

Fire and Forest
Hot Button Issues and the Code Committee
by Mike Esnard
(from The Town Crier - January 2015)

Readers of the TC will know that there have been letters critical of the new code committee and of the role the Fire Safe Council had in bringing it about. The letters either state or imply that both groups are up to no good. I think it is fair to say the formation of the committee has pushed some "hot button issues".

A hot button issue is something that triggers an immediate and excessive response. Harshly criticizing a committee's work before they have done it, I would say, is an example of this.

The hot buttons that the code committee has pushed are several that have come up over the years, and are variations on these two themes: (1) that fire abatement hurts the environment, and (2) that the government is going to make people spend lots of money to cut down all their own trees. The simple response is "No" and "No."

Regarding the first issue, most of us who live up here, either full or part-time, came from somewhere else and were drawn to the beauty, the peace, and the amazing sense of nature that pervades these mountains. We tend to think of the forest in and around our communities as "natural", but people have been altering the forest as long as people have been up here.

For well over a hundred years people have been interfering with a natural process of wildfire by suppressing fires on the mountain that started from lightning strikes. And they logged. The forest we see is partly a result of these activities, producing a thicker forest with more trees and undergrowth, and which is also now at even greater risk for catastrophic

fire. By thinning the forest, we can actually reverse some of our earlier interventions and promote a more natural condition.

The second issue has to do with feelings about government forcing us to do things we don't want to do. Laws, ordinances, regulations, codes: they all constrain us at times, and at times we really don't like it. Add to this the government requiring us to spend money, and you have a serious hot button issue.

The idea floating around that you would have to cut all the trees within 30 feet of your house is simply not true and is *not going to happen*. Regarding the money, I don't know what the committee will recommend, but I very much doubt most of us will notice anything different in the money or time we spend keeping our properties fire safe. Some owners of vacant land overgrown lots will probably have to spend more.

The basic facts are these: fire abatement in our local communities has not harmed the environment, and nothing anyone is talking about for the future will harm it either. The idea floating around that one would have to cut all the trees within 30 feet of your house is simply not true and is not going to happen.

We are all responsible, and have been for many years, for complying with state and county codes based on Public Resources Code 4291. This can be done (in fact, *has been done extensively*) with an eye to both safety and preserving healthy and attractive vegetation. MCFSC project managers and the licensed contractors up here who do the work are all expert in this--as good as any in the state.

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Chief John Hawkins emphasized recently that the committee process will be open, and anyone interested can attend the next meeting on January 13, at 1 PM, at the Mountain Resource Center.