



ORANGE COUNTY FIRE AUTHORITY

P.O. Box 57115, Irvine, CA 92619-7115 • 1 Fire Authority Road, Irvine, CA 92602

Brian Fennesy, Fire Chief

(714) 573-6000

www.ocfa.org

July 31, 2019

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor of California
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, California 95814

RE Wildfire in Orange County

Dear Governor Newsom:

The County of Orange Area Safety Task Force (COAST) is an unprecedented collaboration of nearly three dozen public agencies, municipalities, landowners, land managers and other organizations directly affected by wildland fire in Orange County. The group was convened six years ago by the Orange County Fire Authority consistent with the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. Our common thread is the urgent imperative to reduce the frequency, spread, and impact of wildfires in our community.

Together we have accomplished a number of important goals, including designation by NOAA/NWS of a dedicated Coastal weather zone for Orange County, the installation of a high-speed wireless network of fire cameras and weather stations, the deployment and expansion of a community Fire Watch Network, and the adoption of a comprehensive Community Wildfire Prevention Plan to advance the broader fire prevention agenda in the region.

We are writing because we share your alarm that the urgency and risk of wildland fire grows more critical each year. Your recent Executive Order requesting a statewide examination of wildfire risk was an important step forward. We want to share the results and priorities from our ongoing, active county-wide collaboration and ask for your help and leadership in implementing our highly-leveraged strategy to reduce the risk and impacts of wildfire in our county.

In Orange County, more than 30,000 acres have burned in the last two years alone, along with dozens of structures. Nearly half the wildlands in Orange County - 60,000 acres - have burned in just the last 10 years. Notably, many acres have burned more than once during that period. These fires have cost tens of millions of taxpayer dollars to suppress. While these acreages are not as dramatic as other places in the state, in a highly urbanized county with a large wildland landscape they are catastrophic.

Serving the Cities of: Aliso Viejo • Buena Park • Cypress • Dana Point • Irvine • Laguna Hills • Laguna Niguel • Laguna Woods • Lake Forest • La Palma
Los Alamitos • Mission Viejo • Placentia • Rancho Santa Margarita • San Clemente • San Juan Capistrano • Santa Ana • Seal Beach • Stanton • Tustin • Villa Park
Westminster • Yorba Linda • and Unincorporated Areas of Orange County

RESIDENTIAL SPRINKLERS AND SMOKE ALARMS SAVE LIVES

July 31, 2019

Page Two

As we have worked closely together over the last six years, priorities for preventing and managing fire in Orange County have become extremely clear. Critically, unlike forested areas in Northern California that have suffered extreme fuels buildup and tree die-off due to drought and pests, shrublands in Southern California have an entirely different fire regime and very different needs to prevent catastrophic fires.

Wildfire risk reduction in Southern California shrublands such as Orange County is nearly the exact opposite of forested ecosystems. While the fire interval has lengthened significantly in most California forests resulting in fuel accumulation and fuel-driven fires, our ecosystems have had far too much fire, especially driven by Santa Ana wind conditions. The historic normal return interval of 50-150 years in most shrublands is now reduced to 7-10 years, resulting in a downward spiral of proliferating non-native, easily ignitable vegetation that further perturbs the fire cycle.

We are unanimously convinced that the Cohesive Strategy to create leveraged risk reduction in shrublands such as Orange County comes down to three critical elements: **Ignition Prevention, Home Hardening, and Strategic Fuel Modification Zones.** We know, for example, that 90% of the acres burn in only 10% of the fires, and those catastrophic fires are overwhelmingly human-caused and wind-driven. Even more important, whether accidental or intentional, more than 82% of ignitions in Orange County start along primary roadways. If we can reduce those ignitions by even half, we can also cut the risk of catastrophic fire in half and double the probable time between major fires.

Another approximately 10% of ignitions are the result of utility infrastructure and maintenance – an issue that Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric are working to address. Their public safety shutoff program is an important immediate step while permanent solutions are identified and implemented. We encourage and support their efforts and their participation in our coalition. We also know that as many as 80% of the structures that burn in large fires here do not meet updated or current building fire codes, often with catastrophic consequences.

Thus, our priorities are simple, and we need your help. Most of the previous fire prevention policy and funding has been directed toward fuels reduction and fire suppression related to fuel-driven fires. This trend continues in CAL FIRE's response to your Executive Order. Unfortunately, this approach is of little help when embers from wind-driven fires ignite vegetation or structures more than two miles downwind. Of course, continued funding for suppression is absolutely critical. But that alone will not reduce risk in places like Orange County when a single roadside ignition during a wind-related Red Flag condition can burn 30,000 acres and destroy hundreds of structures. In Orange County and most of Southern California, **we need major funding and policy to prevent ignitions that lead to catastrophic wind-driven fires - particularly along roadsides - to help those living at the wildland-urban interface improve resilience of their communities, and to support county-wide collaborations such as COAST.**

Our group submitted a proposal for a Roadside Ignition Prevention Strategic Plan under the CAL FIRE Fire Prevention Grants Program, which unfortunately was not funded. We believe this was a significant oversight that misjudges the true sources of wildfire risk in our region. We need an aggressive strategy and leveraged actions for reducing roadside fire risk including modified roadway operations practices, increased patrol and surveillance through community Fire Watch Networks, and

July 31, 2019

Page Three

targeted direct interventions along roads to prevent ignitions. We need bold policy leadership and funding and hope you will support our efforts.

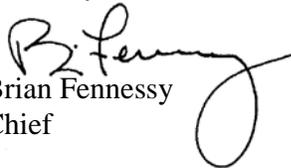
In the area of Hardening Homes, Orange County Fire Authority and other local fire departments such as Newport Beach, Anaheim, and Laguna Beach (all participants in our coalition) have outreach and education programs such as Ready, Set, Go that work with homeowners in the wildland-urban interface to help them prepare their properties against wildfire. But these programs currently reach a fraction of those at risk and must be significantly increased in their scope and effectiveness to ensure that when fires inevitably occur, that their damage can be minimized. And we need support for effective management of Strategic Fuel Modification Zones around communities to increase resilience.

Our group COAST is built on a simple principle – that the impacts of wildfire and reducing its risk are everyone’s problem. The only way this can be solved is if we all work together and step beyond the constraints of convention and old ways of doing business to confront the realities of wildfire in our state. We are bound together by this commitment and know we can count on your support.

We would be pleased to work with whomever you suggest to pursue our priorities and needs in more depth. As you can see from the attached participant list, the breadth of our coalition means that everyone is already at the table. With your support we believe we can make an enormous difference in reducing the risk of wildfire and keeping our communities and our precious wildlands safe.

Thank you for your leadership and we stand ready to work together.

Sincerely,


Brian Fennessy
Chief

Attachment

cc Wade Crowfoot, Secretary of Resources
Jessica Morse, Deputy Secretary for Forest Management, Resources Agency

COAST Participating Organizations

California State Parks - Chino Hills District
Orange County Sheriff's Department – Emergency Management
OC Parks
Laguna Beach Fire Department
Anaheim Fire Department
CalTrans
County of Orange
City of Irvine
National Audubon Starr Ranch
Southern California Edison
Rancho Mission Viejo Land Trust
California State Parks - South Coast District
Orange County Fire Authority
Natural Communities Coalition
Orange County Transportation Authority
UC Irvine School of Biology
Newport Beach Fire Department
Metropolitan Water District
Irvine Ranch Water District
Center for Environmental Biology
UC Irvine School of Information Technology – CALIT2
The Reserve at Rancho Mission Viejo
US Forest Service Cleveland National Forest
Irvine Ranch Conservancy
US Fish and Wildlife Service
Sempra Utilities – San Diego Gas & Electric
US Forest Service - Trabuco Ranger District
Department of Earth Science Systems Science at UC Irvine
Orange City Fire Department
Transportation Corridor Agencies

Contact for COAST: Brian Norton, OCFA Division Chief, Special Operations (714) 573-6761

Serving the Cities of: Aliso Viejo • Buena Park • Cypress • Dana Point • Irvine • Laguna Hills • Laguna Niguel • Laguna Woods • Lake Forest • La Palma
 Los Alamitos • Mission Viejo • Placentia • Rancho Santa Margarita • San Clemente • San Juan Capistrano • Santa Ana • Seal Beach • Stanton • Tustin • Villa Park
 Westminster • Yorba Linda • and Unincorporated Areas of Orange County

RESIDENTIAL SPRINKLERS AND SMOKE ALARMS SAVE LIVES