



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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Designed for Disaster:  
Southern California's Fire Problem

What do the names of the following places conjure to most people of our nation: Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, Belleau Wood, and Khe Sahn? Most are recalled as battlegrounds. What do the names of the following places describe in California: Bel Air, Paseo Grande, Panorama, Sycamore Canyon and Santa Barbara? They were places that became battlegrounds too.

They were sites of major fires that have occurred over the last 30 years. The difference is that in the case of the former, the conflict was between ideals and principles; mankind against mankind. The battle was over freedom. In the case of the latter, the conflict appears to be between mankind and nature. But it isn't. It is a conflict over standards for public safety.

Nations want peace; human nature wants safety. There is a correlation between liberty and safety. Just how much liberty should one person have if it endangers other people's lives and property? In the State of California we have to deal with this relationship sooner or later. The clock is ticking away on a potential catastrophe. It is being measured by the policies and practices of local communities in planning their common fire defenses.

Back in the 1950's, Rexford Wilson, a fire protection consultant, visited Los Angeles. He wrote a treatise entitled "Designed for Disaster." What Wilson described was the first definition of the "urban-wildland" interface problem. Several years later, we experienced the disaster he predicted. The Bel Air Fire occurred, the beginning of many such disastrous fires. Over the last 30 years, we have had a legacy of such losses that are truly tragic. Moreover, we can predict that we are going to have more unless we change one or more elements of the formula that causes such disasters. We cannot change the weather, basic topography, or the drought. We can, however, plan contingencies by creating physical barriers to the rampant spread of these fires.

Among the tools that are needed are non-combustible roof ordinances in impacted areas and reasonable efforts to enact brush clearances in wildland areas. Once a city suggests adopting either, there is a hue and cry that this reduces "design freedom and destroys the environment." One architect arguing the case against a roof ordinance earlier this year in Santa Barbara stated "you are taking away one of the colors of my palette." How about the color black? It replaces all colors when you destroy the property and ground cover.

The problem is, we can't wait much longer to enact such requirements. If we do not deal with this issue effectively in the next decade, most fire professionals will agree that we may see a conflagration of epic



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proportions someday. Are these predictions too harsh? Are the actions requested by fire officials too Draconian? Can California survive even the biggest of fires?

Well, let's look at our most recent experience. According to Fire Marshal Michael T. Bennett of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department, they lost 43 dwellings, 10 businesses, and 10 public structures within a few short hours. We didn't even have time to send mutual aid there to help before most losses had occurred.

There was one fatality. The entire county emergency communications center had all systems out of service for 20 minutes while the structure was evacuated during the fire. Bennett, who was also at the Sycamore Canyon fire of July 26, 1977, indicated that the fire developed so rapidly, there was no possibility of any manned firefighting forces being able to be totally responsible for the protection of all of the structures. The fire was like an invading army that took no prisoners.

Yet, common sense had prevailed in some of the planning stages in Santa Barbara. Losses were reduced where mitigation had already occurred. For example, on the front lines of the fire, near the point of origin, one new tract with brush clearance and higher levels of fire retardant roofs and other code requirements, weathered the onslaught. There were two tracts in this area. Only four out of 14 homes were lost and only one out of six was lost in another. Further down the canyon, older homes with combustible roofs disappeared like leaves in an incinerator.

After each and every one of these fires, we always have a critique. Someone tries to determine the cause of the fire, sometimes we critique emergency services personnel, and we rebuild. Usually, we talk about the lessons we learned. These fires are not about learning. The fire is the test; the final exam. We had better be prepared first. California is a state where fire is unforgiving; we can't afford the lessons.

In 1988, our State Fire Marshal established a new criterion that in all State Responsibility Areas (SRA), all structures will have a minimum of a Class C roof. Unfortunately, this requirement does not apply to all municipalities. Some areas are still devoid of requirements that will help the fire forces develop a line of defense. Senator Diane Watson has currently proposed SB 651, which gives municipalities the opportunity to enact more stringent roofing ordinances to deal with this issue. Senator Watson was witness to the Baldwin Hills fire. She knows the lesson.

The question remains, will our cities take action? If our policy leaders don't deal with the decisions and allow special interests to defeat these requirements, we are neglecting the future. If we allow special interests such as the Red Cedar Shake Industry to hold cities and counties hostage over these economic concerns, we are compromising public safety. The recent Attorney General's opinion that reportedly restricts local agencies from adopting more stringent requirements has been cited by some of these



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special interests as the reason this can't be done. Are we taking the position that special interests are more important than public interest?

In the early days of this state's history, Richard Henry Dana reported that the Indians used to burn off ground cover to improve forage, but we can't do that anymore. Our earliest settlers used tile roofs because they recognized the tenuous relationship between man and nature. In this climate and topography, somehow we have lost that understanding and are not facing up to reality. According to Bob Burns, consultant for the Fire Safe Roofing Committee, some 283 cities have roofing ordinances more stringent than the Uniform Building Code requirements. We should have 100% if we really wish to keep California from becoming the fire loss capital of the industrialized world.