

Wildland-urban interface fire prevention: who is in charge?

by Jon Kaufman

This year an exceptionally large number of destructive fires have occurred in Northern California. The causes were well publicized: 1) an on-going drought, 2) abnormally hot weather, 3) electric power lines, 4) sparks from vehicles along roadsides, 5) campfires, 6) arson, and 7) the underlying condition of homes encroaching into woodland and other natural areas.

We have heard much about the heroic efforts of firefighters, and they deserve our respect and admiration, but less about how to prevent wildfires in the first place. Clearly, there is room in the public policy arena for stepped-up leadership. We know, in retrospect, that too many homes were built in high risk areas, prompted by pent up demand and the natural inclination of public officials to yield to development. Given that homes are now in place, what should we do?

A generation ago the Hills Emergency Forum, a consortium of firefighting agencies in the East Bay Hills, was created to address this very problem.

The Forum was charged with developing a plan of action to protect communities at the wildland-urban interface and beyond. Regrettably, little leadership emerged from this organization and today HEF is more of a clearinghouse for existing agency executives, with no full-time staff, no real budget, and no authority to act.

I believe, as do many of my colleagues involved in wildfire prevention, that the East Bay Hills need a regional wildfire prevention management district with jurisdiction over public and private land—with an adequate budget, a science-based plan of action, and the authority to implement that plan. Like the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, with the power to curb air pollution, we need a similar agency for Alameda and Contra Costa Counties to limit the risk of wildfire in our hills and beyond. I urge our state legislators to create this agency now.