

Tour of Dry Hills Around Topanga Sparks Awareness

By ANDREW C. REVKIN,
Times Staff Writer

A caravan of cars from Topanga Canyon and other parts of the Santa Monica Mountains wound through the dry coastal hills on Saturday, following a wilderness expert.

But the dozen area residents who participated weren't watching birds or looking for wildflowers. They were learning how to save their hillside homes from brush fires.

Two women on the tour had lost houses in such blazes. They and their neighbors were there to learn how to avoid such a catastrophe when the hot Santa Ana winds return this fall.

The tour leader, Klaus Radtke, is a former senior deputy forester for Los Angeles County who is now a consultant in fire and watershed management. He conducted the free tour for the Topanga-Las

Please see TOPANGA, Page 8

Virgines Resource Conservation District, which schedules such trips every few months.

Radtke's career has been built on developing ways to minimize the risks that can confront anyone living in what is called the "chaparral-urban interface," the boundary where fast-expanding residential neighborhoods meet low, scrubby wilderness. Such conditions are found throughout the hills around the San Fernando Valley.

along a steep winding road in the Fernwood section of Topanga Canyon, where Radtke pointed to a stand of tall, wispy eucalyptus trees that graced the hillside near an elegant home. They were beautiful, he said, but potentially deadly.

"When a 50-mile-an-hour Santa Ana drives a fire up this slope," he said, "those treetops will turn into fireballs."

Radtke said county and city ordinances that require landowners to clear brush around structures and streets often are not applied to ornamental trees and bushes, such as eucalyptus, that are not native species.

Eucalyptus should be "topped" every three years, he said, and most bushes and other plants in fire-prone areas should not be allowed to grow much higher than six feet.

Points to Problem Pine

A mature pine tree whose lower reaches were loaded with dead limbs and dry needles also incurred Radtke's wrath. Careful pruning of such hazards can mean the difference between a fire bypassing a tree or consuming it and nearby structures, he said.

Part of the slope in the same area had been cleared of grass but was still dotted with tall shrubs, including some highly flammable species such as greasewood. Radtke said a fire can hopscotch up such a slope.

A hillside homeowner is also faced with the threat of landslides and must balance this danger with the risk of fires. The solutions to the two problems are often antagonistic, Radtke said. For instance, clearing brush on a slope steeper than 30 degrees that is not well anchored to deep rock will cause disaster in a heavy rain.

In most situations, the homeowner should err toward preventing slippage, Radtke said.

The reason is insurance. Policies are available that will cover fire damage but, in most cases, no insurance is available to cover losses in a slide, he said.

Author of Guide

Radtke has written many publications distributed free describing how to live more safely in fire-prone regions, the most widely available being "A Homeowner's Guide to Fire and Watershed Management at the Chaparral-Urban Interface," which he wrote for the county and the U.S. Forest Service.

One Corral Canyon woman on the tour said she has known Radtke and listened to his advice for many years. "I follow Klaus' publications to the letter. It's better than having your own fire truck," she said.

Her interest in brush management was first heightened when a fire swept through the canyon in 1958. "I saw my pine trees turning brown and I never looked back. I knew the house was gone," she said. Several times since then she has fought fires that have come up to the front door of her new home.

Like many other area residents, though, she hasn't listened to one of Radtke's most strident pleas: to get rid of wood-shingle roofing.

Radtke said he often sees property that is cleared of brush and landscaped with fire-resistant plants, but the roof of the home is covered with wood. "People forget that houses burn from the roof down," he said.

Fail to Heed Advice

Along with the problem of people not listening to advice, there is the tendency of people not to seek advice, said Capt. John Galihier of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, who went on part of the tour. People from high-risk areas often are reluctant to come to the department with questions because they are afraid of being singled out for violating brush clearance ordinances.

The ideal situation, Radtke said, would be for an entire community—Fernwood, for instance—to take a coordinated approach to fire and erosion control.

But examples of such cooperation are rare.



GEORGE WILHELM / Los Angeles Times

Klaus Radtke, fire prevention consultant, takes issue with problem pine tree loaded with dead limbs and dry needles.