



City of Sebastopol Planning Commission Staff Report

Meeting Date: March 11, 2025
Agenda Item: 7A
To: Planning Commission
From: John Jay, Associate Planner
Subject: Report out from Land Use Planning for Wildfires Seminar
Recommendation: Receive report and discuss.

Introduction:

On February 25th, 2025 staff had the privilege to attend a Land Use for Wildfires seminar that was hosted by The American Planning Association, Cal Fire, California Climate Investments Program, and Community Wildfire Planning Center at the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa California.

Discussion:

The training goals of the seminar included the following:

- Increasing foundational understanding of California state requirements for land use planning in fire hazard areas, including the General Plan Safety Element, Fire Safe Regulations, Subdivision Review Program, and applicable chapters of California Building and Fire Codes.
- Expanding knowledge of wildfire vulnerabilities in the built environment at different scales, including subdivision and lot scales.
- Learning about best practices and resources for proactive planning in the wildland urban interface based on recent guidance issued by the Office of Planning and Research, CAL FIRE, Community Wildfire Planning Center, and other organizations.
- Interacting with peers to exchange perspectives on fire mitigation and planning through exercises and facilitated discussions.

Additionally, goals that were laid out included how to define and distinguish key terms associated with wildfire and wildland-urban interface (WUI), establishing linkages between land use planning and WUI, understanding the minimum state-level WUI planning requirements and expanding knowledge of best practices, resources, and opportunities.

One key point the seminar put across was the fact that wildfires have been happening in California and across the US for longer than we have been here and started to develop the land. The State has been working since the mid 1800's to develop laws to suppress wildfires and how we've seen recently with Climate change wildfire hazards have been exacerbated. Within the last twenty years we've seen communities become "fire adapted" meaning a human community consisting of informed and prepared citizens collaboratively planning and taking action to safely coexist with wildland fire.

An interesting statistic was shared with the group in that 20 of the most destructive wildfires in California history occurred between 1991 and 2025, and 4 of the 5 most destructive wildfires in California history occurred between 2017 and 2025. Also, that size of the fire, in acres, is not always proportional to loss.

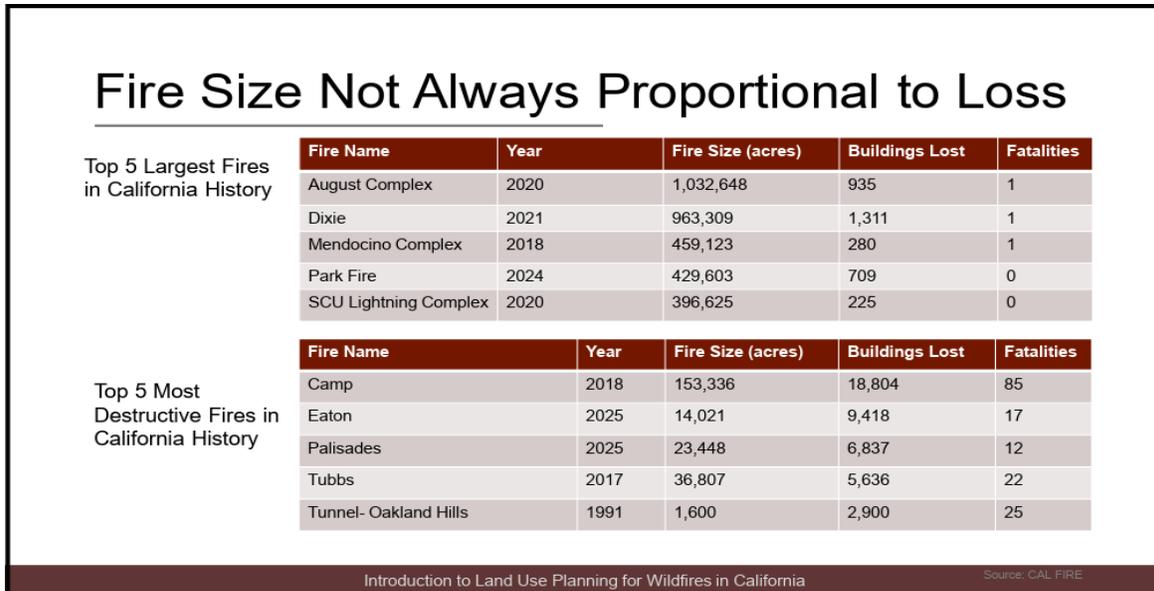


Figure 1 comparing Largest fires in California history by acres to destruction of building and lost lives.

What was also mentioned in the seminar was the responsibility areas and how it's broken up into three separate categories: Local Responsibility Area (LRA), State Responsibility Area (SRA), and Federal Responsibility Areas (FRA). Sebastopol would fit into a Local Responsibility Area as we would manage the local response where State would be responsible for State Parks and other owned land.

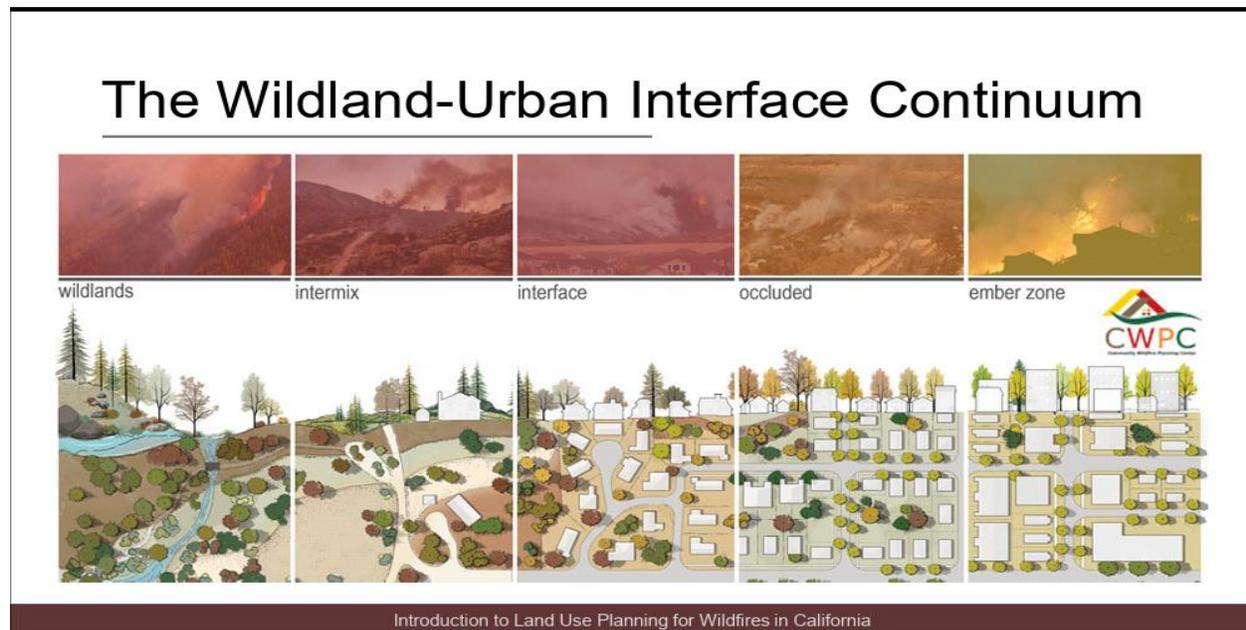


Figure 2 The Wildland-Urban Interface Continuum

Additionally, how we as Planners, Fire Departments, Emergency responders, and Elected Officials describe what the WUI definition truly is. Currently its defined as “*The line, area, or zone where the structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels*” but as we are experiencing wildfires deeper into the urban core maybe we should broaden that perspective to “*any developed area where conditions affecting the combustibility of vegetation, and structure or infrastructure (built fuels), allow for the ignition and spread of fire through the combined fuels*”. This broader term allows us to better plan for wildfires in the future as they are becoming increasingly frequent, and we are seeing that not just wooded areas are being affected by these events but we’re seeing them within suburban areas.

The seminar also discussed the difference in impacts that wildfires through a community can have. Traditionally, we are focused on the immediate impacts of that event and sometimes don’t consider the long term impacts of wildfire in a community. Those immediate impacts can include loss of life or injury and loss of building and infrastructure, but the long term impacts can be economically crippling to a community as well as causing Social and Health impacts.



Figure 3 Impacts of wildfires in a community.

Next the conversation moved towards how Planners can help the emergency response departments in getting access to these fires and some of these suggestions were: minimum of two access/egress routes, geographically separated locations, two way traffic, all weather road surface, signage, road and bridge loads. Also, the discussion talked about water supply and how handle water flows during the event of a wildfire including: adequate water supply for fire suppression, water supply infrastructure protected from wildfire impacts, power back-up.

Access and Egress

- Minimum two access/egress routes
- Geographically separated locations
- Two way traffic
- All weather road surface
- Grades and corners
- Signage
- Road and bridge loads



Introduction to Land Use Planning for Wildfires in California

Figure 4 Access and Egress

We also discussed greenbelts and buffers and how grazed rangelands, urban greenways, city parks and irrigated recreation areas can help buffering a city that is within the WUI from a wildfire.

Greenbelts and Buffers



Introduction to Land Use Planning for Wildfires in California

Figure 5 Greenbelts and Buffers

The second half of the seminar focused on implementing policies for jurisdictions and provided WUI Planning Tools as well as where to find guidance. For this, they referred the group to

review the Office of Planning and Research “Fire Hazard Planning Technical Advisory” series and the American Planning Associations “Planning the Wildland-Urban Interface”. General Plans that are going through the update process must update the safety element section to include protection of the community from unreasonable risks associated with, among other things, wildland and urban fires. Sebastopol completed this as part of its Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP) in 2023 when we updated the General Plan for the Housing Element and Safety Element. Also mentioned in this section is that Cal Fire, through their Land Use Planning Program (LUPP), provides a service that helps local jurisdictions with wildfire related requirements to General Plans and other areas and they function as a resource to help connect stakeholders in wildfire planning and prevention.

Finally, we moved on to the last section which deals with the challenges Planners face on a daily basis of providing more dense housing in their communities and how providing that dense housing along with defensible space around that housing can be a challenging task. When defensible space is hard to achieve there are other ways to regulate building construction to meet the same goals (See Figure 7 “Many Paths to Regulate”)

Defensible Space Regulations

PRC 4291,
GC §51182

- Vegetation management extends 100 ft minimum
 - Zone 0: 0-5 ft (in law, but not yet in regulation)
 - Zone 1: 5-30 ft
 - Zone 2: 30-100 ft
- Applicability in SRA and LRA Very High FHSZ



readyforwildfire.org
fire.ca.gov/dspace/

Image: CAL FIRE

Introduction to Land Use Planning for Wildfires in California

Figure 6 Defensible Space Regulations

Many Pathways to Regulate

	Building Code	Fire Code	Fire Safe Regulations	Subdivision Regulations	Zoning Code	Landscaping / Vegetation Ordinance
Community / Subdivision Scale						
Access (roadways, bridges)		X	X	X		
Water supply		X	X	X		
Vegetation management		X	X	X	X	X
Development siting and density				X	X	
Allowable land uses					X	
Building / Lot Scale						
Building materials & construction	X					
Landscaping, defensible space			X	X	X	X
Attachments, fences	X				X	X
Signage	X	X	X			
Driveways		X	X	X		

Introduction to Land Use Planning for Wildfires in California

Figure 7 Many Paths to Regulate

In closing, staff's overall takeaway from this seminar was that Planners and local emergency response departments need to work collaboratively to provide a safe environment for the residents of their community. This safety must also look at what services are needed and required by those emergency responders to ensure they have the tools to properly do their job. The State is moving in a way that is trying to provide the tools necessary to complete these goals by offering the LUPP and these seminars to educate the people by reviewing these projects and plans. It's on us as Planners to take this information and share it with our decision makers and the public so that we can make conscious decisions on development in our community.

Attachments:

Link to seminar information https://communitywildfire.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/LUPP-Training-Handouts-Complete_FINAL_2025_V1-1.pdf