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ALERT

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NAPA'S BURNING PROBLEM

## Napa County desperate for wildfire fixes before next fire season

Barry Eberling

Jan 9, 2021



A staircase remains from the Meadowood Napa Valley clubhouse following September's Glass Fire that caused an estimated \$100 million in damage to the resort. The resort credits a project to create defensible space with saving parts of the resort that did not burn.

AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Barry Eberling

**I**dentifying the problem is easy — recent Napa County fire seasons have become tales of flames, choking brown smoke, blackened hillsides and homes and wineries reduced to rubble.

Finding a fix? That's harder.

Wildfires over three years have burned more than half the county and destroyed more than 1,500 structures. The wine industry and residents alike are calling for ways to make the county, if not fireproof, at least more fire resistant.

Ideas and suggestions are swirling. Which become realities in coming months could determine what happens on the fire lines next summer and fall.

## Countywide fire plan and money woes

A milestone will occur when the Community Wildfire Protection Plan is released, perhaps this March or April. The Napa Communities Firewise Foundation secured a \$100,000 grant to evaluate fire risks and create a unified, countywide fire protection strategy.

“I think it's going to make a big difference,” county Fire Chief Geoff Belyea said. “It's going to give us a road map for the future to prioritize fire protection projects in the county.”

But prioritizing areas that pose the biggest threats for extreme fire behavior because of vegetation, topography and weather won't help unless money can be found to remove primed-to-burn brush.

Here's the pitch from fire prevention advocate Christopher Thompson: Invest a few million annually in fire protection projects. That's better than rebuilding fire-devastated communities at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars.

“That's backward ... We need that money beforehand,” said Thompson, president of Napa Communities Firewise Foundation.

Part I: The Dec. 20 installment looked at the **growing fire threat** facing Napa County.

Part II: The Dec. 27 story examined how the **wine industry is affected** by fire.

Part III: The Jan. 3 story looked at how **Napa Valley communities** face the fire threat.

Part IV: Today's final story looks at what can we do to say "Never Again."

The \$2.8 million in grants that local fire groups raised over three years for fuel mitigation and similar projects isn't enough in his mind.

"Going after grants is like playing the lottery," Thompson said. "Maybe you get it, maybe you don't."

Neither does he view the county's contribution sufficient for fuel management. The county Fire Department in 2020 designated \$100,000 for the Napa Communities Firewise Foundation, \$50,000 for weed abatement and \$160,000 to provide free chipping to rural residents, according to a county report.

Thompson wants to see a steady revenue stream of \$2 million to \$4 million annually going to make the county safer from fires. That could be donations, a local tax, whatever it takes to make it happen, he said.





The Deer Park community was at the center of much of the destruction produced by the Glass Fire in Napa County. Local organizations are now searching for ways to fund fire protection projects before the 2021 fire season.

Howard Yune/Register file photo

Finding \$2 million to \$4 million is a challenge any year, much less during an economic crisis. State and local governments face tough budget times amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

“That kind of money needs to come from the state,” county Board of Supervisors Chairperson Diane Dillon said. “We’ve dipped way into our reserves already. I’m not aware we have that kind of money around.”

State Sen. Bill Dodd, D-Napa, said the state should do more for wildfire prevention even amid the pandemic.

“Counties, they don’t have the money sitting around to do big work like this,” Dodd said. “This is going to take a team effort from the counties, state and federal government.”

The state is spending more than \$3 billion fighting fires and only a fraction of that is for fire prevention, he said.

Dodd isn't the only one who wants to see the fire prevention slice rise. In December, a coalition of 18 groups ranging from the Sierra Club to the Wine Institute asked Gov. Newsom to spend \$1.5 billion in the coming fiscal year on wildfire resilience efforts.

"Extensive fire suppression and exclusion, development in high fire hazard severity zones and the spread of non-native vegetation from human activities has left California's landscapes prone to large, intense fires," the groups wrote.

The past few days brought new developments.

Dodd introduced a bill calling for the creation of the Office of Wildfire Technology Research. The goal is to identify more effective ways to prevent and put out wildfires.

In addition, Gov. Gavin Newsom released his proposed 2021-22 budget. It asks for \$1 billion for a wildfire and forest resilience action plan, including \$323 million for early actions in 2020-21.

"We need to improve fire protection and this budget does that," Dodd said in a Friday press release.

## Napa County's fuel management needs remain

The Tubbs, Atlas, Nuns, Hennessey and Glass fires over the past three years burned an area roughly equal to about half of Napa County. That helped thin out built-up fuels in some local fire hazard zones but didn't end the problem.

"It's a lot like your lawn, it's a lot like your hair," Belyea said. "You just don't cut it once and walk away from it."

An example is the 160-acre The Cove property on Mount Veeder owned by the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District. The 2017 Nuns Fire blazed through The Cove, resulting in a bleak, charred landscape that looked all burned out.

Today, flammable French broom is growing at The Cove, Open Space District General Manager John Woodbury said. He wishes the district had the money to remove the non-native evergreen shrub.

“It all comes down to money,” Woodbury said.

The district is to use a \$24,000 grant to remove French broom at its Moore Creek Park near Lake Hennessey. Woodbury said that’s one-time money, so then the district needs to find the next round of funding.

The Open Space District owns 5,000 acres in Napa County. It, like the Land Trust of Napa County, is a player in the county’s wildfire prevention efforts.

The district in March tried unsuccessfully to pass the Measure K quarter-cent sales tax to raise \$9 million annually for open space and parks. Some of this money would have gone to fire management.

Doing the right thing costs money, Woodbury said.

California State Parks owns 1,900-acre Bothe-Napa Valley State Park near St. Helena. Woodbury said State Parks pulls Douglas fir sprouts from the lower park, but hasn’t done a lot of other vegetation management.

Dodd said the state needs to be a better neighbor by doing such things as creating shaded fuel breaks at Bothe-Napa Valley park. That involves removing flammable, understory vegetation while leaving fire-tolerant trees.

## Having private property owners step up

Private property owners in rural areas have a role to play, too. They by law must maintain 100 feet of defensible space around their structures and neighboring structures.

Napa County in 2020 ramped up its fire inspection program with a code officer devoted to the task. Belyea said the county inspected 960 properties and found 159 were out-of-compliance. All but 12 property owners eventually complied.

The county filed lawsuits against those dozen property owners for failure to abate fire hazards on their properties. Napa County Superior Court gave the county power to inspect the properties and clear dry and overgrown vegetation.

But Napa County court records show lawsuit filings came in September, well into fire season, after the massive Hennessey Fire had already occurred. Belyea said the COVID-19 pandemic affected the effort and the county will try to move faster in 2021.

“There’s not going to be one round where we take the violations and work through the legal process,” he said. “It’s going to be an ongoing thing during the summer and the drier period of the year.”

Belyea doesn’t want the havoc wreaked by the Glass Fire — 305 residential structures and 343 commercial structures destroyed — to dampen enthusiasm for defensible space in 2021. He noted on the flip side that 805 homes and 358 commercial structures within the fire footprint survived.

Berryessa Highlands resident Stu Williams said he spent \$1,100 getting rid of weeds on an acre around his house. That was a major factor in his home surviving last summer’s Hennessey Fire, he added.

Meadowood Napa Valley, among wine country’s most luxurious resorts, suffered an estimated \$100 million in damage during the Glass Fire, including the loss of the clubhouse that housed a three-star Michelin restaurant. Resort Managing Director David Pearson credited defensible space with helping to prevent an even bigger disaster.

Working with Cal Fire and Thompson, the resort during the COVID-19 shutdown bolstered its defensible space, Pearson wrote to the county.

“This important work helped spare most of the south side of the property, many of the other key structures on the property and the adjacent Madrone Knoll neighborhood,” Pearson wrote.

Various wildfire protection proposals could go before the Board of Supervisors in 2021 affecting private landowners. They range from establishing fire safety design review for new rural buildings to making it easier for landowners to build water storage tanks and reservoirs.

One thing not on the table is a ban on new homes in wildfire-prone parts of the rural county. But county zoning no longer allows large, new subdivisions to be built in the hinterlands, with communities such as Berryessa Highlands and Circle Oaks dating back to the 1960s.

Most of the rural county is zoned for agriculture, Planning, Building and Environmental Services Director David Morrison said. The valley floor is limited to one home per parcel and the watershed to two homes and guest cottage per parcel. Multiple units are allowed only in existing communities.

Not counting fire rebuilds, the county in an average year approves 30-35 new homes for the unincorporated area, he said.

## The role of prescribed burns

Prescribed or controlled burns are a way to remove excess fuels from an area with low-intensity fires. It's unclear what role they might play in Napa County's future.

One local official thinks a planned, prescribed burn in Spanish Valley preserve west of Lake Berryessa could have made at least some difference during the late-August, lightning-spawned fires of 2020 — if that prescribed burn hadn't been delayed by regulations.

Woodbury of the Open Space District described how attempts over a year to do a prescribed burn within the preserve were delayed. The burn required a Bay Area Air Quality Management District permit and Cal Fire help. The Department of Fish and Wildlife wanted an updated biological study.

In late August, lightning hit an oak in Spanish Valley and started a wildfire in the area that had been targeted for the controlled burn.



“We have well-intentioned rules, but they are counterproductive to the big picture,” Woodbury said.

Still, prescribed burns happen in Napa County. Woodbury noted that the Land Trust of Napa County was able to do several in recent years on its properties next to Spanish Valley.

Dodd said the right balance needs to be struck with the air district and other agencies. The smoke from a prescribed burn is short lived, he said. By contrast, the big wildfires of recent years have caused big air quality issues.

“We’ve got to be practical and really analyze the consequences,” Dodd said.

More prescribed burns would be a return to the past. An Open Space District report said Native Americans prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 1600s regularly lit fires to improve habitat.

European settlers banned this practice of setting frequent, small fires, leading to built-up fuels primed to burn, the report said. As a result, today’s wildfires can quickly change from small, relatively cool events into hot conflagrations that destroy everything in their paths.

A countywide fire prevention strategy, a search for money, new rules for rural home construction, fire inspections, prescribed burns — all are issues confronting Napa County in that lull between the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons.

Napa County has long been famous as wine country. The push is on to help it shed the unwanted image of recent years of also being wildfire country.

**WATCH NOW: HENNESSEY FIRE AS SEEN FROM NICHELINI FAMILY WINERY**

Hennessy Fire from Nichelini

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## Farm Bureau Town Hall

### Napa County Farm Bureau Wildfire Town Hall:

- A two-session virtual town hall meeting on wildfire recovery and prevention. Topics will include insurance, wildfire management practices and fire prevention and resiliency.
- At 2 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 12 and Wednesday, Jan. 27.
- Hosts are California State Treasurer Fiona Ma and California Farm Bureau President Jamie Johansson. Participants include state and local officials, the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development, the UC Cooperative Extension and others.
- The series is free and open to the public. Go to [www.napafarmbureau.org/events](http://www.napafarmbureau.org/events) or call 224-5403 for details.



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Barry Eberling covers Napa County government, transportation, the environment and general assignments. He has worked for the Napa Valley Register since fall 2014 and previously worked 27 years for the Daily Republic of Fairfield.