

COAST

County of Orange Area Safety Task Force

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. The common thread among all participants is the urgent imperative to reduce the severity, 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, 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.

In Orange County, more than 30,000 acres have burned in the last two years, along with dozens of structures. Nearly half the wildlands in Orange County - 60,000 acres - have burned in 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.

As we have worked together closely over the last six years, priorities for preventing and managing fire in Orange County have become clear. Critically, unlike forested areas in Northern California that have suffered extreme fuel 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 in most California forests resulting in fuel accumulation and increasingly massive fuel-driven fires, Southern California shrublands have had far too much fire, driven by Santa Ana wind conditions. The historic normal return interval of 50-150 years in these natural communities is now reduced to 7-10 years, resulting in a downward spiral of proliferating non-native, easily ignitable vegetation.

We are unanimously convinced that the Cohesive Strategy to create leveraged risk reduction in Southern California shrublands 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 fires, and those fires are overwhelmingly human caused and wind driven. We also know that 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 first step while permanent solutions are identified and implemented. We encourage and support their efforts and participation in our group. 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.

Most of the fire prevention policy and funding in California has been for fuels reduction and fire suppression related to fuel-driven fires. Unfortunately, this approach does not address embers from wind-driven fires that ignite vegetation or structures several miles downwind, nor help structures become more resilient and resistant to embers. Continued funding for suppression is absolutely critical. But reducing 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 requires a new mindset about wildfire and systemic changes in how risk is reduced.

In Orange County and most of Southern California, major funding and policy changes will help prevent ignitions that lead to catastrophic, wind-driven fires - particularly along roadsides - and help those living at the wildland-urban interface improve the resilience of their communities, with the support of county-wide collaborations such as COAST.

An aggressive strategy and actions for reducing roadside fire risk in our region includes everything from modified roadway operations practices, to increased patrol and surveillance through community Fire Watch Networks, to direct interventions along roads and utility corridors to prevent ignitions. This represents a fundamental change in the approach to wildfire in wind-driven systems.

Orange County Fire Authority and other local fire departments such as Newport Beach, Anaheim and Laguna Beach (all participants in COAST) 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. 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. Support and funding is also urgently needed for management of Strategic Fuel Modification Zones around communities to create defensible space and further increase resilience.

The COAST Fire Prevention Working Group 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 reality of wildfire in our region. We are bound together by this commitment to reduce the risk of wildfire and keep our communities and our precious wildlands safe.