be an alternative to the preferred method of controlled burns.

Considerations to Investigate

While this article has focused on the need for a greater emphasis on mitigation and prevention, numerous fire suppression issues need review. A number of blue-ribbon task forces and independent investigations have been ordered to ascertain exactly what went wrong. In the coming months, here are issues that will likely receive increased attention:

Lack of resources. As noted before in this article, the fires have not changed the strong opposition in San Diego County to new taxes, even for those issues related to public safety. In terms of actual numbers, San Diego would need to add 800 firefighters to reach the national average for a city with a population exceeding one million—at a cost of nearly \$15 million a year. Although no estimates have been issued of the cost of needed public safety equipment, we can imagine that the price tag will be steep. Among the resources needed:

- Newer communications equipment that allows police, fire, and emergency services personnel to communicate with one another is for the most part unavailable.
- At various junctures while fighting the fires, management teams were unaware where all fire engines were located—something that GPS tracking systems might be able to help with.
- GIS technology would help to design layouts of fire regions.
- Also required is a fleet of fire and rescue vehicles, including helicopters, fire trucks, and other updated firefighting technology.

To further illustrate the lack of resources, in the 1980s the San Diego Fire Department's response-time goal was four minutes. Today, because of increased congestion, urban sprawl, and a lack of funding, the response-time goal is six minutes.

Fire-response funding. The initial fire response has been funded completely at the local level. For instance, San Diego's cost in dealing with the Cedar Fire has been pegged at \$16 million. Although the

city does hope to be reimbursed by the state and federal governments, it does not expect to see any funds for at least nine months, and maybe longer. To ensure that they receive their reimbursements, local governments would be wise to keep El Cajon City Manager Bill Garrett's words in mind—"Document, document, document!!"

Mutual aid. After the fires had been put out, much media attention was focused on the California Disaster and Civil Defense Master Mutual Aid Agreement. Much has been made over the fact that when the Cedar, Paradise, and Otay fires broke out, 45 of the 361 fire engines based in San Diego County were in San Bernardino County, fighting other blazes.

Also, about 180 firefighters were not able to return immediately to San Diego County, as statewide mutual-aid rules required them to stay until they had controlled the fires they were working.

Contrary to some of the rhetoric that has ensued in the aftermath of the blazes, fire officials and other experts have vigorously defended the mutual aid-system, arguing that the unique circumstance of having 15 large fires burning in southern California simply overwhelmed what is in fact a fantastic system. Many have indicated that the controversy over the mutual-aid system, much of which is confined to the San Diego County region, can be traced to the fact that these blazes were the last major fires to start in the state and thus suffered most of the problems of a system stretched to the limit.

Central to the issue of mutual aid, again, is the fact that fires can and should be prevented from becoming as intense as the ones southern California experienced. In nearly all other situations, the mutual-aid system has worked extraordinarily well.

Mountain Area Safety Task Force. One great success story of good fire management can be found in San Bernardino County. Back in September of 2002, county officials began focusing on the huge fire hazard that the bark beetle infestation had caused in the San Bernardino Mountains.

In response, local officials began attracting a core group of organizations to found the Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST). According to San Bernardino County Assistant Administrator John Goss, by using good, sound management techniques, MAST oversaw many aspects of fire safety as they related to planning, appointing fire safe councils and working with the community. (See article on San Bernardino County in this issue of *PM*.)

Early on, the group identified a potential problem, should fires ever hit the region. Realizing that the mutual-aid system would bring firefighting units from outside the community, the group undertook the ambitious task of developing extremely detailed fire maps for those unfamiliar with the territory. This was found to be especially helpful, once the blazes did begin to burn.

Also of note: MAST members realized the problems that would be associated with evacuating about 110,000 people, 60,000 from mountain communities with few roads and exit points, while firefighters and heavy equipment were being dispatched to fire locations. The task force worked to set trigger points to make sure that these problems would not occur should a fire begin, another innovation that certainly contributed to the evacuation process.

A countywide fire department for San Diego County. In its first official action, a blue-ribbon task force searching for ways to bolster fire protection decided in mid-December to sidestep one of the more controversial issues to develop in the aftermath of the wildfires: whether San Diego County needs a countywide fire department.

At the suggestion of San Diego Fire Chief Jeff Bowman, the task force decided to recommend that the city and county governments hire an outside consultant to study the issue. Being the only large county in California without a countywide fire department, San Diego County relies instead on 60-plus local, state, regional, military, and tribal fire agencies.

Under its charter, San Diego County is not required to protect residents from fire, and some argue that, as a result, service has historically been spotty and has become a hugely political topic. In the coming months, it will be interesting to see in what direction the voters and politicians will lean.

Fire suppression technology. The recent fires saw the increased use of compressed-air foam systems (CAFs), which have been around for several years but are only now beginning to gain widespread acceptance. A soap solution is mixed with water and then administered by injecting air into the mixture, creating a shaving cream-like lather. This foam is sprayed onto structures in advance of approaching

fires, leaving what looks like a covering of snow.

Throughout the country, one can see that CAF technology is being used more and more. For instance, Phoenix, Arizona, has 30 CAF-equipped engines (about two-thirds of its fleet) and expects to convert the rest over the next five years. In Texas, a state law requires insurance companies to give homeowners a reduced rate if they live in cities protected by fire departments with CAFs.

Currently, fewer than 5 percent of all new fire trucks nationwide are armed with compressed-air foam systems.

The Ventura County model. Despite having had 172,000 acres burning throughout the county, Ventura County had only 38 structures destroyed. Why was the region spared the widespread destruction that the fires brought upon other parts of southern California?

State and local officials note that strict brush clearance laws and the county’s growth policies both played crucial roles in the county’s ability to protect property and lives. Ventura County, for example, requires homeowners to make a 100-foot clearance around woodland homes each spring, whereas other counties adhere to the state’s 30-foot standard. Fire officials stress that the extra 70 feet makes all the difference in the world.

Additionally, an aggressive enforcement program backs up the county’s weed-abatement ordinance. Every April, about 14,000 warning notices are sent to property owners. If they remain in violation after a second warning, the fire department will contract for the brush clearance and place an assessment on the owner’s property taxes to recoup the costs. Brush clearance bills can run from a few hundred dollars to several thousand, not including a \$635 administrative fee attached to each bill.

Growth policies also have helped Ventura County to develop a good land management strategy. In the 1970s, plans were adopted to keep nearly all commercial and residential development within the boundaries of the county’s 10 cities. These plans drew greenbelt buffers between the cities and limited the growth of residential tracts on unincorporated land, where many of the wildfires occurred.

Fire management. To encourage fire mitigation and prevention techniques over fire suppression, some officials have asked if providing fire departments with lump-sum budgets might spur such a paradigm switch.

As it is, fire departments understandably have every incentive to keep a focus on suppression. If they were to embrace mitigation and prevention by emphasizing controlled burns, building inspections, code enforcement, sprinkler systems, and the like, we would need fewer firefighters. Few fire departments—indeed, few departments, period—want to shrink.

Would providing a lump-sum budget, whereby the department would be allowed to keep any savings, change the incentives of fire management and therefore the operation of a fire department? Would this create a situation whereby mitigation and prevention would be emphasized because they would save the department money? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But maybe the idea is worth implementing on a smaller scale to see if such a strategy has any merit.

The state of California has never known a greater natural fire disaster than the widespread one experienced in the fall of 2003. Now, with the memory of the deadly fires beginning to fade, public servants must remain committed to examining what happened and, more important, to implementing those changes that must be made.

Rising from the ashes, we must find answers to critical questions and ensure that such a tragedy never

Information Resources

The National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) established a panel to examine ways to reduce wildfire hazards. The panel, chaired by Phoenix, Arizona, City Manager Frank Fairbanks, has issued reports that emphasize the importance of mitigation and partnership in fire-prone states. For more information about the NAPA reports, visit the Web site at www.napawash.org.

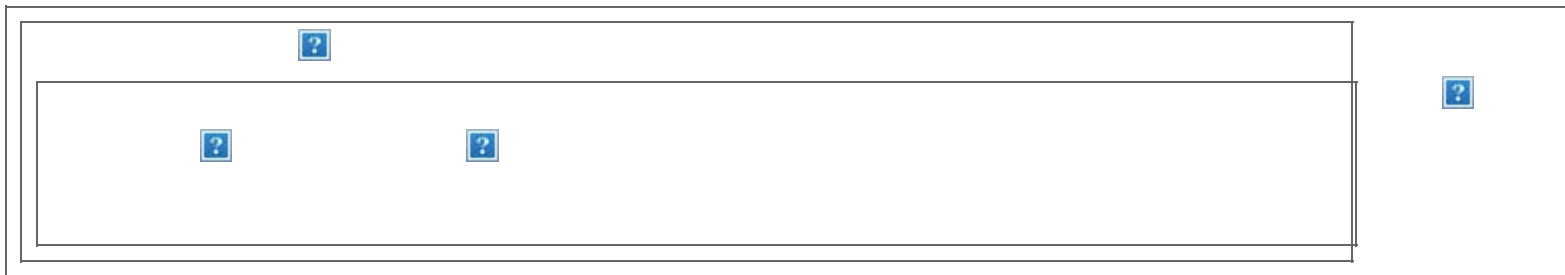
The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) is working with local, state, and federal agencies to develop information for fire departments and other local officials on how they can work together to address the needs of the growing number of communities that are at risk on the wildland/urban interface. For more information, visit www.iafc.org, or contact the IAFC Wildland Fire Policy Committee through Ann Davison at adavison@iafc.org.

again occurs.

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San Bernardino County's Part in California's Fire Siege 2003

John Goss

Probably the hallmark of San Bernardino County's successful response to its share of California's Fire Siege 2003, which included the Grand Prix and Old Fires, was significant amounts of long-term, advance planning. It became clear when the county board of supervisors declared a local state of emergency in April 2002 that the county's mountains were a tinderbox, ready to explode into flame. The pine trees had suffered four years of drought, a lack of thinning, and an infestation of various pests, including the bark beetle.

It also was clear to local elected leaders and staff that the bark beetle was spreading throughout the forest, with the number of dead and dying trees numbering in the hundreds of thousands. It was estimated that more than 1 million trees were dead or soon would be. There was a need—seen not only by the county but also by the state and federal governments—to declare an emergency in order to attract or find additional resources with which to start mitigating the clear and present threat to the forest.

Even without state and federal emergency declarations, local, state, and federal employees in San Bernardino began working across jurisdictional lines to prepare for the wildfires we knew would eventually happen.

Unlike other threatened forests throughout the nation, this one had within its boundaries more than 50,000 homes, 100,000 full-time or part-time residents, and numerous commercial establishments, hotels, ski resorts, and campgrounds. The total assessed value of this area was \$8 billion. Such resort communities as Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear were in the cross hairs of what some people called this “disaster waiting to happen.”

Unfortunately, emergency declaration requests by both San Bernardino and Riverside counties in the spring and later, in the fall, of 2002 went unheeded. Appeals to Congressman Jerry Lewis, however, were successful in making available \$3.3 million in FEMA funds in April 2003 for both counties to start clearing rights-of-way along the main evacuation routes off the mountains and to create safe areas around the mountain communities and crucial communications towers.

Also, in August 2003, Southern California Edison, with state PUC approval, began to clear more than 300,000 trees along high power-line rights-of-way. Nevertheless, not nearly enough clearing had occurred before arsonists started the Grand Prix and Old fires in late October 2003.

Preparations Were Made

Before the fires and even without state and federal emergency declarations, local, state, and federal employees in San Bernardino began working across jurisdictional lines to prepare for the wildfires we knew would eventually erupt. We could not wait for emergency declarations or stop to complain about inadequate funding before addressing an obvious emergency problem. We urgently had to use local tools to prepare for disaster.

Various parts of the mountains are served by the U.S. Forest Service (San Bernardino National Forest), the California Department of Forestry, the county fire department, and several independent fire districts. By the summer of 2002, agencies were aware of the mounting problem but were not adequately coordinating their efforts. So, in September 2002, the assistant county administrator called these agencies together, along with the sheriff, California Highway Patrol (CHP), California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), public works, and county and state offices of emergency services to develop a plan in preparation for a likely fire emergency. By November, the agencies had agreed to create MAST (Mountain Area Safety Task Force).

Following traditional emergency organizational structure, MAST consists of a unified command supported by sections for operations, plans, logistics, finance, public relations, and community liaison. The unified command reports to the MACS (Multi-Agency Coordinator System), which acts as an executive/policy committee for MAST. Chaired by the assistant county administrator, MACS was the point of coordination for local and state elected officials.

From this MAST organization came numerous critical planning efforts to prepare for the inevitable. Fire officials worked with local communities to appoint numerous fire safety councils, which worked to inform people in their areas about the hazards they were facing and how to clear “defensible space” around their homes. Prepacking for possible evacuation was encouraged. Volunteer Mountain Safe Councils, local mountain newspapers, and local public information staff worked overtime getting the word out.

While mutual aid eventually brought more than 10,000 firefighters to San Bernardino, the rapid spread of the fire—with, at times, 200-foot-high flames—was beyond the control of existing resources.

The office of the county fire marshal started notifying residents of the need to cut down their dead trees. To help in this effort, block tree removal was initiated, whereby bids would be secured to remove trees from an entire block of properties, rather than have each homeowner try to obtain a cutter on their own.

The county assigned crews to remove “slash” as trees were cut and to work with the tree cutters for faster tree removal and more effective disposal of the wood debris. The purpose of block tree removal was to encourage property owners to cut and remove their trees by reducing the cost of removal, thus speeding up the entire process. It was estimated that the expense per tree was reduced from \$1,000 to \$300 by using these techniques.

Tree removal is not just felling the tree. It also includes disposal of that tree. Without any nearby sawmills or biomass facilities, the county’s solid waste division has had to rely on landfill disposal of the wood waste, supplemented by air-curtain destructor incinerators on the mountain, used to burn much of the wood. A year ago, the county managed five tons of waste a day. With the cutting of trees, that waste stream now exceeds 800 tons a day.

Once the Southern California Edison tree removal operations are in full swing, this number should swell to 1,600 tons per day. Even with the fires, 95 percent of the dead and dying trees remain in the forest, and their removal along evacuation routes and around communities and communication sites remains a priority. The county is working with the federal government to develop proper infrastructure to use the wood products from the trees to avoid choking landfills and to obtain productive use of this raw material.

The sheriff, along with the CHP, developed evacuation plans for the mountains. Evacuation was one of the important topics at numerous community meetings held throughout the summer. People realized that alternate routes might be necessary for escaping to safety, given the location and direction of the probable fire danger. This realization clearly became crucial when the two fires forced the evacuation of more than 110,000 people; 60,000 of these people had to come down from the mountains, which are only served by three, winding two-lane roads.

The county office of emergency services added to the preparation for these fires by conducting

operational and tabletop exercises and by participating in regional exercises.

Detailed maps, called community protection plans, were prepared for mountain neighborhoods, where often there are no addresses and street-name signs to guide incoming firefighters along the dirt roads. These detailed maps identified high-hazard areas and such strategic infrastructure as safe areas, schools, fire hydrants, dead ends, turnarounds, and other needed information, as thousands of firefighters from some 350 fire departments unfamiliar with the mountains fought the fires in late October and early November of 2003.

In addition, mapping of infected areas of the forest was accomplished with the help of U.S. Forest Service flyovers, with GIS mapping assistance from a local company, ESRI. This company also assisted in developing a Web site to get out information about removing dead trees and identifying evacuation routes.

During the Fire

As measured by the number of structures lost, California Fire Siege 2003 involved five of the largest 20 fires in the state since accurate records began to be kept in 1932. The largest of the five, and the second largest in state history, was the Cedar Fire in San Diego. That fire alone saw 273,246 acres burned, 2,820 structures destroyed, and 14 lives lost. The two fires in San Bernardino combined to engulf 150,729 acres, destroying or damaging more than 1,400 structures, with the loss of six lives.



The first of three photos of the Old fire was taken at 1422 hours and shows the flames on one side of the only major road on the face of the mountains, Highway 18. The smoke is going straight up, showing that there was no wind. A photo taken at 1423 hours shows the fire is on both sides of the highway, and two minutes later at 1425 hours, it had crossed the highway, dramatically demonstrating the unusual dynamics of this fire.

Photos by Troy Whitman, Director of Fire Management, Southern California Edison Company, Rosemead, California.

These two fires eventually merged near the interchange of the 15 and 215 freeways, at one time creating a fire line of 50 miles. In all three fires, Santa Ana wind conditions prevailed, wherein the normal onshore flow (west to east) reverses, causing warm, dry winds to blow in through mountain passes from the desert. Relative humidity of less than 10 percent and winds of 40 mph, with gusts to 60 mph, caused flames in all three fires to spread rapidly and to easily jump 10-lane interstate freeways.

The suppression response was immediate but ineffective because of the speed of the fire advance, inaccessible terrain, and the lack of immediate outside resources. While mutual aid eventually brought more than 10,000 firefighters to San Bernardino, the rapid spread of the fire—with, at times, 200-foot-high flames—was beyond the control of existing resources. While the fires lasted almost two weeks, southern California was extremely fortunate that rains and snow in the higher elevations helped bring the fires under control and prevented them from reaching the remaining 95 percent of the dead and dying trees in the forest.

The sheriff and fire departments worked closely with fire incident command to establish trigger points for

the evacuations. When the fire reached the first trigger point, voluntary evacuation would be ordered. At the next trigger point, evacuation there would become mandatory.

While there were traffic jams of cars coming down off the mountains, no one was trapped or injured, and there were no serious traffic collisions. Evacuations did not block incoming emergency vehicles responding to the fires. As important, two acute-care hospitals, several skilled and long-term nursing facilities, as well as homebound individuals, were evacuated. The county jail was evacuated, along with the Moonridge Zoo in Big Bear. That's right, lions, tigers, and bears, as well as two bison, had to be transported away from the peril.

From the local area, 490 pieces of equipment were used, which brought many communities to well below their acceptable resource drawdown levels. The city of San Bernardino, for example, committed all engines to the fires during the initial hours of the siege. Later that day, it was able to cover four stations of its 11 stations (in a city of 200,000 people).

The county's public health department also activated 17 strike teams totaling 85 ambulances, three mobile command vehicles, and a mobile treatment unit. Of course, fire strike teams from throughout the West eventually arrived to support local suppression efforts.



Besides having completed nearly two years of advance planning for this event, the county was fortunate in that it is a large organization, with 17,000 employees. In fact, San Bernardino County is called the "Staples of employers" because it performs almost every job imaginable. The response by these employees and those from other organizations was impressive, as many worked around the clock during this emergency. With miles of power lines destroyed, for example, workers for public and private water providers braved the mountain fires to keep backup generators fueled so that pumps could fill water tanks for the firefighters night and day.

The Red Cross set up evacuation shelters for 2,500 people, including one hangar that held more than 1,000 people. Forty-eight public health nurses, along with staff from the Red Cross, the Loma Linda University Medical Center, and the county hospital, treated 3,300 health episodes at the centers. And by the way, makeshift polling places were set up at the emergency shelters by the county registrar of voters because 14 polling places for the November elections were unable to open.

Teams of building inspectors and tax assessor staff visited the burned homes of citizens to determine immediately if the structures were habitable, and if they were fully or partially destroyed, they made a tax reassessment for the current round of tax bills. The staff of behavioral health immediately supplied counseling services. And the district attorney provided a staff of 10 victim advocates to guard against victimization by fraudulent contractors.

Gift cards from Wal-Mart and Target were given to the evacuees, along with food stamps and gas and food vouchers. Private law firms offered free legal advice. And one religious foundation instantly gave up

to \$500 to those who had lost their homes or, in the case of renters, been displaced by fire.

Setting Up for Reconstruction

Patterned after MAST, a soil erosion and debris mitigation organization was formed to coordinate the efforts of the U.S. Forest Service, National Resource Conservation Service, and state and local agencies in preparing for possible mudslides and debris flows. A post-disaster reconstruction task force was created, even while the fires were still burning, to address construction and landscape standards that would be used in rebuilding destroyed neighborhoods.



Even before the fires had been controlled, in fact within 72 hours, county staff had set up a 20,000-square-foot Fire Emergency Local Assistance Center (FELAC) in a local airport terminal. It was a one-stop shop hosting 49 county, state, federal, city, and private agencies to help victims recover from the disaster. It was complete with phones, computers, desks, chairs, and child-care facilities.

The Emergency Operating Center (EOC) was a beehive of activity. CAO Wally Hill was there day and night, as were representatives of various state and local agencies. As one who was in the midst of this frenetic activity, I know that each day was an adventure, and we often set up meetings on the fly. For example, the district CalTrans director told us that it would take two to three weeks to repair the main route to the mountain before evacuees could return to their homes. Realizing the problems that this delay could cause, within 90 minutes EOC staff were able to schedule a meeting of a reentry task force.

We had practiced reentry for a single community but not for the 60,000 permanent residents who live in the mountains. Reentry efforts were generally successful, using a phased-in approach to the mountains, and in most cases with a considerably shorter timeline than mentioned in the first discussions with CalTrans.

Results and Questions in the Aftermath

One of the results of these fires, especially the Old Fire, was to get the Healthy Forest Initiative off of dead center, according to U.S. Forest Service administrators. This legislation was stuck in Congress, but once vivid images of 200-foot flames in the forest, threatening thousands of homes and cabins, had been aired on national television, the legislation started to move rapidly. That the county fire marshal appeared nightly on CNN didn't hurt either.

People ask about "lessons learned" from these fires. It will take months, perhaps longer, to give a comprehensive answer to this question. But there certainly are a number of issues and questions that have been identified in the aftermath of these fires. One that is not too apparent is the role of the reconstituted National Fire Plan. Apparently, without legislative authority, there is and will continue to be an attempt to shift the costs for fighting wild land fires threatening structures on private lands from federal into local hands.

Local governments, whose citizens all pay federal taxes, incur great expense in providing structure protection during these events and do not have the funding to pay for the response to threats from outside their jurisdictions. The specter of uncompensated provision of services could threaten the fabric of an excellent mutual-aid system.

And there are other questions: Are there enough aircraft resources for a nationwide attack on major wild land fires across the country? And why is there such a delay in bringing properly equipped military aircraft to a conflagration, even if they are stationed nearby in the same region?

Fire Fact: A fire receives its name from the closest street or landmark to where it originates. The Grand Prix fire started near Grand Prix Street in Fontana, California, and the Old Fire started on Old Waterman Canyon Road in San Bernardino.

Why was the city of San Bernardino unable to spend its \$450,000 grant money, received eight years ago, to conduct controlled burns along the wild land/urban interface, which could have saved homes in the Old Fire? With more than half the grant money spent on studies required by the federal and state resource agencies, approval still had not been secured to execute the controlled burns because of potential danger to endangered species habitat.

The last time I checked, that habitat had burned in the fire. And so had hundreds of homes.

The Far-Reaching Issues

An issue that needs further discussion is bringing in an incident command team from outside the area to manage a fire response. While it is helpful to have incident commanders who have worked similar fires and are a “team,” there also is precious time lost through the team’s lack of familiarity with the geography, resources, and local facilities. More of a blending of the incident command staffing needs to be explored.

Do we need to strengthen the building codes along the wild land/urban interface? It was clear that newer construction—with roofs and siding constructed of nonflammable materials, limited landscaping and defensible space, and roadways located between the homes and the wild land area—suffered far less damage than older areas using earlier construction, landscaping, and subdivision design.

These questions are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to describing the many issues presented by these fires, which will be discussed over the coming months. In the case of San Bernardino County, however, it was clear that applying basic management tools greatly assisted the county in successfully dealing with the complexities and challenges of these massive fires.

Sustained, long-term disaster planning with our state and federal partners; excellent interagency cooperation; constant, programmed communication with the other agencies and particularly with the potentially affected citizens; and a motivated workforce, properly equipped, all contributed to a successful emergency response to these fires.

Something extremely special occurred during these fires. In my 40 years of city and county management, I have never witnessed such a massive, intense coming-together of multiple agencies, with focused, dedicated public servants to attack an imposing, common threat to our communities.

And what about the arsonists? Unusual for a wild-land arson case, a sketch now exists of the arsonist who is known to have started the Old Fire. The board of supervisors has offered an award of \$50,000 for his capture, which has been doubled to \$100,000 by private contributions. The suspect is listed as one of America’s Most Wanted. When this article was written, the suspect had not yet been apprehended.

Until December 12, 2003, when he retired a second time, John Goss was the assistant county administrator, San Bernardino County, California, and still can be contacted at jgoss@cao.sbcounty.gov. He is a former city manager of Alameda and Chula Vista, California.

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Ethics Inquiries

Free Golf for City Officials?

Scenario: The city manager is well known in the community, even though she was appointed city manager just a few weeks ago. She previously served as assistant county manager in the same area and so knows many of the local business and government leaders.

To her surprise, the local country club manager, a casual friend, stopped by her office to give her an annual pass to play golf at the club. The country club manager explained that it is a longstanding practice of the country club to offer the pass to a number of city officials, including the mayor, police chief, city manager, and fire chief.

The city manager has worked with the country club manager on a number of issues of common interest over the years and is on good terms with him. She does not believe that the country club manager has ulterior motives for making the offer, but she is uncomfortable with the practice and called to discuss it.

Response: The city manager is wise to question the free golf pass, as it has significant financial value and would not be viewed as a “de minimums” gift by most citizens. The city manager could have future dealings with the country club manager, and she needs to retain her reputation for independence and objectivity.

It is better for the city manager to pay for the golf pass herself than to risk any claims that her recommendations may be compromised. Some local governments pay for a country club membership for the city or county manager because they view it as a valuable networking opportunity for the city.

The manager may want to consider developing a city policy on accepting gifts. Most city and county governments have standards of conduct or a code of ethics that discourages or prohibits employees from accepting personal gifts or favors from the public. While some local governments allow employees to accept gifts of nominal value, most require that employees publicly declare the value of any such gift.

Seeing Red over Lobbying Work

Scenario: A town government has a strict sign policy that town officials believe helps the community retain its historic image and charm. Recently, a city manager in a nearby community was hired by a major sign company to lobby this town's council to change its sign ordinance. The town manager was frustrated by the lobbying effort by his colleague, particularly since the lobbyist/city manager approached individual members of the town council

to press for changes in the ordinance.

The town manager found out that his colleague was lobbying for sign changes from one of the town's elected officials. Is the nearby city manager's lobbying work consistent with the values in the ICMA Code of Ethics?

Response: While consulting is the sort of outside employment that can be compatible with work as a city or county manager, there are a number of problems with this particular consulting job. A guideline for the ICMA Code of Ethics stipulates, "When members advise and respond to inquiries from elected or appointed officials of other local governments, they should inform the administrators of those communities."


The town manager has a right to expect his colleague to let him know about his lobbying work, rather than let him hear about it from a member of the town council. In addition, the city manager would be expected to seek permission from his own governing body before pursuing consulting work. To avoid any harm to the profession, ICMA members should avoid outside employment involving a politically sensitive matter.


Editor's note: ICMA's management discussion group is open to ICMA members working in local government. For more information about joining ICMA, visit ICMA's Web site, icma.org. At the site, members can click on "Interest Groups and Discussion Lists" and then on "Listserve" for information on signing up for the discussion list.



Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in *PM*, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611, e-mail, ekellar@icma.org or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668, e-mail, mperego@icma.org.

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Profile

Santa Paula Manager Wows City Residents



Walter (Wally) Bobkiewicz is city manager of [Santa Paula, California](#).

Wally Bobkiewicz was reading by age 2. At 5, he began wearing a football helmet to protect his head in case he crashed on his bicycle. And as a Cub Scout, he saved his uniform to put in the presidential library he believed would one day be built in his honor.

It was that kind of record that convinced his mother she needn't worry about the son who has finished his first year as Santa Paula, California's city manager [in October 2003]. "I always knew he was going to be successful because he knew it himself," said his mother, Dianne Kerekffy. "He never faltered."

That's the same grade he's getting from Santa Paula residents, be they Latino activists, the city council, downtown merchants, or those battling the city. "One of my deepest regrets is that I'm not working with Wally," said former City Attorney Phillip Romney, who filed a wrongful termination claim against the city in September.

Laura Flores Espinosa, a Latina leader who often disagreed with Romney during her eight years on the

council, is just as straightforward. "Being part of the council that hired Wally Bobkiewicz, that's got to be one of my greatest accomplishments," she said.

In their view, and that of others around Santa Paula, the 37-year-old Bobkiewicz ushered in a "can do" attitude that the town of 29,000 needs at a time when it is poised for growth. Nestled in the Santa Clara River Valley between Fillmore and Ventura, Santa Paula boasts Victorian homes, a storied history in the citrus industry, a young population, and small-town charm.

But it's also facing some big-city problems, including a 9 percent unemployment rate and poverty that keeps its median household income almost \$12,000 below the county average. The city government has struggled to make ends meet in recent years, and economic growth is projected at less than 1 percent a year through 2004.

So when a divided city council started looking for a new city manager two years ago, councilmembers across the political spectrum were seeking someone who could help them move ahead. "He was hired at a time when we needed some aggressive, futuristic thinking on what we could be down the road, particularly in the downtown," said Santa Paula newspaperman Don Johnson, who was on the council at the time.

Enter Bobkiewicz, then assistant city manager of Novato in Marin County [California]. Although born in Chicago, he had spent his teenage and young adult years in southern California. And he wanted to return. Councilmembers interviewing applicants for the \$105,000 job were impressed with his energy, youth, and record of getting things done. They found he wasn't afraid to get out and talk to people, either, something that Santa Paula needed after years of political infighting.

Before Bobkiewicz started [in October 2002], he asked all five councilmembers for the names of 10 people each who they believed were important for him to get to know in Santa Paula. When Councilman John Procter had not gotten back to him a week before his start date, Bobkiewicz didn't let it drop. "He said, 'John, I need that list,' " said Procter, who is now mayor. "He was on the job before he was on the job."

His competitors, though, don't always appreciate his attempts. Bobkiewicz, interested in boosting Santa Paula's business fortunes, walked the streets of Fillmore, Ojai, and Ventura and told merchants that if they ever decided to move out of town, Santa Paula would welcome them. Some of those towns' city managers complained that he had failed to contact them before making his forays. "It was considered a breach of city-manager etiquette," he said. If some are complaining in surrounding towns, Santa Paula merchants say they welcome someone who gets things done, after a series of interim city managers who never seemed to stay very long.

"I just think there were too many part-timers to make the real commitment Wally has made to the community," said Donna Stewart, owner of the Santa Paula Inn.

Walter Joseph Bobkiewicz's interest in public service and government jelled while he was still a teenager growing up in the Chicago suburb of Deerfield.

He was elected president of his ninth-grade class at Deerfield High, but when his Navy-pilot stepfather was transferred to Ventura County, Bobkiewicz moved to the area in the middle of the school year.

He entered Camarillo High School, where he was elected president of both his junior and senior classes. By the time he graduated from high school in 1984, Bobkiewicz was so convinced that government was his calling that he enrolled in the public administration program at the University of Southern California.

He served as USC student body president in his junior year. But the university politics accompanying the job convinced him that he wasn't really cut out to run for elected office. He preferred being the implementer. "I just wanted to do," he said.

After an internship in Washington, D.C., and graduation from USC, Bobkiewicz entered Syracuse University's top-rated program in public administration and earned a master's degree. Then it was back to California, where he worked for the city of Long Beach for almost a decade, picking up experience as an analyst for the public works and police departments, telecommunications manager, and assistant to the city manager.

That prepared him to become assistant city manager in Novato, but the bucolic atmosphere in the city never really suited him. So when a headhunter approached him about becoming city manager of Santa

Paula, he found it appealing for both personal and career reasons.

His parents and sister live in Ventura County, Santa Paula is a full-service city that runs its own police and fire departments, and there is a lot to do. Now, as he finishes his first year, Bobkiewicz counts some of his top achievements as improving Santa Paula's appearance, pushing economic development, boosting employee morale, and helping the council focus on goals for the future.

He has a full agenda ahead, as the council tries to keep money-losing Santa Paula Memorial Hospital open, considers a development that could add 6,000 residents, builds a new sewer plant, and tries to find the money to pay for police, fire, and other public services.

Councilmembers say the city manager's only flaws are that he works too hard and that it's tough to keep up with his pace, as their almost-weekly rounds of meetings will attest. "I fear he's going to work himself into poor health, but we've gotten more done in the last year than in the last couple of years," Councilman Rick Cook said.

As for Bobkiewicz, he says he's committed to staying the course in Santa Paula, rather than moving on, even if it is hard to find women to date in the family-oriented town. "It's a fun place," he said. "For me, it's everything a city should present as far as a challenge."

Kathleen Wilson Staff Writer Ventura County Star Ventura, California

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