

**RIVERSIDE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
FIRE HAZARD REDUCTION TASK FORCE  
INTERIM REPORT**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Following the tragic Esperanza Fire that started on October 26, 2006 near Cabazon, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, at their November 21, 2006 regularly scheduled meeting, resolved to create a Fire Hazard Reduction Task Force. The action was initiated by First District Supervisor Bob Buster.

The Task Force was charged with reviewing and providing recommended direction for the reduction of fire hazards and the clarification of evacuation measures throughout the county. The committee with representatives from top county departments and representatives appointed by the Board of Supervisors determined that most problems and suggested solutions revolve around public information and education (including evacuation), fire protection planning or engineering and enforcement.

The Mission Statement developed by the Task Force is:

*The mission of the Fire Hazard Reduction Task Force is to ensure life safety thru stringent protection and education requirements while identifying future development criteria thru education, engineering and enforcement.*

The Task Force was divided into three general subject areas. Those areas are Education, Engineering and Enforcement. This paper represents an interim report from the Task Force with problem identification and recommended solutions.

The Task Force members included:

1st District Appointee-Mike Palmer, 2<sup>nd</sup> District Appointee-Ray Russell, 3<sup>rd</sup> District Appointee-Carl Thibeault, 4<sup>th</sup> District Appointee-Larry Kueneman, 5<sup>th</sup> District Appointee-Bruce Cowie, Riverside County Fire-Chief John Hawkins, Captn. Tracy Hobday, Riverside County Sheriff Dept.- Darryll Norte, Office of Emergency Services-Mary Moreland, Riverside County Planning Dept.-Mark Balys, Riverside County Transportation Dept.-Mark Bernas, Riverside County Executive Office-Bob Tremaine

**RESOLUTION**

Riverside County Board of Supervisors, November 21, 2006 meeting, Policy Calendar Item 3.25, Supervisor Bob Buster, creation of a Fire Hazard Reduction Task Force:

*RECOMMENDED MOTION: That the Board of Supervisors:*

- 1. Approve establishing the Task Force, appointing one member from each supervisorial district and staffing it with top Fire, Sheriff, Emergency, Planning and Transportation department personnel.*

*BACKGROUND: (The tragic Esperanza Fire and other recent small brush fires in the Pass and Lakeland Village areas emphasize the continuing danger, especially in dry Santa Ana wind conditions, facing several unincorporated areas.*

*Even clearing significant perimeters around homes in high-fire hazard areas may not be enough to protect the structures or the occupants from raging wind-blown fires. Certainly, the Esperanza Fire has again shown that rescuers and firefighters are always at great risk in these areas.*

*We owe them and many residents in such areas the County's best efforts at fire prevention and protection.*

*I expect the Task Force to take a hard look, not only at stringent protection and evacuation requirements for existing residents, but also at what form any future development should take.*

*-Bob Buster, Supervisor District I*

## **Education Subcommittee**

***Specific Goals and Recommendations - All focus on mitigation and preparation activities to ensure a more effective and efficient response to fire situations.***

**GOAL: Encourage the development of more Fire Safe Councils as a way to engage all stakeholders in their respective communities. Seek increased grant funding for existing and future Fire Safe Councils (FSC).**

***Recommendation:*** *That the Board of Supervisors consider the creation of a county-wide Fire Safe Council (FSC) "Commission" or "Alliance." This Commission would not usurp the authority of the existing FSC's, but would act as a coordinating body to ensure collaboration and cooperation among Councils, support the formation of new Councils, lead the effort to community and individual property hazard abatement and assist with the acquisition of grant funds to accomplish fire hazard abatement. The Task Force should continue as a Board working group or the Task Force should evolve into an Alliance as stated above.*

**GOAL: Use the media to make the County's residents more aware of the newly adopted weed abatement requirements.**

***Recommendation:*** *Work with the Economic Development Agency to add "100 foot clearance" information into the County's "Connections" periodic publications. Use all existing Town Hall meetings, Safety Fairs, COMM group meetings, etc., as additional information vehicles for the dissemination of fire safe information, which is available from a variety of sources in hard copy and on the internet.*

**GOAL: As it applies to evacuation, provide increased information about the County's Early Warning Notification System (EWNS) which will be fully implemented by June 2007.**

***Recommendation:*** *This goal is in process of implementation. This EWNS information was shared with all contract cities at their quarterly meeting on April 18, 2007. Information was shared with the Board of Supervisors at a Workshop on June 18, 2007. Full media coverage of its implementation is also planned for June, 2007.*

**GOAL: Use the Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST) planning process as a model to develop and test evacuation plans for other vulnerable communities, especially those in Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas of Riverside County.**

**Recommendation:** *This goal is in process of implementation. Another table top exercise focusing on evacuation plans was conducted with the MAST organization on May 23, 2007. A functional exercise focusing on the Lakeland Village / El Cariso areas was held June 20, 2007. These drills will annually continue and will focus on different vulnerable areas each year. The drills emphasize the importance of unified command among fire and law enforcement responders, early and effective evacuation actions of both humans and animals, fire suppression tactics and methods to protect communities at risk from an advancing wildfire and joint information systems to appropriately provide the media coordinated information releases that represent the position of all County response agencies and the Executive Office.*

**GOAL: Encourage more communities to take the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training.**

*Recommendation: This goal is in process of implementation. Information about the importance of CERT training is shared on a consistent basis throughout the County. County Fire OES has secured \$50,000 in grant dollars to hire a contractor that will instruct 8 -12 more CERT classes in the coming year. OES has also just hired a bi-lingual Emergency Services Coordinator whose focus will be Community Outreach and will include teaching additional CERT classes.*

*The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations.*

*Riverside County CERT programs train an average of 1,200 citizens per year. Additionally, 300 take advanced CERT training, 300 attend annual refresher training and 600 are trained in and serve as drill victims for various public safety agencies. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, Riverside County CERT members have responded admirably to a wide range of emergencies such as earthquakes, winter storms, flooding, wildland fires, power outages and other disaster situations.*

**GOAL: Enhance the Fire Department's public education component, focusing especially on elementary aged children (primarily third graders as it has been shown they are most receptive to fire safety information).**

*Recommendation: That the County Fire Chief's Association address the importance of this educational component by assigning additional staff to this task. Fire Prevention Education information must be provided to elementary aged children throughout the County. At the County Fire Department, more staff is needed to adequately provide fire education.*

**GOAL: Work with utility companies, etc. to see if fire safety information can be inserted into monthly bills.**

*Recommendation: This goal is in process of implementation. County OES staff has been in discussion with Southern California Edison and other utility providers and are getting initial positive feedback on using their billing process to disseminate fire safety information.*

**GOAL: Maintain consistent contact with the other two subcommittees (Engineering & Enforcement) so that we speak with a common voice and so that all information disseminated by the Education Subcommittee is in context with the overall goals of the Task Force and the Board of Supervisors.**

**Recommendation:** This goal is in process of implementation. Even after these goals and recommendations are shared with the Board of Supervisors and implemented, our subcommittee encourages the Task Force to continue to meet for their valuable contributions and expertise in the areas of fire hazard reduction and evacuation.

## **Engineering Subcommittee**

**GOAL (short term):** Continue fire safe compliance through effective fire protection planning review processes utilizing currently adopted standards.

**Recommendation:** That the Board of Supervisors support and direct the Fire Department to address effective fire protection planning efforts through the plan review process using currently adopted standards and, where appropriate, adopt new standards that minimize the threat of destructive wildfires to communities. Communities should be designed and built to withstand the thrust of an advancing wildfire.

**GOAL (short term):** Riverside County must investigate other agency and county fire safety practices and implement practices that best serve the County reducing the fire hazard.

**Recommendation:** That the Board of Supervisors direct the Task Force to investigate effective fire safety practices used by other agencies and counties. Examples might include past fires and lessons learned from incidents such as the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire, the 1993 Old Topanga and 1996 Calabasas Fires, the 2003 Southern California Firestorm fires and the 2006 Esperanza Fire. Lessons learned that would benefit Riverside County should be implemented locally to improve fire safety and reduce the fire risk to Riverside County communities.

**GOAL (short term):** Develop draft offset mitigation charts and alternative methods and materials.

**Recommendation:** That the Board of Supervisors support and direct the Fire Department to address effective fire protection planning efforts through the plan review process developing mitigation and alternative methods consistent with the fire safe practices of the Wildland Urban Interface Code.

**GOAL (short term):** Provide training and training resources (audio-visual) for fire personnel that includes specific instruction on fire protection planning or engineering, fire hazard reduction techniques that ensure effective fire prevention inspection compliance.

**Recommendation:** That the Fire Department develop effective fire prevention and fire protection planning training materials including courses in fire hazard reduction, fire safe planning, etc., and that these classes be supported with state of the art audio visual instructional materials.

**GOAL (short term):** Ensure that the Fire Department has appropriate municipal staffing in the Fire Protection Planning organization that ensures a comprehensive plan review process.

**Recommendation:** *The Riverside County Board of Supervisors has strongly supported providing the Fire Department effective staffing to deal with the rapidly developing communities of the County. It is imperative that the staffing levels are maintained at levels that meet the needs of development and can adequately and accurately respond to development requests and planned submissions.*

**GOAL (long term):** **Adopt or revise fire codes to ensure that Riverside County has the most effective approach to fire hazard reduction and abatement.**

**Recommendation:** *That the Board of Supervisors support the adoption or revision of fire codes including (1) adopting the California Fire Code with the process beginning July 1, 2007, (2) adopt the Wildland Urban Interface Code with the process beginning July 1, 2007 and (3) revise Riverside County Ordinance 787 by January 1, 2008. These codes will provide a comprehensive fire and life safety approach to ensuring that legal, defensible enabling authorities drive fire safety within Riverside County. Once code revisions are completed, take the revisions to the Board of Supervisors for adoption.*

**GOAL (long term):** **Revise Riverside County Ordinance 348 to provide 100' minimum setback on one acre or greater sized lots.**

**Recommendation:** *That the Board of Supervisors revises Ordinance 348 to provide a minimum 100' setback on one acre or greater sized lots. Doing so will ensure that structures are situated on parcels of one acre or greater size to provide the opportunity for the required 100' of vegetation clearance and fuel modification.*

**GOAL (long term):** **During the January 1, 2010 revision of the Riverside County General Plan provide for the inclusion of the state Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps in conjunction with the county designated Hazardous Fire Area (HFA) and building standards.**

**Recommendation:** *That the Board of Supervisors adopt the State Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps and building standards. CAL FIRE is re-mapping fire hazard severity zones for lands where the State has fiscal responsibility for wildland fire protection (State Responsibility Area) and is preparing Very High Fire Hazard Severity recommendations for local responsibility areas. This mapping is being done under authorities defined in PRC 4201 and GC 51175. This effort incorporates improved wildland fire behavior science, data sets, and understanding of structure ignition mechanisms during conflagrations.*

*The California Building Commission adopted the Wildland-Urban Interface codes in late 2005 with an effective date of January 2008. These new codes include provisions for ignition resistant construction standards in the wildland urban interface. The updated fire hazard severity zones will be used by building and fire officials to determine appropriate construction materials for new buildings in the wildland urban interface. The updated zones will also be used by property owners to comply with natural hazards disclosure requirements at time of property sale. It is likely that the fire hazard severity zones will be used by local government as they update the safety element of general plans.*

*The State Responsibility Area map adoption process will include public hearings in 56 of the 58 counties. These hearings should be completed by fall and the maps are scheduled for adoption under CCR Title 14 regulation by December 31, 2007, in time for the January 2008 building codes. Then, after the SRA maps are adopted and published, the CAL FIRE director will send updated maps to all local jurisdictions that have lands that meet the criteria of very high fire hazard severity zones. The local government will then commence discussions on the acceptance of the recommendations.*

**GOAL (Long term):** Update the Riverside County General Plan and complete consistency zoning actions to limit residential growth within or adjacent to high fire hazard areas.

*Recommendation:* That the Riverside County Board of Supervisors strongly support providing the Planning Department effective staffing to update the General Plan and adopt consistent zoning designations. It is critical that the zoning designations and regulations conform to statutory requirements and comprehensively address the health, safety and welfare needs of Riverside County residents and fully respond to development requests.

**GOAL (Long term):** The County shall acquire lands adjacent to high fire hazard areas to be managed as greenbelts and buffers for fire-safe development.

*Recommendation:* That the Riverside County Board of Supervisors support and direct efforts for the County to acquire lands in developing communities to both act as greenbelts and buffers to high fire hazard areas. The dual nature of such an effort can enhance both fire-safety as well as aesthetic components to residential developments in these areas.

### **Enforcement Subcommittee**

**GOAL:** Heighten the understanding of fire hazard abatement by the imposition of a fine in addition to the fuel reduction and administrative costs of abating a fire hazard on private property where the property owner has failed to respond to a notice to abate.

*Recommendation:* That the Board of Supervisors adopts penalties for property owners who do not comply with County Ordinance 695.3 regarding hazard abatement. Currently, property tax assessments and an administrative fee are the only means the county has to collect funds that are used to abate a fire hazard on private property, after the owner fails to abate the problem themselves. Imposing a fine, based on an increasing tiered amount (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> offense etc.) in addition to the collection of fire hazard abatement costs, may further motivate property owners to take a more active role in the fire hazard abatement process.

**GOAL:** Work to standardize federal, state and local hazard abatement regulations and ordinances to ensure consistent application of abatement actions across all properties.

*Recommendation:* That the Board of Supervisors through the Fire Department work with all federal, state and local fire entities to standardize fire hazard abatement regulations or ordinances such that a seamless application of the rule applies across all properties. Work to standardize State of California, Public Resources Code Section 4291 and County of Riverside Ordinance 695.3. The first applies to occupied parcels on state or private land where structures exist. The second applies on unoccupied parcels on private land where fire originating on the unoccupied parcel presents a risk to adjacent, occupied parcels. PRC Section 4291 is a good enforcement tool for occupied parcels and is well supplemented by Riverside County Ordinance 695.3 on unoccupied parcels. Riverside County should consider implementing a local ordinance that takes the strengths of PRC 4291 and adds

*local needs to provide a local ordinance that improves the clearance requirements around structures over and above what is required by PRC 4291.*

**GOAL: Provide the highest degree of coordination for enforcement activities between the Fire Department and Code Enforcement.**

***Recommendation:** That the Board of Supervisors direct the Fire Chief and the Director of Code Enforcement to closely align all enforcement activities to ensure the highest degree of coordination for the abatement of both fire and general code enforcement activities. Both Fire and Code Enforcement should focus on training and identification of abatement issues to assist their assessment of all hazards particularly flammable hazards, the appropriate reference codes, and enforcement processes for those violations.*

**GOAL: Staff the Fire Department enforcement function with sufficient staff to affect fire hazard reduction work and investigation and enforcement activities.**

***Recommendation:** That the Board of Supervisors support staffing the Fire Department with sufficient personnel to adequately deal with both hazard reduction and investigation/enforcement activities. Proper staffing of both hazard reduction and investigation/enforcement bureaus will ensure the separation of functions allowing both activities to be appropriately conducted and accomplished. The fire hazard abatement function has grown to be a tremendously important function for the Fire Department. Preventing fires and reducing the fire hazard will positively impact fire loss reduction. Staffing will also allow the Fire Department to patrol high risk areas and either repress fire hazards or apprehend fire law violators.*

*Hazard abatement supervision should be considered its own function because of land use, environmental demands, and fire concerns. A county wide abatement program will require substantial augmentation of staff, supervision, and fiscal support to effectively manage abatement activities. Land Use and Environmental Specialists should be assigned to the Hazard Abatement Section. Railroad and power line inspections can also be associated into a successful abatement program, and can be captured during property inspections.*