

Fire Events and Policy

Years 1923–2006

California has a long history of catastrophic Wildland Urban Interface fires. The following timeline discusses some of those fires and highlights key policies.



1923

Berkeley Fire destroyed 584 structures. Embers falling on wood shingles accelerated the spread of the fire.

1932

The Economy Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, enabling use of military resources in peacetime events. The intent of Congress was to encourage civilian employment prior to committing military resources.

1933

The Griffith Park Fire in Los Angeles started on October 3, 1933. This 47-acre fire killed 29 firefighters and injured 150 others.

1943

The Hansen Creek Fire started on October 2, 1943 on the Cleveland National Forest. Ten marines and one army firefighter are killed. Seventy-three other military personnel are injured on this 13,145-acre fire.

1946

The California State Board of Forestry declared the San Bernardino Mountains around Crestline and Lake Arrowhead as a “Zone of Infestation” for forest insects.

1947

Helicopters are used to assist during wildland fires for the first time in Southern California and the usefulness for moving firefighters around the fire was quickly recognized.

1950

The State of California, all 58 counties and nearly all city governments signed a “Master Mutual Aid Agreement.”

1960

California Public Resource Code 4291 was adopted. This code requires a minimum of 30 feet clearance of flammable vegetation around structures in State Responsibility Areas.



1961

Santa Ana winds fanned a wildland fire in the Bel Air community of Los Angeles County destroying 484 homes, many owned by Hollywood stars. Researchers studying the fire's impacts identified a demand for regulations limiting expansion in the wildlands and improving structure survivability.

1971

After the devastating fire season of 1970, the California fire services were severely criticized for failure to provide leadership in solving the issues of cooperation, command and control, communications and training. In response, state and federal legislative action authorized funding for a five-year research program coordinated by the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) called FIREScope (Firefighting Resources of Southern California Organized for Potential Emergencies). The FIREScope research team identified a new fire management system containing the following elements:

- Incident Command System
- Multi-Agency Coordination System
- Information Management System
- Technological Support
- Common Communications

President Nixon created the "National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control." The commission completed a report in May 1973, titled "America Burning." The report covered structural and wildland fires and stated, "Fire is a major national problem."

1972

The Southern California Geographic Area Coordination Center (OSCC) was established to provide coordinated multi-agency logistical support and intelligence for wildfires in Southern California. Components of the center include the Intelligence Section, Logistical Support Center, Southern Operations Emergency Command Center and the South Zone Training Unit.

1980

Major Santa Ana wind-driven wildfires occurred in Southern California. At least 325 homes were burned in San Bernardino. The fires prompted Federal, State and Local officials to study the problem of fires coming from the wildland into developed communities. The California legislature established the Vegetation Management Program (VMP) to reduce hazardous fuel conditions.

1987

Pebble Beach Fire in Monterey County destroyed 31 structures. Roof type, window type and vegetation clearance were determining factors of structural survival.



1989

The California Legislature added the FIRESCOPE program to the California Health and Safety Code and authorized OES, in cooperation with CAL FIRE and the State Fire Marshal, to carry out the program.

1990

The Paint Fire in Santa Barbara County killed one resident and destroyed 479 homes and other major buildings. Researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, conducted a study of the causal factors that led to structure damage. The study found that 86% of the buildings survived when they had both 30 feet of vegetation clearance and an ignition resistant roof. Researchers also found that approximately 90% of buildings are completely destroyed once they catch fire.

1991

In October 1991 the Oakland Hills fire burned 1,600 acres, killed 25 people and destroyed 2,900 homes. The fire was almost completely within the city limits of Oakland and Berkeley and was considered an urban conflagration rather than a wildland or urban intermix. Six acres of SRA wildland burned on the perimeter of the fire. Combustible roofing material was implicated in the spread of fire. The high density of structures contributed to extreme radiant heat that spread fire to adjacent structures.

1993

The Laguna Beach fire alone destroyed 441 homes. The October 1993 fire siege in Southern California resulted in four fatalities and 1,200 structures destroyed. After the fire, residents formed the Laguna Coast FIRESAFE Council to help protect the region from future disasters.

The California Legislature passed the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) Act for California. SEMS required state agencies responding to emergencies to use a standardized management system. Incident Command System (ICS) is a component of SEMS.

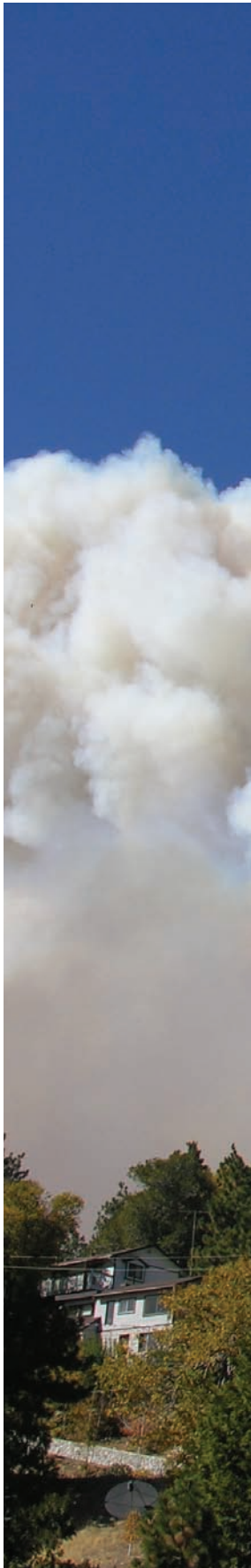
1994

Thirty-four wildland firefighters were killed while fighting fires in the United States, prompting the five federal wildland fire agencies to review federal fire management policy and programs.

1995

A new federal fire management policy was adopted. The policy concluded:

- The first priority in wildland fire management is the protection of human life.
- The second priority is the protection of natural resources, cultural resources, and property.
- Wildland fire, as a critical natural process, must be reintroduced into the ecosystem.



1996

CAL FIRE and the Office of the State Fire Marshal publish “California’s I Zone,” a nationally recognized in-depth study of past and projected problems of wildland/urban intermix fires.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection developed the “California Fire Plan,” a framework for reducing costs and losses from wildfire. The Fire Plan emphasized that residents need to be involved in planning for fire safety. Fire Safe Councils were established. State and federal funding was made available for civilian-supported fuel reduction projects. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) amended the program to include training for local fire service personnel in firefighting tactics in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

2000

In August 2000, President Clinton directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to develop a plan to respond to severe wildland fires in order to reduce their impacts on rural communities, and to assure sufficient firefighting capacity in the future. The Secretaries developed the National Fire Plan (NFP) to increase firefighting capabilities to better protect natural resources, to reduce the threat to communities adjacent to federal lands, and to reduce the cost of fighting large fires.

2001

The U.S. Forest Service began implementing key points of the National Fire Plan by building up fire preparedness and suppression resources beyond historic levels. NFP assigned the highest priority for hazardous fuel reduction treatments to communities at risk, and other important local features, where conditions favor uncharacteristically intense wildfires. California Wildfire Coordinating Group (CWCG) identified communities at risk from wildfire and recorded them in the Federal Register.

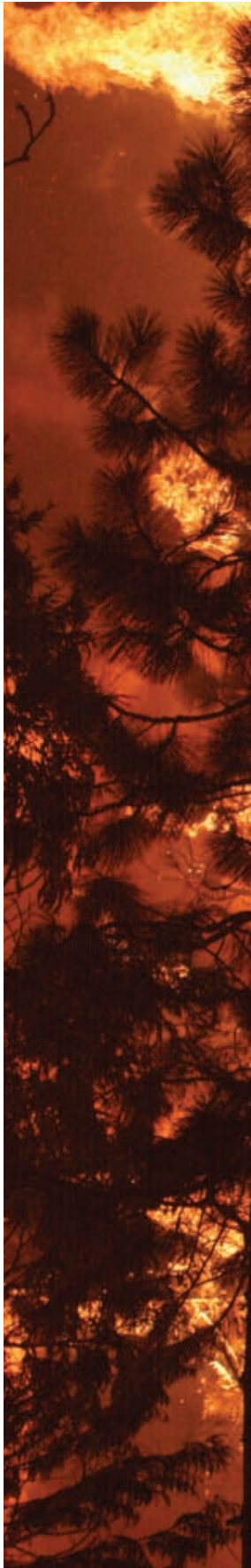
2002

The Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) was organized to address public safety and forest health issues on both public and private land in San Bernardino and Riverside counties. This was one of the most extensive, pre-event planning efforts to ever take place. The three part strategy deals with: 1) emergency preparedness response, 2) fuel reduction around communities and key evacuation routes, and 3) long-term planning and treatments to restore forest health.

In San Diego County, new county fire code required 100-foot clearance around structures, and the Forest Area Safety Taskforce (FAST) was formed.

2003

Local, state and federal agencies focus on identifying priority WUI areas in California to establish better protection strategies that will result in meaningful changes in fire behavior and mitigate the severity of fire effects at a watershed scale. These strategies are consistent with the interagency report: “A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities



and the Environment, Western Governor's 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan and the Memorandum of Understanding for the Development of a Collaborative Fuels Treatment Program.”

A multi-agency Joint Information Center (JIC) operating plan was developed in conjunction with the MAST plan to coordinate information release to the community and the media.

All national forests in Southern California began environmental analyses to increase the scale and intensity of vegetation treatments to protect communities from wildland fire.

October 21, 2003 marked the beginning of one of the most devastating periods in Southern California fire history, the Fire Siege of 2003. During the ensuing 15 days, 14 major fires burned more than 750,000 acres and destroyed more than 3,700 homes. Twenty-four people are killed, including one firefighter. Before the last fire was contained, an interagency team was assembled to chronicle the siege resulting in “The Story – California Fire Siege 2003.”

In November 2003, Governor Gray Davis and Governor-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger created the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission to review the effort to fight the California's 2003 wildfires, and provide recommendations to limit destruction from future fires.

2004

In April the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission released its final report which included 33 findings and 48 recommendations in five categories: 1) Jurisdictional and Operational Barriers; 2) Training; 3) Interstate/Regional Mutual Aid System; 4) Local Building, Planning and Land Use Regulations/ Brush Clearance and Fuel Modification; and 5) Communications Interoperability, Information Technology, and Public Outreach.

Congress began funding hazardous fuel reduction projects. By 2006 more than \$181 million in federal, state, and local treated more than 96,000 acres in California.

The USFS Pacific Southwest Region developed and implemented the “FIREWATCH” program, utilizing excess military Cobra helicopters to provide state-of-art command and control, infrared capable remote sensing, and downlink capability.

The USFS Pacific Southwest Region developed an aviation training simulator for agency and interagency cooperator pilots and international governmental aviation personnel.

Beginning in 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger issued annual Executive Orders to minimize the impacts of large and damaging wildfires.

The California legislature amended the Public Resources Code and Government Code to require 100 feet of clearance around structures in the State Responsibility Area and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones in Local Responsibility Areas. The law took effect January 1, 2005.

Many local governments adopt or strengthen ordinances requiring clearance and removal of flammable vegetation and other materials.



CAL FIRE San Diego established an operation plan with the U.S. Navy Helicopter Squadron from North Island allowing the San Diego unit to access assets during major incidents. This included annual training.

2005

CAL FIRE units intensify hazardous brush treatment by cutting and piling brush as part of a shaded fuel break for wildland interface protection.

CAL FIRE begins year-round staffing of department stations.

The Topanga Fire, starting in Los Angeles County and moving into Ventura County, burned 24,175 acres. Of the nearly 1,000 residences threatened, three homes were destroyed and one damaged. Defensible space, fire safe design and ignition resistant construction is credited with reducing the impact of this fire in populated WUI.

2006

The USFS Pacific Southwest Region established an agreement with United States Marine Corps CH-53 Squadron at the Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego. The agreement outlines the annual pre-fire season training and experience requirements for pilots in command.

NASA's Dryden Flight Research Center and the USFS Pacific Southwest Region agree to test aerospace technologies to aid wildfire imaging and mapping through use of a remotely piloted unmanned aircraft.

Governor Schwarzenegger authorized contracting for a 12,000 gallon DC-10 air tanker during the peak fire season. This air tanker provides a large-load backup capability to supplement CAL FIRE's regular fleet of 23 Grumman S2T air tankers.

On October 26, 2006, five USFS firefighters were entrapped while engaged in structure protection operations on the Esperanza Fire in Riverside County, California. Three of the firefighters were killed at the scene, one died en-route to the hospital and the fifth died on October 31.