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## ‘It could happen here’: East Bay community moves to shield itself from mega-fire

By **Matthias Gafni** Updated 1:53 pm PDT, Friday, April 19, 2019



IMAGE 1 OF 10

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Allan Prager has spearheaded the clearing of defensible space around his and his neighbors' homes and organized fire drills.

Dave Winnacker commutes over the Berkeley hills each morning into Orinda, often by bicycle, navigating the switchbacks of Wildcat Canyon Road and cringing at the bristling and highly flammable vegetation lining the roadway.

Modern firefighting efforts over the last century have saved lives and homes but eliminated the region's natural fire cycle, leaving behind a thicket of nonnative trees and brush that the 44-year-old chief of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District knows is his semirural community's Achilles heel.

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“Fire was removed from the ecosystem. Photosynthesis was not,” Winnacker said this past week, standing at Inspiration Point lookout and ew.”



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...t of areas this concentrated with

Since the Wine Country and Camp fires killed dozens of people and destroyed thousands of homes the last two years, residents up and down California have begun assessing their own vulnerabilities, while asking existential questions: Is their community prepared for a monster fire? Could they outrun flames that descended on their neighborhood?

A new state report last week provided a snapshot of the state's biggest fire fears, ranking 35 critical fuel-reduction projects that need attention. It has residents and local fire officials both nervous and hopeful.

In the report, state fire experts rubber-stamped Winnacker's assessment and listed an 11-mile stretch — 1,760 acres of land — along the north edges of Orinda and Lafayette as the ninth most important area for thinning vegetation. Carving out the North Orinda Fuel Break would protect 30 East Bay communities and more than 500,000 people, said the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal Fire.



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None of the other statewide projects had as big a potential impact.

“The areas north of Highway 24 include a combination of topography and fuel that are aligned to create a potentially significant rate of spread from a large wildland fire that would directly impact residential neighborhoods,” said Contra Costa Fire Protection District Deputy Chief Lewis Broschard, whose agency is partnering on the project.

Cal Fire, which in its report offered a range of recommendations to Gov. Gavin Newsom on slowing the state’s wildfire crisis, said it hoped to secure funding for the projects and finish them by the end of the year. Proposed by local fire agencies across the state, the fuel breaks would thin almost 94,000 acres of state land in a bid to keep more than 200 communities safe, including Bay Area towns such Woodside and Los Gatos, plus Aptos in Santa Cruz County.

Cal Fire ranked the fuel-reduction proposals based not only on fire risk but what the agency called socioeconomic factors, such as whether communities have aging populations and difficult evacuation routes. In last year’s Camp Fire in Paradise (Butte County), many of those killed were elderly or had limited mobility, while the few roads out of town got jammed with cars.

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Alarmed by the way fires tore through places like Paradise, Santa Rosa and Malibu, residents living in the state’s designated danger zones are paying attention — people like Orinda resident Allan Prager.

The 75-year-old retired consultant is your dream neighbor if you care about fire safety. He secured a \$5,000 grant for himself and his neighbors to clear defensible space around their homes in an area called Sleepy Hollow. He regularly rakes the duff from trees that collects at the edges of his house. And he saws low-hanging branches off his trees.

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“You should see me with a chain saw,” he joked as he walked through his acre of land, which sits just south of the proposed Orinda fuel break.

Last November, he watched in horror as 85 people perished in the Camp Fire, many dying as they tried to flee.

“It was going through my mind that it could happen here,” he said. “It became a hot topic in our neighborhood association.”

In January, Prager joined his neighbors for an evacuation drill in which law enforcement officials sent notices to residents by phone, text and email, and turned two-lane thoroughfares into one-way escape routes. In a bid to avoid gridlock, authorities created a rolling evacuation plan and safe shelter-in-place zones. The month before, authorities ran a similar drill in neighboring Moraga.

“We know the road facilities can’t support an evacuation,” Winnacker said. “Just watch the traffic each morning.”

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If funding is approved for the trimming project, the East Bay fire agencies would hire contractors to create a “shaded fuel break.” Brush and lower tree branches would be removed, though the higher tree canopy would remain in place. Officials want to reduce sun exposure and prevent future growth. The fuel break would be maintained by prescribed burns that chew away vegetation.

“We’re not running a bulldozer and knocking everything down,” Winnacker said. “It’s more like pruning.”

The area has a history of catastrophic blazes. In 1923, a fire sparked by a power line in Wildcat Canyon burned over the ridge into the Berkeley hills, torching 584 structures near the UC Berkeley campus. For almost 70 years, that was the most destructive fire in state history, until the 1991 Oakland hills blaze ruined more than 3,200 homes and killed 25 people. The Camp Fire burned down almost 19,000 structures.

In the 1920s, the sprawling grasslands north of Orinda averaged one tree per acre, but as housing and landscaping flourished, the tree density has risen to about 100 trees an acre, Winnacker said.

Every fall, near the end of fire season, the area experiences fierce north-to-south winds, similar to the Santa Ana phenomenon in Southern California. The dry gusts push down from the Sacramento Valley, unlike winds from the west, which carry moisture from the ocean.

The low moisture “makes the late fire-season fuels and grass-covered hills much more susceptible to ignition,” Broschard said.

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In its risk assessment, Cal Fire also considered the presence of electrical equipment. Transmission lines branch out from a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. substation in Orinda, between Sleepy Hollow and Wagner Ranch elementary schools, just south of the proposed firebreak. Last year, each of the schools added a 10,000-gallon water tank to aid firefighters.

Rob Schroeder lives a block from Sleepy Hollow Elementary, where his son attends school, and received a grant to remove vegetation from his block. When he attended a neighborhood meeting after the 2017 Wine Country fires, he learned that the house he

shares with his girlfriend sat in a “red zone” in the path of computer-simulated fires. Now, he noted, northern Orinda is officially on the state’s radar.

“You see your small community show up on this statewide list and it just reinforced our concerns,” he said, adding that he’s glad the work is being prioritized. “If it gives us a few more minutes to evacuate, that’s all you can ask for.”

For Winnacker, who served as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps during the 2003 Iraq invasion, the fuel break project has parallels to his military experience.

“This problem looks an awful lot like how you design defensive operations,” he said. “Obstacles don’t stop the enemy, but they do slow the enemy.”

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