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

Homeowners and firefighters partner for wildfire safety

Preparing for a wildfire is everyone's responsibility. Californians are mobile. Lives change and people move into areas prone to wildfire. For those unfamiliar with wildfire, information about how to successfully prepare can literally save your life. For the past 20 years, HEF Members have focused much of their time and efforts providing this information. Educational mailings and fire department inspections annually remind residents to create defensible space around their homes. The cities of Berkeley and Oakland enforce the latest fire codes and more restrictive building codes for new or major remodeled homes.

Fuel projects cut the hazards. Projects to reduce the hazards from vegetation happen not only around homes, but also on nearby parks, watersheds and other public lands. Fuel reduction projects can be seen along Grizzly Peak Drive, Skyline Boulevard, and Claremont Avenue that have lowered the risk from catastrophic fire to adjacent communities. Funding for these project vary by agency and include general funds, Oakland's Wildfire Protection Assessment District monies and East Bay Regional Park District's bond Measure CC. Local dollars have been expanded by successful grants from Federal programs. HEF members have collaborated to link one agency's work to another's throughout the East Bay hills. In areas such as Claremont Canyon, Garber Park and Beaconsfield volunteer work parties of neighbors remove vegetation to strengthen both wildfire defenses and community ties.

Community Emergency Response Training expand the response team. The need to safely utilize spontaneous volunteers in a fire situation is well recognized. HEF member agencies use their Community Emergency Response Training (CERT) programs to augment existing

personnel and resources. CERT allows them to incorporate trained volunteers in both drills and emergencies. Many members also have on-going volunteer programs and specific programs to deal with spontaneous volunteers early in a wildfire incident.

Information and updates keep partners informed. During wildfires, situations change with the speed of the proverbial wildfire. 20 years after the Tunnel Fire, there are better tools to create effective information loops. Police and fire vehicles are equipped with public address systems, augmented with new technology such as the “WarnMe” system, to inform citizens when evacuation is necessary. HEF members are active with state and regional information exchanges, alerting and warning systems. Public Information Officers are dispatched to incidents to keep the public adequately informed in a rapidly changing incident. The Joint Information Center allows for coordinated, consistent and factually accurate information available using a variety of technologies. New technology, including the internet and mobile communication equipment, has allowed them to provide media reporters with access to information. HEF members work with regional partners on evacuation plans, and prepare local Community Emergency Response Training teams with exercises.

Formed after the Tunnel fire, 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 or contact us by e-mail at hillsemergencyforum@comcast.net.