

**Fighting for the Professional Soul of the Los Angeles County Forester and Fire Warden
(Fire Department)
Creating
Homeowner's Guide for Fire and Watershed Management at the Chaparral/Urban Interface
(HOGFW)**

While some of the information disclosed here had already been floating around in the community in the 1980s, I did not want to mention it as it could have affected the careers of dedicated public servants at that time, and also the future of their relatives if they followed in the footsteps within the local fire department. However, little seems to have changed in the last forty years in suppressing scientific information and harassing and shutting down its scientists who are trying to produce and disseminate such information for the public good, if it does not fit into the political agenda of people in power such as mirrored in the present life-threatening saga of all-too-predictable Global Warming.

I want to honor herewith the three most-courageous people (besides the US Forest Service scientists, the then owner of the Kindred publication, and the silent contacts within the County Board of Supervisors and the County Fire Department) who defied the all-too-powerful County Fire Chief and fought in their own ways for the professional soul of the Los Angeles County Forester and Fire Warden, known as the County Fire Department. They made it possible for me to write *The Homeowners Guide to Fire and Watershed Management at the Chaparral/Urban Interface (HOGFW)*, that came to be known as the Fire Booklet, put it in print for distribution in fireprone communities by the beginning of the 1982 wildland fire season.

All deceased, they are:

- 1.) Dick Friend, Public Information Officer (PIO). Los Angeles County Forester and Fire Warden.
- 2.) Arthur Arndt, Head Deputy Forester, Forestry Bureau. Los Angeles County Forester and Fire Warden.
- 3.) Louis (Ed) Hill, president of the Santa Monica Mountains Resident Association (SMMRA) and first president of the National Foundation for Environmental Safety (NFES).

Mr. Hill had founded SMMRA and co-founded NFES to keep a County Fire Chief in check, who had gone out of control in suppressing public safety information and thereby endangering the safety of mountain residents. I, as a professional forester and principal cooperater, attempted to carry out cooperative research agreements on public safety issues funded by the USDA Forest Service with the Fire Department as authorized partner, as approved by the County Board of Supervisors. Attempting to do so, I experienced extreme harassment that finally ended in my "house arrest" at fire department H.Q. in downtown Los Angeles and removal from all telephone communication and other public contact. I had refused to become a "professional prostitute," declining to trade my Ph.D. degree from U.C. Berkeley (focusing on Fire Science and Watershed Management) for advancement considerations when asked to provide "professional opinions" serving the interests of the Fire Department but not the interest of public safety. I also refused to name or "finger" others such as Head Deputy Forester Arndt, County Board of Supervisor representatives, and Forest Service scientists and Firescope representatives, perceived by the Fire Department as "illegal contacts" that assisted me in carrying out my work inclusive of writing **HOGFW** when forbidden to do so by the Fire Chief.

Since I was receiving my Ph.D. from UC Berkeley in June 1981, the Fire Department was qualified to continue its cooperative research agreements as it required its principal cooperater to have such an advanced degree. However, the Fire Chief who was eviscerating the remnants of a professional Forestry

Bureau (then still one of the five Bureaus within the Fire Department), refused to sign the new five-year research agreement forwarded to him by the U.S. Forest Service in May 1981, out of fear that it would give further credence to compliance with the post-Proposition 13 ten-year management audit of the County Fire Department, of which I was not aware of in my position. The audit, started in 1979 and completed in January 1980, tried to modernize and make the department more efficient through changes in the bid system and also recommended the civilianization of 123 uniformed personnel, ranging from Fire Fighter specialist to Deputy Fire Chief as these people were performing non-firefighting services, as well as the elimination of an additional 14 positions with initial cost savings of \$1.22 mil. already in 1980. Unfortunately for the Forestry Bureau and our work, the audit also stated that the Forestry Bureau (one of the then-still five Bureaus within the County Forester and Fire Warden) should expand on its stated goal of informing the public on wildland fire prevention. In its extensive review of the research being carried out by Klaus Radtke, it recommended "Establish the completion of the Forestry Bureau's scientific fire management/fire (loss) suppression projects as a department priority."¹ The audit further recommended that some of the moneys saved through the civilianization be earmarked for shoring up the Forestry Bureau that had lost over twenty positions because of lack for professional advancement.²

So, how did the Fire Booklet (**HOGFW**) come about and how were we even able to produce it? I had received a phone call from my boss, Head Deputy Forester Mr. Arndt, in my office at Fire Camp 8 in Malibu requesting to be at a meeting of fire chiefs on December 21, 1981 in the Chief's conference room at the Los Angeles H.Q., as the chiefs would have a meeting on fire safety with representatives from the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisor offices. He would not/could not attend and did not offer any

¹The audit states "Early on Forestry management identified the value of research designed to discover alternatives which could reduce the fire hazard present by the local chaparral. The bureau pioneered work on developing "fire retardant" plants with low fuel volume. These plants, although not fireproof, introduce low growing vegetation that can put out less fuel for fire. Another research project shows even greater promise. Forestry has plotted the history of fires in the Santa Monica Mountains over the last 70 years. This research makes it possible to develop confidence limits on the fires starting in a given area and the path a fire will follow. Information of this type will enhance the scientific management of wildland fires because their start, spread, and intensity can be predicted.

Finally, Forestry is presently working on a project that will enable the department to plot/provide on microfiche viewers the topography of a fire area, the deployment of personnel and equipment, and the movement of a fire. This project will also provide firefighters with an immediate history of fires in the area, the age of chaparral regrowth and a description of the surrounding topography."

²However, the audit did not acknowledge how this came about through the Fire Department's then clever scheme circumventing the Civil Service system in reclassifying/promoting former forestry aides that perhaps did not qualify for the entrance position into the Fire Department itself but had relatives within the Fire Department and therefore became forestry/nursery aides under professional foresters. First reclassified as Forestry assistants (the entrance position for a 4-year college graduate), then giving high promotabilities and largely having or knowing the answers to written questions of the Civil Service examinations for Deputy Foresters, they advanced to Deputy Foresters, then also grandfathering their professional status. If one would nevertheless flunk the Civil Service examination and would even come in dead last (provided he had excellent connections to the Union), one could then be reclassified to Deputy Forester and even Head Deputy Forester, as it happened after Head Deputy Forester Arndt and I were forced out of the Fire Department in November of 1982. One may ask why were there not protests/inquiries made to Civil Service? A very grievous and obvious promotional violation was met with "If you go to Civil Service (and thereby embarrass the Chief, the Department, the Union) you will be transferred to the furthest location away from your home and will not have another happy day within the Department." So, most professional foresters, being confronted with this scheme after being hired, rather quit when opportunities opened up elsewhere.

further information.³ When I entered, the seating along the large, oval conference room table was largely arranged by fire chief rankings (there were over 70 chiefs within the department with different ranks), which placed me at the end of the table opposite the Chief or Chief's Deputy who occupied the first seat almost opposite from me. The air was electrifying and somewhat intimidating as I was told "to behave, watch myself." After some overall back-and-forth, the Supervisor representative stated that the Board of Supervisors would like the Fire Department to produce a "Fire Booklet" for residents in fireprone communities by the beginning of the fire season (July 1, 1982). They had reviewed *Living More Safely at the Chaparral-Urban Interface*, a soon-to-be published US Forest Service research publication that I had written under the previous 5-year cooperative research agreement that had expired in June 1981.

The Chief's Deputy, as apparently instructed by the Chief, then stated that Fire Department staff did not have the time to write such a book nor the money to produce/print it. I was flabbergasted about this lie as the Fire chief had just to sign the overdue cooperative research agreement lingering on his desk and forward it to the Board of Supervisors, who were waiting for it to officially approve it at their Tuesday Board meetings. Then "discussions" went around the long, oval table with the other chiefs either agreeing or nodding, with a few remaining silent as some knew quite well that the Fire Chief had shut down all cooperative research with the Forest Service that could fund such a booklet. When it came to me, sitting across the table from the Deputy Chief, I looked at him (it was a very tense moment) and then mentioned to the Supervisor's representative that I could write this book based on my previous Forest Service publication and have it in print by the beginning of the fire season with the printing paid through the Cooperative Forest Service Research Agreement. I may have also mentioned that the Research Agreement that would fund the booklet had been forwarded to the Fire Chief a while ago and just needed his signature and be forwarded to the Board of Supervisors for approval (as this was the standard procedure).

On the way home I already started to lay out such a fire booklet in my mind and continued it in my Camp 8 field office until I had a draft in print by the middle of March 1982 to be presented to Forest Service scientists for further review. At Fire Camp 8, I was cautious enough to take home any proof that I was working on the booklet and bring the documents back to my field office the next day, as I was well aware that fire personnel had keys to my room and could inspect it any time on a notice from downtown. However, I could not have gotten this far without the help of the Fire Department's PIO **Dick Friend**.⁴ Dick Friend and his staff, whose office was located just down the hall from the fire chief's office, had helped me over the years when it sometimes seemed impossible to find a way forward

³ At this time I was not aware that the Head Deputy Forester kept away from such meetings as he was being suspected/being investigated by the Fire Chief of having communicated with/contacted the County Supervisor offices, informing them that all research on fire safety had been shut down by the Fire Chief already for some time.

⁴ Dick Friend had worked for several newspapers, including the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, *Los Angeles Daily Mirror* and the *Los Angeles Times* before being asked to rejoin the L.A. County Fire Department as its Public Information Officer in 1967. In 1975 he took a leave of absence to publish the *Western Fire Journal* which became later known as *American Fire Journal*. He rejoined the County Fire Department in 1979 and headed the Public Education and Information section which consisted of a uniformed fire captain, seven firefighter specialists (probably to be civilianized), two photographers and two graphic artists. His office handled all press relations for the fire chief, Fire Safety Education programs in schools, hospitals, etc., and all filming permits. In 1984, at the age of 55, he retired from the County Fire Department but continued to work for 11 more years in the News Department of Southern California Gas Co. which serves all of Southern California as a public utility, retiring in 1995. After this he did a lot of volunteer work in his community not related to fire-fighting.

because of red tape encountered. He was a “one of a kind” person, knowledgeable, considerate, thoughtful, and humble, being well respected and needed by the Fire Department but not depending on it for his employment or advancement.

In developing **HOGFW** I had turned to him for permission to review the Fire Department’s photo data base as well as for advice on fire department policies on public safety of which he was well aware of as he was the “consultant to the chief.” He provided me several slides that I then used in **HOGFW** and was also thoughtful enough to review my draft publication on March 13, 1982, as he was the most qualified in the Fire Department to do so. Reviewing it, he stated in a note to me *“Thank you for giving me the chance. It is a much-needed guide.”* He could have turned me in any time to the Fire Chief just down the hall who would have surely shut me down for “insubordination,” but was above all these petty and destructive fire politics and always thought about the bigger picture and what was best for everyone.

Second in line to be honored for making **HOGFW** possible behind the scene is Head Deputy Forester Arthur Arndt. He and I then reviewed the booklet before I met with Forest Service scientists and their editing staff for further review. Like me, he endured intimidation and harassment but often told me about upcoming red tape so that I could maneuver around it and about others to watch out for as “they would turn you in.” At the end, on November 2, we were both waiting for a phone call from the County Supervisors to “shut down the harassment at the direction of the fire chief” which never came.⁵

Third in line to be honored for making **HOGFW** possible after the fact is private citizen Ed Hill. While he later gave me credit for saving his home overrun by the firestorm during the November 2, 1993 Old Topanga Fire and reappearing out of the surrounding ashes as I expected and as reported in the *Los Angeles Times* a few days later, he should take credit for it himself. He was an independent pro-active “mountain man” who had listened and had learned to build a then fire-safe home with an independent water tank water source and a gasoline-operated pump along with 1” fire hoses, had prepared for the expected wildfire, and had also become an expert homeowner firefighter and watershed manager. As an independent retired businessman, he took it upon himself to challenge the all-powerful County Fire Chief and his bureaucracy when the Chief refused to reprint **HOGFW** at the request of the County Board of Supervisors during the height of the fire season, making excuses that there was no money to reprint it, that it was an unauthorized copy requiring review, etc. In reality, the Chief was trying to prevent its initial distribution and stall its reprinting while trying to wrestle the booklet from public domain and make it a “County Fire Department” controlled publication, attempting to force me to deny authorship through intimidation, harassment, and attacks on our integrity.⁶

5 With the gubernatorial election of November 2, 1982 favoring Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, it was believed that the County Fire Chief was trying to be appointed the new director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (now Cal Fire). However, with the mayor unexpectedly losing by a “razor thin margin,” this then became unlikely by the next day. With the Board of Supervisors apparently not being prepared for this and not having the 3:2 majority to fire the Fire Chief at this time (as the Chief would not leave without being assured of a new job of his status), he apparently became more openly emboldened to continue on his path of obstructing public safety information not fitting his present political agenda.

6 On November 15, 1982, with Radtke “out of the way,” he states in a letter to the Board of Supervisors “it (**HOGFW**) represents a compendium of resource information submitted by over 100 various contributors, and edited by our Departmental employees.” However, local newspapers, being aware of the circumstances, list Dr. Radtke as the author of **HOGFW** for more than 10 years.

When Mr. Hill, as the then-president of the Santa Monica Mountains Resident Association, witnessed all this during the height of the fire season, he just met with the printer to safeguard and pay for the original plates and also ordered and paid for another 10,000 books. These he then advertised, sold at cost (approximately 50¢/copy) and distributed as a public service not only in Los Angeles County but throughout the western United States still during the height of the fire season. This infuriated the Fire Chief as it undercut and embarrassed his misguided efforts and he then had Mr. Hill threatened with injunctions to stop distribution of **HOGFW** and perhaps even confiscation of the already printed books. In response to these threats Mr. Hill subsequently distributed the books for safekeeping to homeowners throughout the Santa Monica Mountains as well as to other public agencies. Partially in response to such harassment, Mr. Hill, in August 1983 followed this up with a 32-page-document forwarded to the County Board of Supervisors, charging the County Fire Chief with dereliction of his duties inclusive of “neglecting to prepare the public and his department for predictable wildland fires, refusing to educate the public adequately and timely on wildland fire safety at a time when fire hazard was extreme, refusing to obey mandates for public safety ordered by the Board of Supervisors, etc., and asking for his dismissal” (this had been considered by the Board of Supervisors for some time).

Receiving no response except that the Board is aware of the problem, is looking into it and to cool it for the time being, Mr. Hill then co-founded the National Foundation for Environmental Safety (NFES) in October 1983. Insulated from further such attacks by a pro-active Board consisting of a well-respected judge, a no-nonsense attorney, environmental scientists, and mountain residents, NFES continued to disseminate public safety information inclusive of items Dr. Radtke had initiated and worked on as principal cooperater under Cooperative research contracts between the U.S. Forest Service and the County of Los Angeles. Such information not only consisted of public safety information being withheld from mountain residents but also from other public agencies requesting it.

For the mountain homeowners this at times public saga ended when Dr. Radtke, now in private business, received a phone call at his home in 1984.⁷

⁷ Dr. Radtke received a phone call from a Deputy Fire Chief telling him to look in the Sunday *L.A. Times* for an article of the Fire Chief announcing his retirement. The Chief had gotten a phone call from the Board of Supervisors' offices telling him that he would be fired at next Tuesday's Board meeting unless there would be an announcement in the *L.A. Times* of his retirement by Sunday as a face-saving gesture. Apparently new employment had been assured for him. While many expected drastic changes with his departure, this did not come about because he had apparently written the specifications so tight for the next fire chief, his assistant, that the Board of Supervisors had no choice but to name his personally chosen successor the new chief. During his tenure from 1984-1988 the lid could not be kept on any longer on some of the scandals within the department and newspapers openly asked that he be fired. Then in 1988, Dr. Radtke received another call from a Deputy Fire Chief informing him to again look in Sunday's *L.A. Times* as the Fire Chief would announce his retirement, as he had received a phone call from the Board of Supervisors on Friday that he would be fired at next Tuesday's Board meeting. A while thereafter, Dr. Radtke received a call from one of the finalists for selection as the new fire chief, asking if he would consider returning to the Fire Department and continue his research with his full support and an appointment not within forestry but as chief of research directly responsible to the fire chief as had been originally proposed by the Personnel Department in 1981 and then overruled by the then Fire Chief. Dr. Radtke stated that he would consider it as so much more could be done for the public good. However, this would probably not happen as an outsider from Texas was also on the finalist list and the Board of Supervisors would probably pick him to be more isolated from the fire politics of the firefighter union. And this is what happened.

I somehow felt empathy for the new chief as he would still be surrounded by dinosaurs within the department who would be attempting to undermine him to keep the status quo. Looking ahead, this was obvious during the November 1993 Old Topanga Fire as the department did not prepare proactively for such predictable disaster and had little or no water available for effective firefighting as the firefront passed or soon thereafter as the hydrants “ran dry” while literally millions of gallons of auxiliary swimming pool water remained untouched. Within the fire department we had already discussed and proposed here and there since the 1970’s to have an inventory of such water resources done and road-marked in cooperation with homeowners as the Fire Department was well aware that hydrants would be dry during large-scale wildfires and that even many of their own firefighters would not know the area. The lack of trained wildland firefighters not only responding from other agencies but even from within the County Fire Department, also not acknowledged, was well known and also became a problem.