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16. Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Community Fire Safety Action Plan

16.1. Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Description

This planning unit is located in unincorporated Los Angeles County and includes the neighborhoods and subdivisions of Stokes Canyon, Las Virgenes Canyon, Monte Nido, Dry Canyon, Cold Creek, Stunt Road, Lower West Saddle Peak, and Lower Piuma. The Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor unit extends from Los Angeles County Highway N1 (Malibu Canyon Road) east to just before Mountain Park Drive. The northern boundary includes properties along Mulholland Highway. The southern boundary includes properties along Piuma Road. The planning unit is 16.7 square miles in area.

Assets at risk in the built environment include more than 400 single-family homes, ranches, and estates, equine facilities, reclaimed water spreading grounds, a federal maintenance facility with dormitories (Diamond X Ranch), federal and state joint-use area (King Gillette Ranch), state biological preserve (University of California Stunt Ranch), numerous state and private land trust inholdings, 100-foot dam (Rindge), county fire station (Los Angeles County Fire Station #67), nursery (Los Angeles County Forestry Division), local joint powers authority fire department (Mountains Restoration



and Conservation Authority), several historic structures, wildlife rescue facility, private school, day camp, ashram, Hindu temple, restaurant, bed-and-breakfast operation, eating disorder recovery center, trailer park, and many tennis courts and swimming pools. Most of this CWPP planning unit is unincorporated, with the northernmost part within the City of Calabasas. Properties and homes vary in size, with parcels ranging from a fraction of an acre to over 10 acres. Single-family home prices in the area currently start at \$950,000 and go up to \$5.5 million. Undeveloped parcels in this unit range \$37,500 to \$1 million per acre.¹

16.1.1. Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Wildfire Environment

Development in the Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor unit is surrounded by open space and high habitat values. Parcels in the lower-lying and riparian corridor areas such as Monte Nido tend to be clustered and situated in oak woodlands. Residences occupy larger parcels on the outlying border areas of the planning unit. The Coastal Zone extends inland from the beach into parts of this area.² The environment includes several Significant Ecological Areas and cultural resources sites. Major attributes are: Malibu Creek (perennial), Cold Creek and Las Virgenes Creek (the latter two are ephemeral tributaries to Malibu Creek); oak woodlands, sycamore riparian corridors, native grasslands, pristine coastal sage scrub, rock outcrop, chaparral, and aquatic habitat, as well as other significant botanical areas. Several sensitive, threatened, or endangered plant and animal species are identified in this unit. The southern

¹ Realtor.com, Monte Nido, www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-search/Monte-Nido_CA (accessed March 7, 2010).

² The California Coastal Zone extends 1,000 yards inland from the mean high tide line. In significant coastal estuarine habitat and recreational areas it extends inland to the first major ridgeline or 5 miles from the mean high tide line, whichever is less. In developed urban areas, the boundary is generally less than 1,000 yards.

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steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) is found in Malibu Creek, one of its only locations in the region. The Pacific lamprey (*Lampetra tridentata*) was found in Malibu Creek as recently as ten years ago and has the potential to be identified again.³ The area provides important habitat and wildlife corridors. Most of the undeveloped lands in the unit are part of Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas.⁴ Threats to the environment include development, and populations of ornamental and invasive plants such as alien grasses, giant reed, Russian thistle, tree-of-heaven, and Scotch broom.

Passive recreational opportunities include walking, jogging, bicycling, mountain biking, bird watching, wildflower and wildlife viewing, and horseback riding. Developed and private types include dirt biking, motor biking, motor touring, pool swimming, and tennis. The Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor area is notorious for illegal sports car and motorcycle racing, also known as “canyon carving,” on the relatively desolate, winding, steep roads. A county program called “Operation Safe Canyons” was established in 2006 to post more speed-limit signs and coordinate a citation program. Law enforcement has increased patrols to curb this activity since 2007 to help prevent accidents and fires.^{5,6}

Ingress and egress is from Malibu Canyon Road to the west, Mulholland Highway to the north, and either Piuma or Stunt roads to the south. Lateral roads in the area are narrow, winding, and have little shoulder.



CAL FIRE designated the entire Santa Monica Mountains region as a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, including this area

The Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor unit has a history of many wildfires: Calabasas (1903); Old Topanga #2 (1926); Cold Creek (September 7, 1936); 5,840-acre Las Flores #47 (October 26, 1942); 14,960-acre Woodland Hills #65 (November 6, 1943) with 150 homes destroyed in the burn area; 1,940-acre Hume (December 27, 1956); 17,860-acre Liberty (November 28, 1958); unnamed (October 14,

1961); unnamed (September 17, 1970); 28,201-acre Wright (September 25, 1970) with 403 homes destroyed in the burn area and ten fatalities; unnamed (July 23, 1972); unnamed (November 26, 1976); Las Virgenes (November 24, 1980); 43,090-acre Dayton (October 9, 1982) with 74 homes destroyed in the burn area; 5,197-acre Piuma (October 14, 1985); Tapia (November 13, 1992); Malibu (September 21, 1993); 18,000-acre Old Topanga (November 2, 1993) with 400 homes destroyed and three fatalities; Calabasas (October 21, 1996); Malibu (September 30, 1997); Malibu Creek (August 21, 1998); and Mulholland (September 7, 1999).^{7,8}

³ Rosi Dagit, Senior Conservation Biologist, Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains, personal communication, March 17, 2010.

⁴ Stunt Ranch, Santa Monica Mountains Reserve, <http://nrs.ucop.edu/Stunt-Ranch-Santa-Monica.htm> (accessed January 13, 2010).

⁵ L. Michaelson (2007), “Cops come down hard on ‘canyon carving’,” *Topanga Messenger*.

⁶ M. Picarella (February 23, 2006), “Canyons make attractive venue for racing, but residents upset,” *The Acorn*.

⁷ Robert S. Taylor, Biogeographer/Fire GIS Specialist, National Park Service, personal communication, February 12, 2010.

⁸ Mike Davis (1998), “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn.” In *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Henry Holt), pp. 93–147.

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Structures in the Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor unit have a variable age-class. Older structures tend to be wooden. Newer structures generally are constructed of stucco, plaster, or masonry. An older residential trailer park is located in Las Virgenes Canyon. Most homes, regardless of age, have wooden decks and/or fences. Mature, lush, and tall ornamental vegetation is found around structures in most of this unit and predominates in the older areas. Utilities are aboveground. Several single-family homes are gated. Many structures in the outlying boundaries of the Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor are of contemporary design. However, most are not retrofitted to current California WUI Fire and Building Standards.⁹

Municipal water supply for the Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor unit is from Las Virgenes Municipal Water District.¹⁰ Mandatory water conservation and enforcement measures were established in 2009. The district has one emergency 9,500-acre-foot back-up reservoir.¹¹

Los Angeles County Fire Station #67 is near the intersection of Piuma and Cold Canyon roads in Monte Nido.

The Monte Nido community is currently organizing block captains to form a Fire Safe Council. The council is a committee within the Monte Nido Valley Community Association (MNVCA). A few residents attended fire-safe education meetings and launched an education and outreach effort through local public venues, the MNVCA, and local newsletters.^{12,13}

The Stunt Vegetation Management Project area encompasses 83 acres and is a collaborative effort between National Park Service and Los Angeles County Fire.^{14,15}

16.2. Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Evacuations

Possible impediments to emergency ingress and egress include downed power lines, trees, traffic, and locked gates. Several venues in the Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor host large groups of people: Hindu Temple, Cottontail Ranch, Calmont School, King Gillette Ranch, Diamond X Ranch, Cold Creek/Stunt Ranch Preserve, Saddlepeak Lodge, the bed-and-breakfast, private ashram, and private treatment center. Most homes have large livestock and/or small domestic animals. There are a few equine facilities that board horses. The California Wildlife Center houses and rehabilitates scores of animals at any given time. A few spots have the potential to be considered as possible safe areas in this unit. King



⁹ State of California, Building Standards Commission, www.bsc.ca.gov (accessed February 8, 2010).

¹⁰ Las Virgenes Municipal Water District (2010), District Map [Data], www.lvmwd.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=838.

¹¹ Las Virgenes Municipal Water District (2010), www.lvmwd.com.

¹² Joan Kay, Monte Nido Valley Community Association, personal communication, January–June 2010.

¹³ Monte Nido Valley Community Association E-Newsletter (February, June, November 2009; February 2010).

¹⁴ Los Angeles County Fire Department, Forestry Division (2010), Vegetation Management, Stunt Project, www.lacounty.gov/forestry/vegetation_management_projects.asp.

¹⁵ Charlie Whitman, Prescribed Fire Technician, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, personal communication, May 2010.

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Gillette, Diamond X ranches and grounds, and the many private tennis courts and swimming pools could be options. These factors should be taken into consideration when planning with local law enforcement and fire authorities.

16.3. Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Community Meeting Summary

The Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor meeting was held at Diamond X Ranch on October 26, 2009. Nine residents and one property manager attended.

The following assets at risk were identified at the community meeting. These can be seen on Map II.16-1 at the end of this document.

FIGURE II.16-1. COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED ASSETS AT RISK

- Cold Creek Preserve (Stunt Ranch)
- Dry Creek
- Hindu temple
- King Gillette Ranch
- Malibu Creek
- Parklands
- Cottontail Ranch
- Diamond X Ranch
- Historical structures
- Little Dry Creek
- Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority fire station
- California Wildlife Center

16.3.1. 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 located on Map II.16-1 at the end of this document.

FIGURE II.16-2. LAS VIRGENES CANYON CORRIDOR COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED PROJECTS

IDENTIFIED ITEM DESCRIPTION	PROPOSED PROJECT CATEGORY	PRIORITY RANK
Remove exotic grasses on Saddlepeak and Piuma	Fuel Reduction	1
Individual home inspections	Risk Assessment	1
Fire safe meetings – Stokes	Emergency Preparedness	2
Form a volunteer fire department	Fire Protection	2
Maintain eucalyptus in canyon	Fuel Reduction	2
Build earthen dam to store Tapia treatment plant effluent	Risk Reduction	2
Bury power lines on Mulholland Highway	Risk Reduction	2
Pools as water source for fire fighting	Water	2
Education Program: “House Out” with home ignition zone resource list	Education	
Fire hazard/restoration/preservation/education projects	Education	
Fire safety signage along Backbone Trail	Fire Protection / Equipment	
<i>Arundo</i> (giant reed) removal – Mulholland and McKain Road	Fuel Reduction	
Scotch broom removal	Fuel Reduction	
Tree-of-heaven removal	Fuel Reduction	

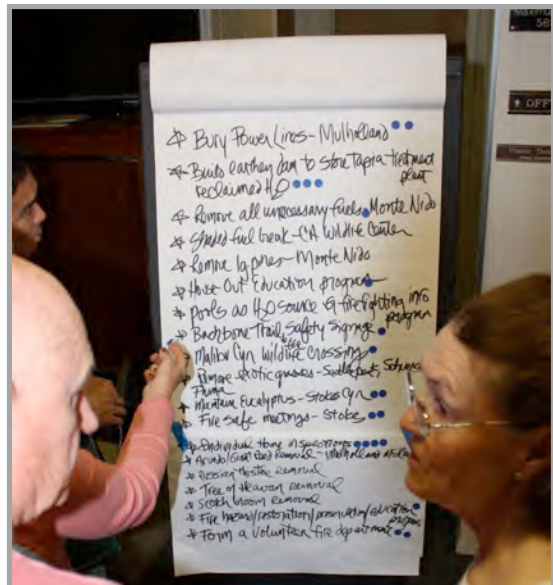
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IDENTIFIED ITEM DESCRIPTION	PROPOSED PROJECT CATEGORY	PRIORITY RANK
Neighborhood fire safe meeting	Emergency Preparedness	
Escape route needs to be maintained	Evacuation / Fire Protection	
Removal of all unnecessary fuels in Monte Nido	Fuel Reduction	
Removal of invasive pampas and fountain grass on Saddlepeak Road	Fuel Reduction	
Removal of large pine trees in Monte Nido	Fuel Reduction	
Russian thistle removal	Fuel Reduction	
Shaded fuelbreak around wildlife center	Fuel Reduction	
Malibu Canyon wildfire crossings and other areas (from US 101 freeway southward)	Fuel Reduction / Policy	
Subterranean power lines	Risk Reduction	
Water storage of Tapia plant reclaimed water	Water	

16.4. Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Action Plan

The following initial projects are the community priorities for action for the Las Virgenes Canyon Corridor Planning Unit.

- Form a local Fire Safe Council (FSC), as is being discussed in Monte Nido, and/or join with nearby FSCs. This organizational structure will facilitate community preparedness for wildfire throughout the local communities. Work with the California Fire Safe Council to create a FSC that will best accommodate and enable this area.
- Implement a hazard tree removal/thinning program starting in Monte Nido through a FSC, homeowner’s association (HOA), or other community organization, and in priority order: (Note: This would NOT include native oak trees.)
 - Along main evacuation routes, including Mulholland Highway, Malibu Canyon, Saddlepeak, Piuma, Cold Canyon, and Dry Canyon roads.
 - Along the spur roads to these main evacuation roads.
 - Near homes, with a focus on trees that threaten more than one home, especially in the Monte Nido area, and those areas identified on the community meeting map (Map II.16-1 at the end of this document).
 - Trees in or near power lines.
- 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 for all homes and landscapes in the Santa Monica Mountains. This includes ensuring that 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



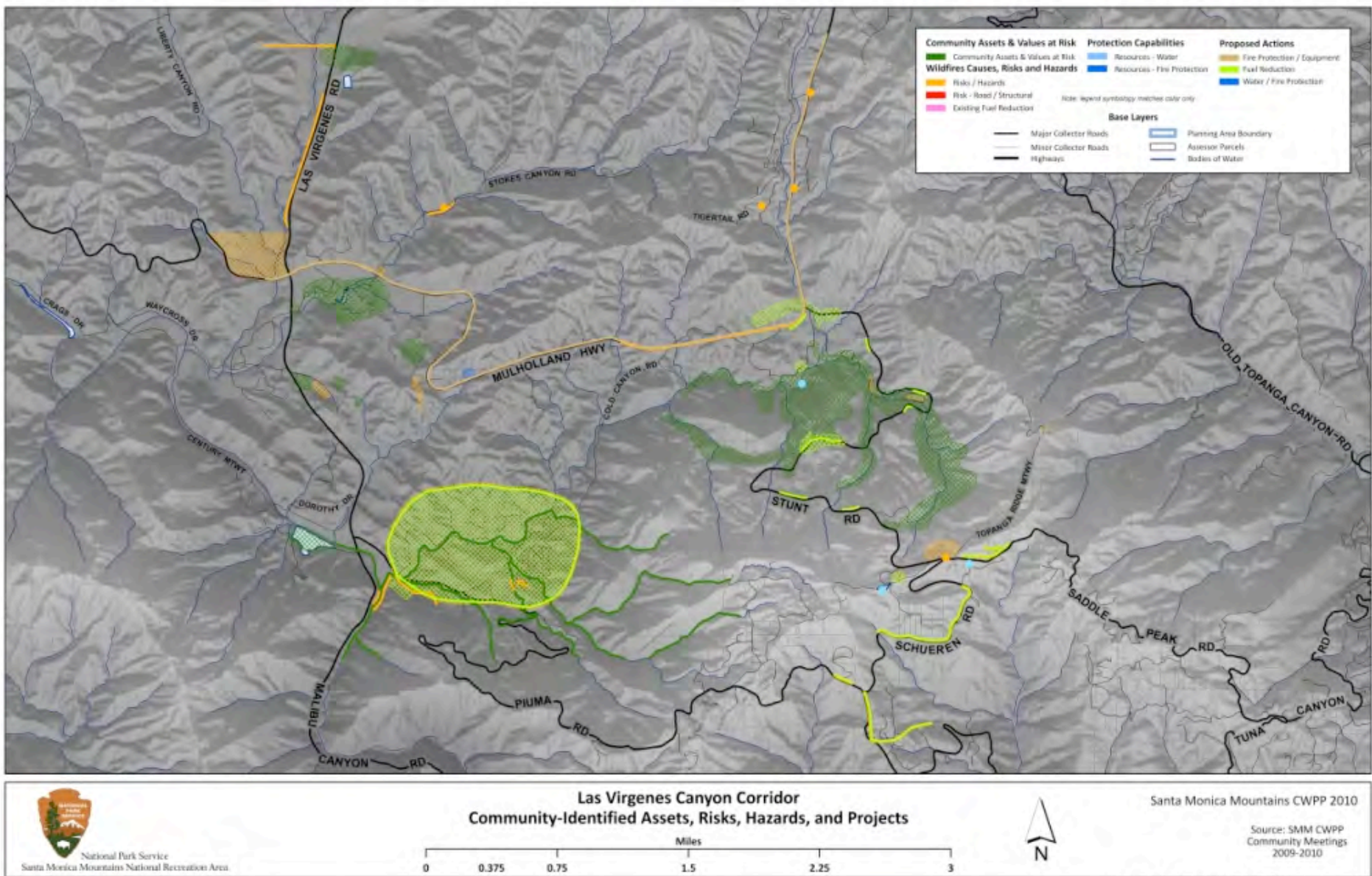
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fire.

- Work with state and federal land management agencies and private landholders through a FSC, HOA, or other community organization to remove exotic grasses and other invasive species, especially along Saddlepeak and Piuma roads.
- Work through a new FSC, existing HOA, or other community organization to begin a local community education and preparedness campaign. Include community education on pool pumps, generators, and home fire-preparedness equipment. This can be done in cooperation with other area FSCs and/or the Los Angeles County Fire Department and the National Park Service.
- Ensure that at least one team from each homeowner's association or neighborhood undergoes Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. This is the venue to begin organizing locally for evacuation planning, in cooperation with local law enforcement and the fire department.
- Develop a neighborhood Arson Watch program. This could be integrated into the work of the Fire Safe Council. Work with state and federal land management agencies to help with Arson Watch in local parks during Red Flag conditions.
- 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 a FSC, HOA, 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.



MAP II.16-1. LAS VIRGENES CANYON CORRIDOR: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED ASSETS, RISKS, HAZARDS, AND PROJECTS¹⁶



¹⁶ This map prints best at 11x17. Visit to www.forevergreenforestry.com/smmcwpp_pub.html to download a print version.