

Senate Governance and Finance

And

Natural Resources and Water Committee

Living Resiliently in the New Abnormal: The Future of Development in

California's Most Fire Prone Regions

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Summary: Some areas of California may be too dangerous to build upon. But to know this, we first need to develop a systematic way of evaluating where those areas exist and what mitigations will reduce wildfire risk enough to be acceptable. This should include a trained body of professionals in land use, a clear risk model for mitigation requirements, and an approach that addresses both current buildings and new. The land use development process will substantially benefit from the following programs to enable this risk assessment. These are the gaps in the current wildfire resiliency planning process.

Critical Needs for Land Use Best Practices

1. **Educate and certify Land Use Planners, Building Officials, and Fire Marshals** – these are the ‘first responders’ of the development world and need better training, certification, and knowledge sharing than they currently have access to. These professionals approve the permitting, maps, development agreements, zoning, General Plans, Fire Protection Plans and other necessary enforcement provisions but do not have ready access to training, wildfire planning specialist certification, or continuing education.
Action: Develop coursework and require certification in Wildland-Urban Interface Plan Review or equivalent and require at a minimum one-time certification.
Value: Planners, builders, inspectors, and consultants across the state will develop consistent means and methods of designing, approving, and enforcing wildfire resilient communities because they share a common body of practice.
2. **Develop both a wildfire zoning overlay and parcel-based risk maps.** The FHSZ methodology accurately describes hazard and is suitable for a zoning overlay but it is not a risk analysis. To understand risk, you need to measure the fire hazard PLUS the mitigations that reduce the hazard. This combination is risk. This will become an increasingly apparent gap if development approvals become tied to fire hazard zones. Using CEQA as an example, consider the process of evaluating a development for environmental impact. The core of the CEQA decision is based on whether the project can meet a defined need for mitigation so that the project impact is either negligible or acceptable. To do this for wildfire, we must define the wildfire mitigations that result in negligible or acceptable risk to lives, homes, and communities. The FHSZ’s do not have this capability but risk

assessment does. We need to extend the concept of fire hazard into the more mature evaluation of fire risk and this assessment must be enabled at the parcel scale to be useful for land use decision-making.

Action: Adopt a statewide wildfire zoning overlay. Direct CAL FIRE to develop a Wildfire Risk Assessment Model for state and local use in all aspects of wildfire resiliency planning, development, and mitigation.

Value: The quantifiable metrics of mitigations will take shape within a systematic risk framework that is predictable for land use development and will measure against fire mitigation effectiveness over time. This will drive improved outcomes.

- 3. Build capacity for Hardened Home assessments at the local level.** Home Hardening includes BOTH ignition-resistant building construction and defensible space. Each must be present to harden the home to withstand the heat from fire in adjacent landscaping/ household items and the ember storm that threatens the home. Local community firesafe education groups, defensible space code enforcement, and the building community all need assistance to place boots on the ground to work with homeowners to both retrofit and maintain these fundamental mitigations that improve structural vulnerability.

Action: Assist local governments with funding for the first 3 years of home retrofit and defensible space enforcement efforts through 3-year block grants. Encourage collaborative approaches that link to land use best practices, parcel-based risk assessments, and resilient community actions.

Value: Creates a holistic set of practices that reinforce one another and leads to a more fully hardened community rather than one divided into new and old housing vulnerabilities.

Bio: Kate Dargan has been a firefighter, fire chief and the former State Fire Marshal (CAL FIRE) for California. She has responded to emergencies and disasters around the state and worked on boards, committees, councils, and task forces to advance wildland-urban interface fire safety. She chaired the State Board of Fire Services, co-chaired the Tahoe Fire Commission, served on the Napa County Watershed Board, and is a Board Member of the CA Firesafe Council and the United States Geospatial Intelligence Foundation. She has worked at the community, public agency, industry, and policy levels of the California fire service and is widely recognized for her consensus-building style and innovative approaches to old problems. She founded Intterra in 2010, a successful situational awareness and analytics software company for firefighters.