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10. La Costa – Big Rock – Peña Canyon Community Fire Safety Action Plan¹

10.1. La Costa – Big Rock – Peña Canyon Description

This planning unit includes the neighborhoods of La Costa, Rambla Pacifico to Malibu northern city limits, Lower Las Flores Canyon, Las Flores Mesa, Big Rock, Peña Canyon, the Las Flores business district, and homes on the north side of Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) within the unit boundary.

The La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon Planning Unit is situated in the City of Malibu north of PCH from Peña Canyon to the east and West Rambla Vista at PCH to the west. Pacific Coast Highway is south. Rambla Pacifico extends north into unincorporated private lands. State Conservancy lands are north of Las Flores Canyon, Las Flores Mesa, Big Rock, and Peña Canyon. The La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon unit is 2.5 square miles in area.

Assets at risk in the built environment include less than 400 single-family homes, duplexes, triplexes, four-plexes, six-plexes, several businesses including dental, personal, and business services, retail stores, eateries, historic bungalows, an historic business structure, historic courthouse/jail, a plant nursery, bed-and-breakfast, local newspaper, private elementary school, city park, recovery treatment center, and Caltrans maintenance yard.



Properties and homes vary in size. Lower Rambla Pacifico and Las Flores Canyon are mostly zoned six units per acre. Most La Costa lots are one-quarter acre. Homes in the lower part of Big Rock are on half-acre lots. Upper Rambla Pacifico to the city line and Upper Big Rock areas generally have 1-acre parcels. Las Flores Mesa hosts 2-acre lots. There are scattered 5-, 10-, 20-, and 40-acre parcels in the remainder of the unit.² Real estate values for homes start at \$1.4 million for duplexes and range from \$1.7 to \$11 million for single-family homes.³

10.1.1. La Costa – Big Rock – Peña Canyon Wildfire Environment

Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHAs) surround the La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon unit. The area in Las Flores Canyon follows the undeveloped stream corridor north and fans out in all directions after New Roads School. This fan extends east to surround the Las Flores Mesa to Big Rock and onward to the Malibu city limits near Topanga Canyon. A narrow strip follows PCH between homes on the north side of the highway and structures on the mesa above. Upland reaches of this ESHA include coastal sage scrub and chaparral habitat. Undeveloped areas in Las Flores Canyon, Piedra Gorda Canyon in Big Rock, and Peña Canyon host riparian and wetland habitat.⁴ Big Rock Mesa was a live oak woodland until its development in the 1950s.⁵

¹ This document was written by Julie Clark De Blasio, Principal of Sweetgrass Environmental Consulting, in conjunction with ForEverGreen Forestry.

² California Coastal Commission Technical Services, San Francisco, CA (Revised 2002), *Land Use Map 4: Carbon Beach to Topanga Beach*, Local Coastal Program – City of Malibu [Data file], www.ci.malibu.ca.us/download/index.cfm/fuseaction/download/cid/1603/

³ Trulia Real Estate Search, <http://www.trulia.com/homes/California/Malibu> (accessed February 26, 2010).

⁴ California Coastal Commission Technical Services, San Francisco, CA (Revised 2002), *ESHA and Marine Resources Map 4: Carbon Beach to Topanga Beach*, Local Coastal Program – City of Malibu [Data file].

⁵ Dayton Lummis (2007), *Dust Devils: Journeys in the Vanishing American West* (Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press).

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Las Flores Canyon Park (City of Malibu) is the only developed public access facility in the unit. Other recreational opportunities are private except for those along roadways, fire roads, and the park. Developed private types are swimming and tennis. Passive recreation types include walking, running, bicycling, and mountain biking.

Ingress and egress is from the thoroughfare of PCH. La Costa is interconnected. Roads are narrow, winding, have little street shoulder and parking, and are privately maintained. Side streets off the connector roads are cul-de-sacs. The La Costa area historically experienced slope destabilization. There are three dewatering projects that help ameliorate slippage. The Calle del Barco Slide in upper La Costa relegates the road and area to periodic unstable conditions.⁶ Upper Rambla Pacifico extends north to Stunt Road in the unincorporated area and serves as a conduit to the San Fernando Valley. Lower Rambla Pacifico became dead-end in 1984, when an *ancient landslide*—the Rambla Pacifico Slide—became active and destroyed eight homes.⁷ Las Flores Canyon connects with PCH and its upper reaches outside city limits with Scheuren and Saddle Peak roads, which both serve as connectors to the San Fernando Valley. It is subject to vagaries from the Eagle Pass–Las Flores Slide, which regularly blocks the road and imposes high costs for safety and clearance.^{8,9} Las Flores Canyon is a developed floodplain with historic property and road losses during rain and debris flow events.¹⁰ Las Flores Mesa is a neighborhood of cul-de-sacs and roads that are privately maintained. The area is unstable due to a slide and artesian springs. Building activities and roads exacerbate this slippage. The Big Rock community is a series of cul-de-sacs that extend almost to the ridgetop. Big Rock Drive is the main thoroughfare and has no outlet. There are active landslides in this neighborhood with the Big Rock Mesa Slide predominant. Piedra Gorda Canyon in Big Rock has 55° slopes. Peña Canyon is a narrow steep cul-de-sac. It has V-shaped 60° slopes. There are no active landslides but evidence of ancient and foreboding activity.¹¹

CAL FIRE designated the entire Santa Monica Mountains region as a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone. The La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon Planning Unit is included.

The La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon Planning Unit experienced several wildfires in the last century: Las Flores–Temescal (1910); Las Flores #29 (November 17, 1928); Las Flores #47 (October 20, 1942); Hume (December 27, 1956); 28,201-acre Wright (September 25, 1970) with 403 homes lost and ten fatalities in the burn area; Old Topanga (November 2, 1993) with several homes lost in Las Flores and homes in Rambla Pacifico damaged; Canyon (October 21, 2007) with homes destroyed in Rambla Pacifico.^{12,13,14}

Homes in the La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon unit have a variable age-class. Older structures range from wooden to Mission-style stucco type. Many homes, regardless of age, have wooden decks and/or fences. Mature unmaintained ornamental vegetation is found throughout the entire unit. Many older homes have been remodeled. Most structures in the La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon unit are not retrofitted to current California WUI Fire and

⁶ City of Malibu (1995), *General Plan – Land Use Element – Appendix A. Neighborhood Descriptions*.

⁷ K. Kelleher (April 10, 1994), “Malibu and County ask for flood, slide funds,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁸ J. Pasternak (June 25, 1987), “Las Flores Landslide area \$11-million Malibu road project,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁹ R. Russell (March 20, 1994), “Die-hard canyon residents still loyal to Las Flores Malibu,” *Los Angeles Times*.

¹⁰ City of Malibu (1995), *General Plan – Land Use Element – Appendix A. Neighborhood Descriptions*.

¹¹ F. Weirich and L. Blesius (2007), “Comparison of satellite and air photo-based landslide susceptibility maps,” *Geomorphology*, Elsevier Press.

¹² Mike Davis (1998), “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn.” In *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Henry Holt), pp. 93–147.

¹³ J. Friedman (October 31, 2007), “Malibu fire damages run the gamut,” *Malibu Times*.

¹⁴ Robert S. Taylor, Biogeographer/Fire GIS Specialist, National Park Service, personal communication, February 12, 2010.

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Building Standards.¹⁵ Utilities are aboveground except for some streets with subterranean phone lines.¹⁶ Vegetation encroaches upon many power lines in the unit.

Municipal water supply is through Los Angeles County Waterworks District No. 29 in Malibu. Conveyance is along a transmission main that follows PCH, with water stored in tanks located on the upland side of the highway. The county adopted mandatory water conservation measures in 2009. Threats to the water supply include infrastructural age and lack of capital funds to upgrade, increased demand from new development, electrical failure, and emergency use during wildfire events, which can affect access to supply.^{17:18}

Big Rock Mesa Fire Safe Council has been active the last several years. It has completed two grant-funded fuel-reduction projects to date and intends to expand its sphere of influence to include more streets and areas of Big Rock.¹⁹

Los Angeles County Fire Station #70 is located at the corner of Carbon Canyon Road and PCH, on the western edge of this planning unit.

10.2. La Costa – Big Rock – Peña Canyon Evacuations

Possible impediments to emergency ingress and egress include downed power lines, trees, traffic, and landslides. There are many narrow, winding, unstable streets with hairpin turns and cul-de-sacs in this unit.

Evacuation from the La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon area will travel either eastward or westward along PCH, depending on law enforcement recommendations based on fire behavior, wind pattern, traffic, and ingress of emergency vehicles. In some cases, and only by the advice of the sheriff, Las Flores Canyon Road, Upper Rambla Pacifico, or Topanga Canyon Boulevard might become options.

Possible survival areas that should be investigated by local law enforcement and fire departments include local tennis courts and swimming pools.



10.3. La Costa – Big Rock – Peña Canyon Community Meeting Summary

The La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon community meeting was held in the City of Malibu Council Chambers on October 22, 2009. Twenty-six residents and three non-residents attended.

The following assets at risk were identified at the community meeting. These can be located on Map II.10-1 at the end of this document.

¹⁴ State of California, Building Standards Commission, www.bsc.ca.gov (accessed February 8, 2010).

¹⁶ City of Malibu (1995), *General Plan – Land Use Element – Appendix A. Neighborhood Descriptions*.

¹⁷ Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy/Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (September 2, 2009), *Malibu Parks Public Access Enhancement Plan – Public Works Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report – Water Supply*.

¹⁸ Arthur Schimke, Regional Water Service Superintendent, Waterworks and Sewer Maintenance Division, County of Los Angeles, Department of Public Works, personal communication, April–June 2010.

¹⁹ Stu Walter, Big Rock Mesa Fire Safe Council, personal communication, October 2008 and June 2010.

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FIGURE II.10-1. COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED ASSETS AT RISK

- Caltrans Maintenance Yard
- Historic Court House
- Las Flores Creek Park – City of Malibu
- Los Angeles County Fire Department Station #70
- New Roads School
- Water tank and pumps – Los Angeles County Waterworks District No. 29



10.3.1. Community-Identified Potential Projects

The following items are community-identified projects from the community meeting. Residents were encouraged to “think big,” and not be concerned about project cost or property ownership for the project brainstorming process. Following the brainstorming, residents prioritized projects based on which were most realistic and most important. These projects can be seen on Map II.10-1 at the end of this document.

FIGURE II.10-2. LA COSTA – BIG ROCK – PEÑA CANYON COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED PROJECTS

IDENTIFIED ITEM DESCRIPTION	PROPOSED PROJECT CATEGORY	PRIORITY RANK
Hazard tree removal/thinning program	Fuel Reduction	1
Alternative evacuation route – Seaboard to PCH	Evacuation	1
Brush removal with goats	Fuel Reduction	2
Secure power to water tank pumps	Risk Reduction	2
Hazard tree removal (upper Big Rock Drive)	Fuel Reduction	3
Bury all power lines	Risk Reduction	4
Volunteer fire department of homeowners	Fire Protection	6
Clearance on Seaboard	Fuel Reduction	6
Policy to regulate flammable non-native trees	Fuel Reduction / Policy	6
Create ordinance to prohibit overhangs to hydrants	Policy	7
Clearance at end of Rockpoint Road	Fuel Reduction	
Enforce metal blade prohibition for gardening power tools	Policy	
Bury water tank and electric lines. Add generator at bottom of hill. Increase fire protection access.	Risk Reduction	
Backup generation of water tank power	Water	
Gravity-feed tank at Tuna	Water	
Replace missing fire hydrant on Rambla Pacifico (before Sumac Ridge)	Water	

10.4. La Costa – Big Rock – Peña Canyon Action Plan

The following projects are the initial priorities for community action for the La Costa–Big Rock–Peña Canyon Planning Unit.

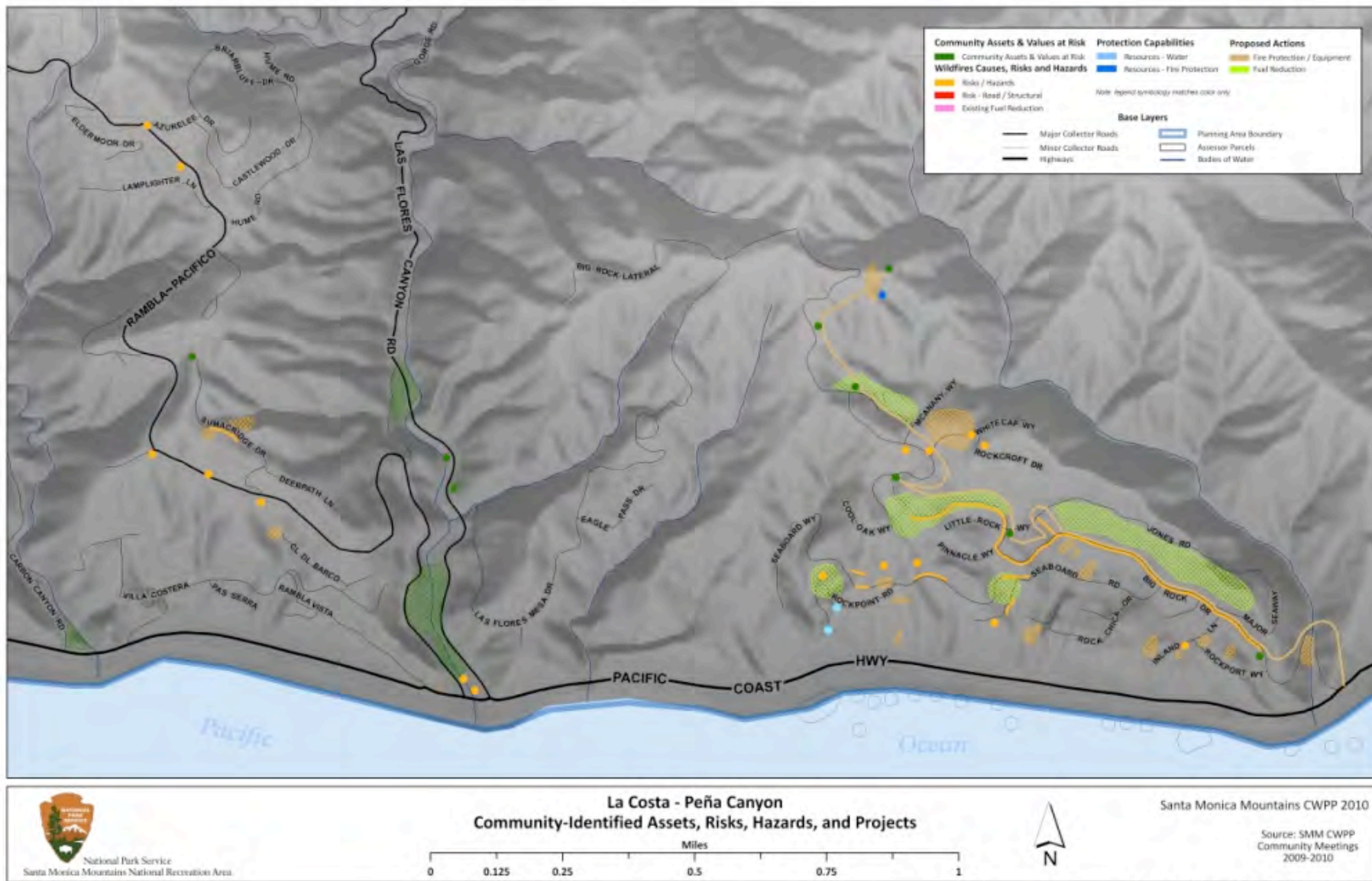
- Implement a hazard tree removal/thinning program through the Big Rock FSC and local homeowner’s associations (HOAs), starting in upper Big Rock. Replace hazardous trees with native live oak trees. Implement in priority order:

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- Along main evacuation routes and near water tanks,
- Along the spur roads to main evacuation roads,
- Near homes, especially for trees that threaten more than one home,
- Trees in or near power lines.
- Ensure that at least one team from each HOA or neighborhood undergoes Malibu Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. This is the vehicle to begin organizing locally for evacuation planning, in cooperation with local law enforcement and the fire department.
- Residents reduce urban fuels in the home ignition zone based on the Conservation Principles and Best Management Practices outlined in Chapters 1, 4, and 5 of this CWPP. Fuels maintenance should be a routine and ongoing practice throughout the year for all homes and landscapes in the Santa Monica Mountains. This includes: ensuring structures are resistant to heat and embers, maintaining all vegetation “from the house out,” and removing anything in this zone that might ignite and spread fire.
- Big Rock Fire Safe Council/Big Rock Mesa Property Owners Association undertake a community outreach program to ensure broad-based representation and participation from residents throughout Big Rock in fire-safety activities. Develop an organizational structure to ensure a long-term, sustainable, democratic process.
- Explore community purchase and installation of wildland-urban interface (WUI) building products to upgrade homes to current WUI building standards. All residents upgrade homes to current California WUI Fire and Building Standards.
- Work with law enforcement and Los Angeles County Fire Department through the FSC, HOA and/or other neighborhood-level association to develop a local evacuation plan. Efforts should be made to ensure that local gates are open or accessible during Red Flag conditions.
- Work through HOAs and FSC to educate residents on the need to keep ingress and egress/evacuation routes clear. Residents need to understand the dangers involved in imprudent parking or long-term street storage of unused vehicles. Because natural disasters can strike at any time, key evacuation ingress/egress routes must be kept free of parked vehicles, especially trailers and other large objects that are difficult to move quickly. Trash cans and other items should be kept off the roadway and out of key turnout/passing areas.²⁰ A neighborhood-organizing project would include creating off-street parking where it is limited. Neighbors can work together to help each other stay in compliance.
- Work through the FSC and HOAs to begin a local community education and preparedness campaign. Include components such as pool pumps, generators, and home fire preparedness equipment. This can be done in cooperation with other area FSCs and/or the City of Malibu, Los Angeles County Fire Department, and the National Park Service.

²⁰ The law in Los Angeles County states that trash cans can only be on the street after 5 pm of the day preceding, and until 8 pm on the day of waste collection.

MAP II.10-1. LA COSTA – BIG ROCK – PEÑA CANYON: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED ASSETS, RISKS, HAZARDS, AND PROJECTS²¹



²¹ This map prints best at 11x17. Visit to www.forevergreenforestry.com/smmcwpp_pub.html to download a print version.