

NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SAFETY, INC.

A Non-Profit Corporation

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Malibu/Topanga Fire: Natural Catastrophe or Man-Made Disaster?
(Over 750 Million Dollars in property losses could have been prevented)

Society paid over one billion dollars in structural losses alone for the Malibu/Topanga Fire of November 2, 1993, making it one of the costliest wildland fire disasters in California's history. How could it have happened? Why was the community so unprepared?

No Lessons Learned From History

Large-scale wildland fires have been documented in the western Santa Monica Mountains on an average of about every six years (i.e., 1970, 1978 [2], 1982, 1985 [2], 1993 [2]). If separate large-scale fires that occurred the same year are included in the statistics, large-scale fires can be expected to occur on an average of every four years. Despite such cyclic reburning of vegetation, pockets of old-age vegetation in excess of 35 years old had survived in the Topanga/Fernwood and Las Flores Canyon/Mesa communities.

Fanned by Santa Ana winds, large-scale fires in the western Santa Monica Mountains have predictable patterns and rates of spread. They are generally not controlled until they run out of fuel (normally at the ocean), the winds die down, and the cool onshore air mass assists in containment of the flanks. Fire storm conditions are readily created by explosive fuels, whether mature native coastal sage or woody chaparral vegetation, poorly maintained or oversized landscape vegetation, or wood roof homes and wooden decks. The lessons learned from such fires are usually quickly forgotten. That is, that effective wildland fire protection is not feasible even with an army of fire fighters and equipment from all corners of the country unless proper pre-suppression planning and training is carried out.

Landuse planning must emphasize the siting and building of fire-safe homes in areas that can be protected from fire and flood. Building codes in high fire areas must emphasize fire-safe home construction (i.e., homes without combustible exteriors). Such construction must feature Class A roofs and should include boxed eaves and boxed balconies, dual-glazed windows with metal frames, and minimal attic and concealed space so that no exposed vents or only indirect venting is required. Defensible space must be created through reducing the buildup of flammable

wildland and urban landscape fuels by enforcing and locally strengthening California's Resource Code that requires the removal of flammable vegetation around homes. If fire hazard reduction ordinances are not effectively enforced by fire agencies, especially for landscape fuels, flammable wildland and landscape fuels around homes will build up and help create predictable fire disasters. However, fire agencies need the complete support for enforcement of such ordinances from City/County governments to really affect fire hazards. At the same time they need to be environmentally sensitive to balance erosion control with fire safety.

No Effective, Realistic Safety Mandates

It is well to remember that California statutes also mandate that each county and city shall adopt a comprehensive long-term local general plan for physical development that must include a seismic as well as a safety element. The safety element must cover a broad spectrum of safety issues inclusive of "planning for the protection of the community from . . . wildland and urban fires" and must also address "evacuation routes, peak load water supply requirements, and minimum road width and clearances around structures." It is of utmost importance that these safety elements not be ignored but be regularly amended to include currently available safety and planning techniques, and that their recommendations be adhered to.

No Effective Wildfire Education & Forced Evacuation costs \$750 Mill. in Fire Losses

It is estimated that if public agencies, especially the Los Angeles County Fire Department, would have intensively continued public wildland fire safety education, public involvement and public outreach programs, over 75% of the property losses or about 750 million dollars in property damage could have been prevented. Instead of effective public education and acknowledging, as was done in the past, that wildland fire losses can be most effectively reduced through trained and knowledgeable 'volunteer community firefighter/residents'¹ who know the local terrain and are intimately familiar with their immediate neighborhood, forced mass evacuation (and the panic, fear and confusion it caused) left neighborhoods unprotected. Wherever knowledgeable residents stayed behind to save their homes alone, or were joined by fire personnel (largely along the fire's flanks), such homes were normally saved.¹ We view the mass evacuation as witnessed in Malibu as a concession by public agencies, especially the County Fire Department, that they were ill-prepared for a wildland fire disaster in this area.

¹ Retired County Fire Chief Harvey Anderson as quoted on p. 122 of The Topanga Story published by the Topanga Historical Society: "Improvements in equipment (such as helicopters for low water drops), technique and water supply have enhanced fire fighting ability but every resident living in brush-covered Topanga during the Santa Ana winds faces the problem of protecting his own home and surviving in a major brush fire. If the owner is home and allowed to stay to protect his house, 100 ft. clearance should be sufficient, but more is better. ... "

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It is estimated that the combination of forced evacuation and police barricades that prevented knowledgeable homeowners from returning to save their homes accounted for an estimated 25% or \$250 million dollars in fire losses alone.

The CL-415 ("Superscooper") Could Have Prevented \$500 Mill. in Fire Losses

Wildland fire-fighting safety precautions dictate that fire-fighting ground crews and their equipment not face the heat or flames of a fire front nor be exposed to situations where limited ingress and egress may jeopardize a quick and safe escape. This is especially true for personnel not familiar with the local terrain as is the case in almost all large-scale fires or with large Fire Departments. Thus homes in the direct path of a fire front (i.e., Rambla Pacifico, upper Las Flores Canyon & Mesa) are generally consumed unless knowledgeable homeowners, in a defensible situation, protect their homes.

Wherever the effectiveness of ground fire fighters (both fire personnel and homeowners) is greatly curtailed, effective aerial fire suppression that can quickly and accurately deliver great amounts of water becomes of utmost importance. While helicopters with water buckets were somewhat effective in saving some homes after the fire front had passed and in finally containing the flanks of the fires under more favorable weather conditions, many more homes could have been saved (i.e., Rambla Pacifico, Lower Las Flores Canyon, Las Flores Mesa, Big Rock) if the world's most efficient urban-interface aerial fire fighting tool - the CL-415 or "Superscooper" fixed wing airplane would have been available to serve the tax-paying citizens. It is estimated that up to half the homes or up to 500 million dollars in structural losses could have been prevented with the use of three CL-415s. At the same time the fire could have been contained much earlier with less confusion and panic to surrounding communities. Perhaps the planes could have even contained the fire before it became an inferno.

Such savings could have paid for the outright purchase, maintenance and staffing of a fleet of at least ten CL-415 airplanes (that could have covered the whole Pacific Southwest of the U.S.) for approximately a decade. However, mountain residents have helplessly watched for over twenty years while inexcusable fire politics have circumvented public safety considerations and have redlined the airplane from being used in the United States even after it has repeatedly demonstrated its excellent capabilities.