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Lessons Shared from the Oakland-Berkeley Hills

In an open letter issued November 11, 2003 to Southern Californians, the Hills Emergency Forum and Diablo FireSafe Council shared lessons learned from the 1991 Tunnel Fire. The two organizations offered a blueprint for speedy recovery by harnessing the abilities of individuals, local support groups, professional organizations, and state and national emergency services. These groups hold the answers to living safely with California's fire dependent ecosystems.

In the words of Gail Norton it is time to implement the "four C's: cooperate, coordinate, and communicate to work out effective ways for conservation of natural resources and protection of life and highly valued private property." The official end of the 2003 Fire Season allows us to sigh in relief. However, as those living in the Oakland-Berkeley Hills have learned, the window of opportunity to forge strong coalitions is limited. It is time for all Californians to do their part to prevent and mitigate the risk of fires at the urban wildland interface.

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Attached 2 page letter issued to
LA Times
San Diego Union
San Francisco Chronicle
Contra Costa Times
Oakland Tribune



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Lessons to Share from the Oakland Hills

The East Bay watched in horror as the Southern California Firestorm consumed acres and communities. Everyone who lived through the October 19, 1991 Tunnel fire knows what is coming for the families whose homes were destroyed, and even for those who were only disrupted temporarily by evacuation. Our hearts go out to those who will face years of rebuilding their lives. While we can never bring back those who lost their lives, or recapture treasured mementos and old community ties, we can share our experiences.

Our greatest lesson to share is that each individual in your community can make a difference. Immediately after the fire, groups were formed in the East Bay to address the issues at every level. Recovery efforts were flooded with help. Local survivor support groups, professional organizations, Mayor's task forces, and the far reaching power of the State Office of Emergency Services (OES) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) each played crucial roles. Homes and neighborhoods were rebuilt more safely thanks to stronger community networks, improved building codes, streamlined one-stop permit processing, and better coordination among our fire agencies. Yet twelve years later we are reminded that people will forget that urban-wildland interface fire danger is a fact of life in California. Next summer's fire may not happen to you, but somewhere in California someone will face the painful process of rebuilding their home, community and lives.

Complacency is the greatest threat to living safely with California's fire dependent ecosystems. In Alameda and Contra Costa Counties we are lucky to have a strong nucleus of people committed to reminding community members of fire risks and providing the information needed to live in better balance with their environment. The Diablo FireSafe Council (DFSC) serves as a coalition of homeowners, businesses, and agencies that outreach to increase awareness and mobilize people to make

their homes, neighborhoods and communities “fire safe.” They are part of a network of councils throughout California. The Hills Emergency Forum (HEF) facilitates a collaborative approach among eight governing organizations addressing agency to agency fire issues in the Oakland-Berkeley hills. We offer these as a model of the types of groups that hold the answers to the issues faced by all Californians at the interface.

Finally we wish to share our experience with a successful program called FIREWISE, sponsored by the California Fire Alliance and the National FIREWISE Communities organization. Just days before the Southern California Fires erupted, on October 15-16, 2003, 120 individuals from both Contra Costa and Alameda Counties came together to share their skills and viewpoints and foster a collaborative approach to reducing wildland fire risks. Through educational sessions and small group exercises we not only learned the tools for building more defensible communities and survivable homes, but also developed working relationships with individuals that can make the vision a reality. Participants included homeowners, land trust managers, local supervisor’s aides, congressional representatives’ staff, homebuilders, watershed managers, fire fighters, building officials, planners, designers, insurance agents and emergency services personnel. Sponsors included the DFSC, HEF, Contra Costa Water District, East Bay Municipal Utility District, East Bay Regional Park District, Society of Fire Protection Engineers, local business such as Oakland Association of Insurance Agents, FireScout, Vaisala, Sycamore Associates, Living Systems, High Tech Fire, Shapell Industries, Inc., Valley Waste Management Inc. and Safeway. All of the participants were able to find common ground and discuss areas of difference. Together we are the future for reducing the devastation from California wildfires. The Oakland-Berkeley hills has learned that we cannot say never again -- but we can say next time we will be better prepared. For more information contact Amber Bach Diablo Fire Safe Council or Cheryl Miller Hills Emergency Forum. Both can be reached at (510) 893-9888 or at www.diabolfiresafe.org and www.lbl.gov/ehs/hef.

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