

Fire and Forest
Fire Adapted Communities

by Mike Esnard

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A fairly new term in wildfire policy is “Fire Adapted Communities”, which reflects a new emphasis from important organizations over the last few years, and I think leads us all in the right direction regarding the challenge of wildfire.

To begin with, by referring to adaptation, the term leads us to think of natural systems, and of the challenges presented to life within any particular ecosystem. For example, all the life we see around us in these mountains has successfully adapted to long dry summers when water is scarce. If we are also going to live here successfully, we need to accept that fire is a natural feature of our ecosystem and has been for millennia.

So a Fire Adapted Community (FAC) is one where everyone accepts that fire is a feature of their landscape, and where the community as a whole takes regular and consistent action to prepare for its occurrence.

There are several features of preparation. Foremost among them is reducing fuel within and around the community. This fuel reduction involves both the actions of homeowners cleaning their properties of hazardous vegetation as well as the actions of land managers creating and maintaining fuelbreaks at key points around the community.

Hardening homes is another important aspect. If we accept fire as an inevitable landscape feature, it makes sense for us to build and retrofit homes and other buildings in the area to be made increasingly difficult to ignite.

Another characteristic of an FAC is the creation and implementation of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). This is a plan put together by multiple parties to provide an overall view of fire prevention work in and around the community, including fuel reduction priorities, and to keep track

of specific projects aimed at reducing community risk. It is intended to be a collaborative effort from public and private organizations, as well as area residents.

For action in response to the inevitable fire, another aspect of an FAC is public awareness of the “Ready, Set, Go” program. This program encourages residents to prepare their properties through abatement and ignition resistance, to prepare an evacuation plan by thinking about what one would take, and to be ready to leave immediately if an evacuation order is given.

I am very pleased to note that our mountain community has taken action in all these areas. The land management agencies, the US Forest Service, CalFire, and the Bureau of Land Management, have long been active in creating and maintaining fuelbreaks. The Mountain Communities Fire Safe Council has been assisting homeowners with education and grant funds for abatement for a decade as well. Recently MCFSC began the first hardening grant on the mountain, assisting homeowners in replacing vulnerable wooden roofs with Class A fire resistant shingles and ember resistant vents.

Our mountain also developed its own CWPP several years ago, and participating groups are now engaged in updating the plan. We should have an accurate and useful update by the holidays.

The basic systems theme that underlies the idea of the Fire Adapted Community is all based on the need for effective collaboration among all key stakeholders in the community. This idea is represented here by the Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST), which has been and continues to be an effective collaborative group. People who attend MAST understand that successful adaptation to fire involves just about everybody.