

Ojai's Wildfire Resiliency Framework

Ojai has been identified in the January 2001 Federal Register as a community at risk from wildfires (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2001/01/04/01-52/urban-wildland-interface-communities-within-the-vicinity-of-federal-lands-that-are-at-high-risk-from>). It has also experienced several of the State's largest wildfires (Matilija 1932 & Thomas 2017) until those records were broke by even larger wildfires in 2018-2020. So, the question of if another wildfire will impact Ojai is really the question of when the next wildfire will impact Ojai.

In 2010, Congress passed the National Wildland Fire Cohesive Strategy (<https://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/strategy/thestrategy.shtml>). It identifies three core tenets to address the wildfire problem:

- Ensure a robust response system
- Restore and manage our landscapes
- Create fire-adapted communities
 - Plus – learning to live with wildfire

Let's look at these three tenets. First, Ojai enjoys a great relationship with the Ventura County Fire Protection District that also has excellent partnerships with the US Forest Service, Cal Fire, local fire/law agencies and the State's Office of Emergency Services aid system. Ojai can trust that it enjoys some of the most robust response capability in the nation, but response cannot resolve all wildfire issues as a major fire siege often causes limited resources.

Second, Ojai and the surrounding valley must appreciate the landscapes' beauty, but recognize its inherited dangers. Native vegetation left unmanaged creates an abundance of volatile fuels and affects our water supplies. Like the native Indians who use fire to manage vegetation to improve water sources, food stuffs and grazing allocation, today we must be creative to reduce fuels by using a variety of treatments that include prescribe/controlled fires, prescribed grazing, mechanical and chemical treatments. We need to identify and eliminate non-native plant species and restore a healthy ecosystem. Ojai loves its open space lands, but everyone has a responsibility to manage these lands. The biggest concern in addressing the fuels issue is the time and cost it takes to make a tangible difference and the fact that it cannot be a "one & done" effort, it requires an on-going maintenance effort and financial support.

Third, we need to create fire-adapted communities that can withstand a wildfire even if there's no emergency resources available. This can be done without making the community look like concrete bomb shelters, but requires everyone's support. This effort is done by the adoption of modern building/fire codes (done) via new construction, hardening of existing structures (in development), maintenance of structures and ornamental landscaping (on-going), and adhering to the Fire District's Defensible Space (Weed Abatement) Ordinance.

In addition to these three steps, the community must adopt and implement the Fire District's nationally adopted Ready, Set, GO! Program (<https://vcfd.org/public-info/ready-set-go/>). This

program alone raises the public's situational awareness of wildfires, instructs the public on preparation actions (fire prevention & evacuation) and stresses the need to evacuate early!

Recognizing that Ojai enjoys a robust fire response already, we defer any action on this tenet. We also recognize that dealing with landscape restoration will involve time/money, riddled with bureaucratic permits/environmental reviews and needs to be an on-going commitment. This means that landscape restoration will not be forgotten, but will be part of the long-term effort. So, the most productive action should focus early efforts on creating a fire-adapted community that includes preparing its structures, infrastructure and occupants/visitors.

The challenge we have is that the wildfire problem is not germane to only the City of Ojai, but is a regional issue with the County, State and Federal entities. The action steps below address what the City in partnership with other levels of government can accomplish outside of direct response. It must be fully recognized that the City only has direct authority within City boundaries, so staff will need guidance from the Council as these action steps are more formally addressed. Recognizing that the City has staffing constraints, success can be achieved by identifying a responsible party that reports to the City Manager and that person builds partnerships, relationships and creates staff depth by creating a cadre of volunteers. The City is not considering these action steps to circumvent existing City/County protocols, it is simply trying to be responsive to City residents and what they desire from their leaders.

Action Steps:

1. Identify and adopt home hardening building code updates and consider adopting guidelines (Can be accomplished within existing budgets)
 - a. These guidelines are for voluntary action at this time
 - b. Have the Buildings Appeals Board (BAB) review and adopt building code updates and recognized guidelines to meet local conditions and recommend adoption by council
2. Create messaging sign boards at each end of the City (Estimated cost of \$100,000)
 - a. Post weather and time on a regular basis so people rely on the signboards, but primary mission is for emergency messages
 - b. Ensure that City staff can update signboards
 - c. Becomes a medium to communicate with visitors
3. Utilize the County's resurrected Ojai Valley CERT function (No fiscal impact anticipated)
 - a. The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) becomes the City's/valley's staffing pool for urgent community needs
 - b. This function is also aligned with the Ojai Amateur Radio operators
4. Continue to grow and develop the City EOC function for **information dissemination (Can be accomplished using existing applications and Events Coordinator/Public Information Position)**
 - a. The public demands accurate/timely incident information from its community leaders

- b. Besides the signboards, ensure the AM radio station is operational, City staff can send “My Ojai” push notifications, Facebook messages and text messages as needed
- c. Conduct a signup campaign for residents to allow the cell/computers to receive “push” text messages for incident info
- d. Monitor social media platforms and other external sources to ensure proper messaging
- e. Create a City intelligence process in partnership with the County OES/EOC, Fire and Police Departments
- f. Create City EOC functions that have resiliency
 - i. Further develop “Battle station assignments” for all City staff and create assignments for volunteers
 - ii. Train City staff and elected officials about their roles during an emergency, the disaster declaration process and coordination with the County EOC

5. Work with the Red Cross, Ventura County Office of Emergency Services, and law enforcement to increase the scope/scale of evacuation shelters (No anticipated fiscal impact)

- a. Communicate and drill with the Red Cross and Ventura County OES to maximize sheltering opportunities in the valley

6. Create a viable risk assessment of the City so insurance companies can improve insurance coverage and provide incentives (No anticipated fiscal impact)

- a. Complete the Risk map pilot project to first educate the public about wildfire dangers and what they can do to reduce their exposure
- b. Then, contact insurance companies to see if a City sponsor program can enhance insurance coverage and provide home hardening incentives

7. Conduct public workshops to raise community awareness and to learn how to live with wildfires (Estimated Costs of \$1,000 to \$2,000 to hold public workshops)

- a. Work with the Fire District to conduct neighborhood public education sessions for the Ready, Set, GO! Program
- b. Request insurance trade organizations conduct public outreach to increase resident’s knowledge of proper insurance coverage and claims process
- c. Design and conduct evacuation tabletop drill to identify evacuation challenges, especially disadvantaged populations

8. Create an alert process so the public knows to seek emergency information (Estimated fiscal impact of \$50,000)

- a. Design and create a unique audible alert sound to notify residents and visitors to tune to their news sources for emerging incident information. This could be a “civil defense” type siren and/or modification to the Post office bell tower chimes in the center of the City
- b. Identify and inventory the various exiting emergency notification systems (cell phone, cable tv, web sites), and various social media platforms residents

regularly utilize to discuss community issues and events. Identify how communications are initiated and updated.

9. Create and implement a regional fuels reduction process and eradication of invasive species in partnership with the Ventura Fire Safe Council (Anticipated Fiscal Impact of \$50,000 funding for Ojai Fire Safe Council)
 - a. Work with the Ojai Fire Safe Council to identify and improve/create tactical fuel reduction projects and invasive species eradication
10. Use CERT and/or create a cadre of volunteers (retirees) to do voluntary property wildfire maintenance/mitigation inspections and staff EOC functions (No anticipated fiscal impact, utilizing existing approved staff time in partnership with County of Ventura).
11. Have the City's Disaster Council approve these actions and then forward to the City Council for ratification (No anticipated fiscal impact)
12. Conduct a community readiness event on May 27th to identify its strengths and areas of improvements (DONE)
13. Evaluate the possibility of the City to hire a contractor to manage these action steps and partner with the County Office of Emergency Services (OES) (Estimated Fiscal Impact of \$30,000 to \$50,000 depending on level of service selected).
14. Conduct annual fire hydrant testing.

Fiscal:

All actions will require some type of fiscal support. Due to the City's stressed financial situation, the City will be needing grant writing support and the City should strongly support the efforts of the Ojai Fire Safe Council and the Ventura Regional Fire Safe Council. The City took the first step towards these efforts by approving \$50,000 in funding for the Fire Safe Council in the current fiscal year. Quarterly updates will be scheduled with the Fire Safe Council to receive updates on potential projects. There are numerous Federal and State grants available and the State grants will be increasing greatly. The challenge will be to develop a long-term funding mechanism once grants expire.

Closing:

It must be recognized that our climate is changing, and the frequency and voracity of wildfires are increasing both in scope and scale. While fire service usually stops wildfires at 10 acres or less 95% of the time, it's the 1% of wildfires that causes "mega" fires. These large wildfires force everyone to retreat until weather/fire conditions subside for extinguishment. This is not a "doom & gloom" threat, it is now a fact of life for communities like Ojai. We have control over our destiny if we choose to exercise that option, but it "takes a village."

References:

Communities at Risk from Wildfires

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=82c9a07d6a7147a98b4efbe68428defb>

Wildfire risks to communities

<https://wildfirerisk.org>

True costs of wildfires

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/wildfire/homes-risk/full-community-costs-of-wildfire/>

Ventura County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)

<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=af136745-4f39-411b-a683-586ef128f023>

Cal Fire Home Hardening Guide

<https://www.readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/get-ready/hardening-your-home/>

NFPA Wildfire Guide

<https://www.nfpa.org/Public-Education/Fire-causes-and-risks/Wildfire>

IBHS Wildfire Guide

<https://www.firesafemarin.org/retrofit-guide>

<https://disastersafety.org/wildfire/wildfire-ready/>

<https://ibhs.org/guidance/wildfire/>

Fire-adapted Communities

<https://fireadapted.org>

CA Fire Safe Council

<https://cafiresafecouncil.org/resources/fire-safety-information-for-residents/>

Ojai Fire Safe Council

<https://firesafeojai.org>

Ventura Regional Fire Safe Council

<https://venturafiresafe.org>

Home Hardening Costs

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/wildfire/homes-risk/building-costs-codes/>

Defensible Space Ordinance

<https://vcfd.org/fire-prevention/fire-hazard-reduction-program-fhrp/>

Ordinance 31

<https://vcfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Ordinance-31-Adopted-Version.pdf>

FD Access

<https://vcfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/501-Fire-Apparatus-Access-Standard.pdf>

FD Address Requirements

<https://vcfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/502-Premises-Identification-Standard.pdf>

FD Defensible Space

<https://vcfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/515-Defensible-Space-and-Fuel-Modification-Zones-Standard.pdf>

Mulch Standards

<https://vcfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/517-Application-of-Mulch-and-Chips-in-Defensible-Space-Standard.pdf>

Ventura County OES

<https://www.venturasheriff.org/divisions/patrol-services/office-of-emergency-services/>

City of Ojai

<https://ojaicity.org/emergency-preparedness/>

Red Cross

<https://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief/wildfire-relief/2020-wildfires.html>

CERT

<https://vcfd.org/CERT/>

Ojai Amateur Radio Club

<http://ovarc.org>

Pulse Point

<https://vcfd.org/pulsepoint-active-calls/>