



20th Anniversary of the 1991 Hills Firestorm



This October, the Cities of Berkeley and Oakland are commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the Berkeley-Oakland Hills Firestorm.

The fire burned for three days, killed 25 people, and destroyed 3,354 homes-- 63 of which were in Berkeley. Memories of that fire are present in the work the City does every day. It is a factor in building codes, planning decisions, and of course, emergency preparedness and response.

Much of what the City has done is the result of strong community support. That support has been demonstrated by support for several bond and tax measures, as well as direct involvement in our Community Emergency Response Teams.

Residents and City workers alike have not forgotten how emergency crews came from all over the state to help fight the fire and keep it from spreading to other residential neighborhoods. Interagency partnership also has a key role in our prevention and response plans.

Below is a summary of some of the investments and policy decisions that were a result of what was learned in the 1991 Fire.

Vegetation Management

- The City adopted Wildland Interface Codes to provide stricter vegetation management policies and enforcement guidelines
- The City provides a Free Chipper and Debris Bag program to encourage residents to clean up their properties and improve vegetation management during fire season.
- All members of the Hills Emergency Forum have developed vegetation management programs. The Hills Emergency Forum developed a Fuels Management Plan (FMP) in 1996.
- The Hazardous Fire Zone was increased from 720 properties before 1991 to over 8,000 after the fire.

Fire Department Emergency Response

- Residents passed Measure Q, a \$9.75 million bond measure that allowed for the purchase of an emergency above ground water system. This system allows us to pump water out of a lake or bay to fight fires in situations where the below-ground water system is weak or has failed.
- Residents passed Measure G, a \$55 million bond that allowed for the earthquake retrofit of six fire stations and the construction of the new Public Safety Building and Fire Station 7 in the Berkeley hills.
- The City Council recently approved the City's participation in a Radio Interoperability system, which will improve our ability to communicate with 32 other jurisdictions for fire, law enforcement, and emergency medical service response.
- On high-fire days, fire apparatus perform roving patrols in hills neighborhoods.

- In 2011, Berkeley purchased a Type III Wildland Engine, which expands our capacity to fight fires in areas where wildland and urban areas meet.
- Fire commanders have received additional training in wildland firefighting.
- BFD has coordinated regional communications and staging drills to familiarize outside agencies with Berkeley target hazards and staging areas.
- BFD participates annually with Alameda County and Contra Costa Wildland Training Drills.
- Berkeley's entry-level firefighter training includes wildland firefighting strategy and tactics.
- Two quick attack engines were purchased for response to wildland fires and for patrol during high fire hazard weather.
- The City has developed mutual response area agreements with Alameda County, Oakland, Moraga-Orinda, East Bay Regional Parks, El Cerrito, and Richmond Fire Departments for fire response during fire season.
- BFD firefighters receive annual training to understand "fire weather" and to perform surveillance of critical fire weather patterns.
- The City purchased gear and equipment that is more appropriate for wildland firefighting.

Community Emergency Preparedness

- Berkeley residents passed Measure GG, the Fire and Disaster Preparedness Tax, to support minimum staffing of fire stations, invest in radio interoperability, increase the number of first responder paramedics, and expand community training and disaster preparedness.
- Berkeley has a Community Cache Program which allows neighborhood groups to be trained in emergency preparedness and be furnished the tools for neighborhood disaster response.
- More than 52 disaster equipment caches have been supplied to groups all over the City.
- Thousands of Berkeley residents have participated in disaster preparedness training.
- The Berkeley Emergency Notification System (BENS) has been developed to assist with community notification.

Construction Requirements

Since 1990, the State has passed many building code regulations for the buildings located in State fire zones, which includes the Berkeley and Oakland Hills. In 2008 the City of Berkeley adopted those Codes, which include materials and construction methods that are set by the Office of the State Fire Marshal.

Berkeley has taken those codes a step further. Berkeley's Fire Safety Zones are larger than defined by the State and the requirements were expanded to included additions, alterations, repairs and re-roofing. Berkeley Building Code adopts the State's approach for protecting structures from wildland fires and includes additional local provisions:

- Roofs (and roof replacements) are required to be Class A minimum - that means that they are effective against severe fire exposure. Wooden shakes or shingles are prohibited regardless of the assembly rating of the roof system;
- Spark arrestors are required when certain kinds of heating appliances are modified or whenever a structure is re-roofed;
- There are higher standards for replacement of existing exterior wall coverings;
- Underground utility connections are required for new construction;
- Areas in the local Fire Zone 3 (very high fire hazard severity zone) have additional requirements for a fire warning systems, automatic sprinkler systems, utility enclosures, water service, access roads and fire trails, and brush and vegetation control.