

New Defensible Space Tactic Provides Extra Security in Fire-prone Areas

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California is a beautiful state and a wonderful place to live, but depending on where you go, the Golden State also has its share of risks. Earthquakes. Hot summers. Flooding. Mudslides. Massive winter snowfalls. Even the occasional tornado or hurricane. Sometimes, more than one of the above. And, of course, especially in our region, wildfires.

Despite all these risks, some 39 million people live in California largely protected from the elements. Strict building codes ensure that homes and other structures keep us safe in even major earthquakes. Flood control systems protect areas against flooding, and air conditioning makes it possible to live comfortably in hot interior regions of the state.

However, despite these



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The structure on the left is engulfed in flames, while an identical structure on the right did not burn due to a hardscaped “moat” and fire-resistant siding.

examples of how human ingenuity can sharply reduce the risks of living in California, there continue to be proposals to ban development in areas prone to wildfires. That would deny Californians the ability to choose where

they live and drive up housing costs even more by inflating land values in the limited areas where new development would still be allowed.

Fortunately, science is showing us that it is possible to sharply reduce the

risk of living in areas prone to wildfires. For example, important steps are underway to reduce the likelihood of major uncontrolled fires, such as thinning long-overgrown forests and hardening electrical transmission

lines. But we’re also learning that it’s possible to make these areas safer by building homes designed to withstand fire and planning new developments in ways that can help prevent fires from endangering new communities.

In fact, state regulators are working on plans that will require homeowners in fire-prone areas to protect their properties by taking steps similar to what I saw recently at the Pacific Coast Builders’ Conference (PCBC), the West Coast’s premier homebuilding show. PCBC and its parent organization, the California Building Industry Association (CBIA), teamed up with the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS) and the Anaheim Fire Department to conduct a live demonstration of how a home built to withstand a wildfire compares to one that doesn’t.

The most important features of the fire-safe home were:

- Constructing a “moat”

of fireproof materials at least 5 feet wide around the home.

- Using noncombustible fencing.

● Utilizing fire-resistant exteriors, such as stucco or cement-based siding.

- Installing dual-paned windows with at least one tempered glass layer to withstand excessive heat.

- And sealing eaves to prevent embers from striking under the roofline.

As my friend and colleague Dan Dunmoyer, the president and CEO of CBIA, put it, “Five feet of paver stones is a game changer.”

The demonstration began with firefighters igniting plants and mulch in front of the two structures. As with many homes, the mulch and plants were up against the wall of the unprotected structure while they were five feet away from the protected building.

After ignition, the mulch smoldered for about five minutes but then erupted. Flames quickly spread to the base of the wall of the unprotected home, but at the protected building, the mulch burned, and the fire died out as there was no additional fuel.

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Within about 12 minutes, the unprepared structure was fully engulfed, bathing the protected structure in extremely hot radiant heat and sending

embers flying toward it, but the fire-resistant exterior did its job.

The demonstration showed the effectiveness of science-backed miti-

gation actions detailed in IBHS's Wildfire Prepared Home program and that building communities with greater wildfire resistance is possible. The city of South Lake Tahoe is already requiring homeowners to provide five feet of noncombustible space

around their structures, and the state Board of Forestry and Fire Protection is working to adopt similar regulations for fire-prone areas based on legislation enacted in 2020.

In a state where obtaining homeowners insurance in fire-prone areas is

becoming increasingly difficult and more expensive, it may be that fire-protecting homes will bring more carriers back into those markets. Californians have figured out how to reduce the risks of living in earthquake country. We can clearly do the

same in fire-prone regions. Murphy is President & CEO of the North State Building Industry Association, which represents builders, developers, subcontractors, suppliers and related professionals dedicated to providing new housing opportunities in the Greater Sacramento region.