

# Firebreaks Give Fires a Break

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34 years ago, in a draft fire hazard reduction manual that was killed by the City Manager's office, I made the point that fire breaks and other "brush clearance" made fires more likely, not less likely. The intuitive legend that brush clearance reduces fire hazard seems logical, but it is seriously flawed, as the two incidents mentioned in this article clearly demonstrate. The reason clearing makes fire more likely is simple: Clearing causes weeds, and weeds are tinder. No amount of mowing will reduce the weed growth enough to prevent fires. On the contrary, mowing sets up perfect conditions for ignition. In fact, grass clippings on the ground are almost certain to ignite from the least spark, and certainly from a cigarette butt. You can literally spend the day tossing cigarette butts or sparks into mature wild shrublands ("brush" if you like) without causing an ignition--unless they happen to hit some tinder (weeds and grass) which is very rare in mature shrublands. Just try it in a *typical* well-maintained firebreak and see what happens. Surely the controlled-burners could keep this little experiment from getting out of hand. Ask them. They will refuse. They don't want you to know this.

But the myth persists, and after thirty-four years of repeating this message, I have no illusions that the facts will change prejudices. More likely, the facts will not change the fact that people make money doing what comes instinctively about fire hazard reduction. Well, folks, its your money, your houses, your lives.

This is not to say you should do nothing with the shrublands. It is well known that only those parts of shrubs smaller than an half an inch in diameter actually burns in the flame front, so it makes no sense to cut off big heavy shrubs with a chain saw or bulldozer all that does is make combustible fuels (smaller than an half-inch) grow, making the fire worse. Trimming out the combustible fuels (small branches and leaves) enough to separate the remaining clumps of fuel so the fire burns near the ground is actually cheaper and easier than bulldozing or chain-sawing (or mowing).

If you already have weeds, you might want to consider planting some shrubs to reduce the weeds, but keep them far enough apart so a fire can't move readily from shrub to shrub. When they grow enough to "shade out" the weeds and can be trimmed up enough (making little trees out of shrubs), you can consider planting more. You might plant low shrubs between the big ones, but use the kind that can be cut back almost to the ground in May of each year (or whenever the fire season starts). Remove the cut material; don't mulch it. (Yeah, this is contrary to some well-meaning recommendations, so an open discussion with proponents is in order.) No need to have any excess fuel, and thick mulch prevents the formation of moss and other small plant cover that is practically fireproof. Don't disturb the soil. Kill weeds by applying a biodegradable herbicide to the weeds only do not broadcast spray. This is not as tedious as you might think; it can be done with a moistened cloth.

My house has plastered eaves, my canyon has a combination of native shrubs like lemonade berry, toyon, and laurel sumac trimmed into small trees with a six-foot separation from ground fuels, few weeds, and some mingled fruit trees. When fire approaches, sprinklers wet down my decks and windows, the most vulnerable points on my house. What I really need is an on-site, fully self-contained, automatic, water drenching system to make sure that no firebrands or embers can get into my house or onto any unprotected fuels close enough to in turn cause a window to break or any chain of ignition from tinder to kindling to wood to meat (me and mine). And I'm not being funny.

Go ahead, do your thing. But for some reason, I am chagrined and angry that ignorance and yes, even determined ignorance (aka stupidity) keeps our communities in the grip of terror and

tragedy. Not for nothing. Pockets are being lined to the tune of millions for such incredibly insane and useless "preventative" measures and burning "brush" miles from homes as a "fuel reduction" measure. Trouble is, brush is not forest, and when the wind gets up, it can get away from the prescribed burners and all the county's helicopters and all the county's men and women and fire fighting equipment **can't stop it**. This is another popular fiction, and one that gets people killed and costs millions upon millions for little more than TV coverage that helps scare the hell out of people so they will willingly be led to the tax slaughter by the dissembling politician and bureaucrat opportunists and their contributors who profit from fear.

Regretfully submitted,  
Wayne Tyson

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