

National Foundation for Environmental Safety

The stated goal of the National Foundation for Environmental Safety (NFES) was to make the community in which we live a safer place for everyone. This was being achieved through promoting awareness of environmental hazards, furthering a spirit of self-help, and through cooperation and drawing upon knowledge from everywhere with assistance from its Board (“Experts Helping People.”)

NFES was co-founded in October 1983 by Louis E. Hill, president of the Santa Monica Mountains Resident Association, partially in response to the threats, harassment and intimidation that was directed at him by the Los Angeles County Fire Chief in the fall of 1982 for disseminating public safety information inclusive of the booklet *A Homeowner’s Guide to Fire and Watershed Management at the Chaparral-Urban Interface*. Mr. Hill, in response, charged the County Fire Chief the following year with dereliction of his duties and endangering the life and safety of mountain residents at the height of the fire season, documenting these charges in an explosive document titled “Firegate 1” that he provided to the County Board of Supervisors. “Firegate 1” supported the many charges with written internal Fire Departmental, County Interdepartmental, and outside agency communication.

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. Klaus Radtke had initiated and worked on as principal cooperator 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.

Not knowing how the County Fire Chief would react and if he would again attempt to shut down Mr. Hill as he attempted to in November 1982, a public Wildland Fire Management Seminar was announced to the press by NFES to be held in Malibu that would provide specific public safety information as listed in the news release.¹ The seminar was conducted on April 25, 1984 at the Malibu Civic Center library with Judge Baker charmingly acting as moderator and breaking the tension while ushering to their seats largely off-duty representatives from Los Angeles County, Los Angeles City, Ventura County fire departments, etc., as well as research professionals and interested homeowners until there was standing room only. Fire history, vegetation type, and age class maps were displayed on overlays and historic fire corridors were outlined with handouts provided.² It was shown how the lessons gained from such research could predict fire patterns given a fire start and where and how fires could be fought effectively under different fire weather regimes because of less resistance to containment. Such knowledge gained by fire chief officers led, for example, to the containment of the eastern flank of the 1993 Old Topanga Fire along

¹ Public Announcement Wildland Fire Management Seminar 4-25-1984.

² Such fire history and fire frequency maps not only covered the SMM but tried to include most of Los Angeles County’s fireprone areas.

Topanga Canyon Road.³ However, such knowledge gained has to be continuously updated to be applicable to current field conditions.

Public safety education focusing on homeowners had already been initiated in late 1983 and was continued by NFES and cooperating agencies, with seminars held in the mid-1980s in Los Angeles County as well as UCLA, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and U.C. Berkeley.

At the same time Radtke, in private practice (Geo Safety, Inc.), also continued to oppose non-fire-safe development in the Santa Monica Mountains⁴ and supported fire-safe community standards that must include safe and adequate ingress and egress. As supporter of and subsequently Board member of NFES, he also conducted free of charge many homeowner inspections in Los Angeles County's wildland areas during the 1980s-1990s, often after homeowners had passed their yearly "brush clearance" inspections and thought they were safe. Wildfires and their causes as well as home losses were also investigated when time permitted and fire safety seminars were held throughout California. The footnotes below provide some of these references.⁵ To Radtke's

³ Personal communication in 1994 at Fire Camp 2 by the chief in charge of this section.

⁴ Radtke, Klaus. Re: Rancho Malibu Estates (Vesting Tentative Tract Map No. 46277. Document addressed to Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors raising concerns about this unsafe development. Geo Safety, Inc. 10 pp.

⁵ *Malibu Surfside News*. Organization hopes to Address Environmental Concerns. Fire, Floods, Slides. Oct. 27, 1983.

Topanga Messenger. National Foundation for Environmental Safety: A Group of Professionals From New Foundation to promote Environmental Awareness, to prevent and Control Fires and Landslides, to Compile Data, and Lay it on the Line. Jan. 26, 1984.

Los Angeles Times (Poole, Bob). "Outsmart Fires with Science, Experts Say. Hillside Residents, Facing Season that May be One of the Worst, Told to Fight Back." *Los Angeles Times*. April 29, 1984.

Los Angeles Times (Poole, Bob and Elaine Woo). High, Dry Malibu Vulnerable in Unusually Perilous Fire Season. *Los Angeles Times*. May 3, 1984.

Daily News (Washington, Erwin). "Santa Ana Winds Raise Fire Danger." October 22, 1984.

Malibu Surfside News (Radtke, Klaus). "Burn Patterns: Using Data Analysis on the Fire Line." August 8, 1985.

Malibu Surfside News (Radtke, Klaus). "Patterns Emerge from Study of Area Fire History." August 15, 1985.

Topanga Messenger (Radtke, Klaus). "Fire in the Mountains." September 12, 1985.

Topanga Messenger (Radtke, Klaus). "October's Fire: The Crucial Lessons Learned?" November 20, 1985

Los Angeles Times (Revkin, Andrew C). "Tours of Dry Hills around Topanga Sparks Awareness." August 10, 1986.

Topanga Messenger (Radtke, Klaus). "Management by Crisis or Crisis Management." August 14, 1986.

Sunset Magazine. "Protecting your home against brushfire." Sept. 1983. 6 pp.

NFES. "The Oakland (Tunnel) Fire of October 20, 1991."

NFES. "Natural Catastrophe or Predictable Man-Made Disaster." News Release. Nov., 22, 1991. 2 pp.

NFES. "The Malibu/Topanga Fires of November 2, 1993: Natural Catastrophe or Predictable Man-Made Disaster? News Release. January 13, 1994. 3 pp.

NFES. News Release. Postfire Hydroseeding: Damaging or Saving Wildland Watersheds? A Waste of Public Funds to the Tune of Millions of Dollars? March 15, 1994.

NFES. The Homeowner – The Forgotten Firefighter. August 4, 1994.

Los Angeles Times. (Poole, Bob). County (Fire Department) Reverses Policy on Homeowners Fighting Fires (Disasters: Officials hold expo to help residents learn techniques. Heavy losses in 1993 blazes prompt change). August 5, 1994.

Malibu Surfside News (Macuk, Michael). "NFES Self-Help Group Offers Tours of "Survivor" Sites-Promotes Do-It-Yourself Ethic." August 11, 1994.

Malibu Surfside News. "Fire Expert Says City (of Malibu) has increased its Disaster Risk." July 6, 1995.

Los Angeles Times. "Tour of Dry Hills Around Topanga Sparks Awareness." August 10, 1996.

Radtke, Klaus. "Lessons From the Ashes: The 1977 Topanga Fire." Geo Safety, Inc. April 26, 2000.

dismay he found that most of the homes inspected were not really fire-safe, as flammable landscape vegetation, flammable household items, or flammable accessory structures were never really addressed during brush inspections. To his knowledge, none of the residences of homeowners that diligently followed his advice were lost in wildfires even when they were located in the center of a firestorm, such as in central Las Flores Canyon during the 1993 Old Topanga Fire.

With the aging, retirement and death of key members, NFES was also retired by 2005.

Footnotes continued

Wildfire and Watershed Management. Tree People, Beverly Hills. Feb. 25, 1984.

Wildland Fire Management: Fighting Fire with Science. Palos Verdes Library, Palos Verdes, CA. May 26, 1984.

Continuing Education

Fire in the Landscape seminars held at UCLA, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and U.C. Berkeley, CA. May 1985.

Wildland Fire Management in Urbanized Areas (living and working in disaster-prone areas). Veterans Memorial Building, Culver City, CA. January 24, 1986.

Ecological Landscaping for Fire and Erosion Control. Veterans Memorial Building. Culver City, CA Jan. 25, 1986.

Hillside Safety Seminar, Malibu public library conference room. Feb. 17, 1986.

Landscaping for Fire and Erosion Control. The Theodore Payne Foundation. Sept. 19, 1987.

Urban Wildfire Prevention and Landscape Revegetation Workshop. Sheraton Hotel. Los Angeles, CA Dec. 11, 1993.

Seminars in the News:

Malibu Surfside News. Environmental Management: Safety Group to Host Public Seminars. Jan. 19, 1984.

Rolling Hills Community Association. County-wide series of seminars on homeowner property management. Jan. 26, 1984

Palos Verdes Peninsula News. Seminar Here Saturday to discuss Hillsides. Jan. 26, 1984.

Palos Verdes Peninsula News. Control of Hillsides Possible, Experts Say. Feb. 2, 1984.

Los Angeles Times. Talks on Hillside Safety Set at Several Locations. Feb. 2, 1984.

Malibu Surfside News. Group to Offer Hillside Safety Seminar. Feb. 9, 1984.

1984: First Los Angeles County-wide series of free public education seminars on homeowner property management at the wildland-urban interface.

Wildfire and Watershed Management. Malibu Civic Center, Community Room, Malibu. Jan. 27, 1984.

Wildfire and Watershed Management. Taft High School, Woodland Hills. Feb. 3, 1984.

Wildfire and Watershed Management. Pacific Palisades Library. Community Room. Feb. 4, 1984.

Wildfire and Watershed Management. Topanga Community House, Topanga. Feb. 10, 1984.

Wildfire and Watershed Management. Malibu Civic Center, Community Room, Malibu. Feb. 17, 1984.
