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First in a series of three articles about changes and continuing challenges since the 1991 "Firestorm" in the Berkeley Oakland Hills.

Local fire agencies are better prepared to deal with wildfire.

Twenty years after the 1991 firestorm local fire agencies are better prepared by working together. A wildfire requires more firefighters than a typical building fire. The need for a coordinated response requires a system to direct these forces.

Prior to the 1991 fire, local agencies were not skilled in working together. Officially known as the "Tunnel Fire," the Oakland hills firestorm originated north of the Caldecott Tunnel on October 19, 1991. This large urban-wildland fire spread over 1,520 acres, 25 lives were lost, 150 people were injured and over 3,300 buildings destroyed.

Today, Hills Emergency Forum (HEF) members use the nationally recognized Incident Command System. The Incident Command System oversees equipment, personnel, procedures and communications. In 2005, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties formed the joint county East Bay Incident Management Team. The team responds to and manages all 3rd Alarm incidents in the two county areas. HEF members are also better coordinated because of mutual aid and practical experience gained on wildfires outside of the area. They have developed regional alert protocols and taken part in annual interagency drills. HEF members regularly communicate and work together to move resources quickly to fires.

Working together includes water. The region's water delivery system has been enhanced through projects identified as a result of the Tunnel Fire. Upgrades include Berkeley's disaster firefighting water system and the fire flow improvement program in Kensington. Since 1991, over 6,500 hydrants were changed to national standard threads to match the fire hoses carried by most fire trucks. As of 2011, many of the pumping systems that refill the upper water zones in the hill areas have been improved. HEF members utilize water

tenders through the County or State Mutual Aid systems to supplement local water supplies for fire fighting.

The Hills Emergency Forum facilitates a cooperative approach among nine governing organizations addressing urban wildland interface fire issues in the Oakland-Berkeley hills. The “20-Years After” Summary details further changes and challenges related to wildfire. It will be available on the HEF website after October 21, 2011. For more information, see hillsemergencyforum.org or contact us by e-mail at hillsemergencyforum@comcast.net.