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*Last in a series of three articles about changes and continuing challenges since the 1991 firestorm in the Berkeley Oakland Hills.*

## **20 Years After the Tunnel Fire challenges continue**

20-years after the 1991 firestorm in the Berkeley Oakland Hills the agencies responsible for fire fighting, public safety, emergency planning and land management have made considerable collective progress addressing the region's vulnerability to wildland fire. However, challenges continue.

Significant accomplishments have been made in terms of preparedness before a fire strikes. Strategy, tactics and a unified command structure are now commonly used to orchestrate a coordinated attack once a fire starts. Fire agencies have formed meaningful partnerships with the community and each other to improve public safety.

There is always room for improvement.

Firefighters retire or take other jobs, but their replacements often have limited experience with wildfire and require additional training. New residents move into the hills and need information. Chronic funding and resource shortfalls require prioritization. Training, multi-agency exercises and coordination between departments must compete against projects and public education programs.

Communications capabilities historically have been a major problem on every large incident. Many accomplishments have been made in efforts to have common radio system and frequency coordination throughout the region. New technologies emerge that allow for better coordination and communication. HEF members are involved in on-going regional interoperability communications improvements. Efforts should continue until the interoperability is resolved.

For the past 20 years, HEF Members have focused on removing vegetation to reduce fire hazards, but funding for projects on public and private lands has been an on-going challenge. Members have received grant funding, developed an assessment district and passed voter supported bond measures, as well as used funding allocated as a part of annual operating budgets. Prior to beginning most projects, environmental clearances are needed to comply with both federal and state laws. Members continue to work with environmental regulators and the public to complete environmental reviews and identify acceptable mitigation measures. However, until the environmental issues are resolved vegetation hazards will continue to grow.

The places in the East Bay hills where it was relatively easy to build were developed long ago. As more people want to live in the hills, city planners are pressured to accept new construction that addresses wildfire in less effective ways. As a result of the Tunnel Fire, all of the surrounding cities have adopted new building requirements for more fire safe structures. However the topography, access roads, and other supporting infrastructure remain the same. New homes are built in places that are difficult for firefighters to reach, surrounded by flammable vegetation, steep slopes and in configurations that make them hard to protect.

The Hills Emergency Forum facilitates a cooperative approach among nine governing organizations addressing urban wildland interface fire issues in the Oakland-Berkeley hills. Also known as the Oakland hills firestorm, the Tunnel Fire originated in Oakland 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. 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](http://hillsemergencyforum.org) or contact us by e-mail at [hillsemergencyforum@comcast.net](mailto:hillsemergencyforum@comcast.net).