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17. Cornell Community Fire Safety Action Plan

17.1. Cornell Description

This planning unit includes the Los Angeles County unincorporated neighborhoods of Lobo Canyon, Triunfo Canyon, Cornell, Careful, Seminole Hot Springs, Malibu Lakeside, Malibou Lake Mountain Club, and Wagon Road. The Cornell unit extends from Westlake city limits on the west to Los Angeles County Highway N1 (Malibu Canyon Road) on the east. This planning unit does not include Liberty Canyon and Lost Hills. The northern boundary is approximately one-half mile south of US 101 (Ventura Freeway). The southern boundary is Castro Ridge and the southern property line of Malibu Creek State Park. The planning unit is 21.3 square miles in area.

Assets at risk in the built environment include less than 500 single-family homes, ranches, and estates, numerous small residential and large commercial equine facilities, Los Angeles County Fire Station #65, three constructed lakes (Enchanto, Malibou, and Seminole), two national park facilities (Paramount and Peter Strauss ranches), state parks (Malibu Creek and Tapia), several historic buildings, several eateries, at least three commercial vineyards and wineries, several private vineyards, two day camps, defunct motor raceway track (Paramount Ranch), wine tasting room, western movie set (Western Town–Paramount Ranch), Santa Monica Mountains Resource Conservation District offices, wastewater treatment and reclamation plant (Tapia), water quality laboratory (Tapia), sludge-composting facility (Tapia), probation camp (Los Angeles County Camp David Gonzalez), roads maintenance facility (Los Angeles County Department of Public Works), electricity substation (Southern California Edison), private commercial trout fishing farm, private community resort club, two homeowner associations' community centers, two domestic animal rescue facilities, gas station, business and personal services, and auto repair shop. Malibu Junction is the business district located mostly east of Kanan Dume Road between Agoura Road and the Ventura Freeway.



Properties and homes vary in size. Careful, Malibou Lake Mountain Club, Malibu Lakeside, and Wagon Road are zoned single-family residential. Approximately two-thirds of the parcels at Malibou Lake Mountain Club are built. Parcels range from a fraction of an acre to more than 10 acres. Single-family home prices in the area currently start at \$750,000 and go to \$5.8 million. Mobile home prices begin at \$160,000. Undeveloped parcels range from \$17,000 to \$897,000 per acre.¹

17.1.1. Cornell Wildfire Environment

Development in the Cornell Planning Unit is surrounded by open space and high habitat values. The subdivisions of Wagon Road, Careful, Malibou Lake Mountain Club, Malibu Lakeside, and Seminole Hot Springs are clustered. The other neighborhoods are rural with a mix of paved and dirt drives; parcels are generally not adjacent to

¹ Loopnet.com, Agoura Hills land for sale, www.loopnet.com/California/Agoura-Hills_Land-For-Sale (accessed March 17, 2010).

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immediate neighbors. Older neighborhoods of Malibu Lakeside, Malibu Lake Mountain Club, and Cornell are heavily wooded with tall, mature ornamental plants including pine trees and eucalyptus. The remainder of the Cornell Planning Unit is light agriculture.²

Passive recreational opportunities include walking, jogging, bicycling, mountain biking, bird watching, wildflower and wildlife viewing, horseback riding, dressage, fishing, painting, and sculpting. Developed and private types include dirt biking, motor biking, motor touring, boating, camping, picnicking, outdoor instruction, swimming, and tennis. The Cornell area is notorious for illegal sports car and motorcycle racing, also known as “canyon carving,” on the relatively desolate, winding, and 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 prevent accidents and fires.^{3,4} Residences in Lobo and Triunfo canyons are on larger parcels. Almost all of the CWPP Planning Unit is situated within the California Coastal Zone as the area is a significant sub-watershed to Malibu Creek.⁵

The environment includes several Significant Ecological Areas and cultural resources sites. Attributes are: ephemeral Medea and Triunfo creeks, which serve as critical sub-watersheds to perennial Malibu Creek; oak woodlands, valley oak savannah, sycamore riparian corridors, native grasslands, pristine coastal sage scrub, rock outcrop, chaparral, and aquatic habitat, as well as other significant botanical areas. The Medea and Triunfo creeks sub-watersheds combined contribute 60% of the water to the Malibu Creek watershed. Enchanto, Malibou, and Seminole lakes are constructed dammed structures and are sustained by ephemeral surface and subsurface flows.⁶ Many sensitive, threatened, or endangered plant and animal species are identified in this planning unit. The area provides important habitat and wildlife corridors. Most of the undeveloped lands are part of Environmentally



Sensitive Habitat Areas.⁷ Many significant cultural resource sites are located throughout the Cornell unit. Threats to the environment include development, vegetation clearance, grading activities, and populations of invasive species including fennel, alien grasses, peppergrass, giant reed, non-native thistles, tree-of-heaven, Spanish broom, yellow star thistle, crayfish, and Virginia opossum.⁸

Enchanto, Malibou, and Seminole lakes receive tons of silt from nearby and upstream vegetation clearing and grading activities. This problem is greatest in Malibou

² County of Los Angeles, Department of Regional Planning (2003), Santa Monica Mountains North Area Plan Zoning Map [Data].

³ L. Michaelson (2007), “Cops come down hard on ‘canyon carving’,” *Topanga Messenger*.

⁴ M. Picarella (February 23, 2006), “Canyons make attractive venue for racing, but residents upset,” *The Acorn*.

⁵ 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.

⁶ State of California, State Water Rights Board (1960), Malibu Lakeside Mutual Water Company – Decision approving application No. 985.

⁷ California State Parks (2005), Malibu Creek State Park, General Plan, Final Environmental Impact Reports V.I.

⁸ California State Parks (2005), Malibu Creek State Park, General Plan, Final Environmental Impact Reports V.I.

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Lake.^{9,10} Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and the Department of Regional Planning designated Significant Ridgeline Areas and stringent grading regulations for these areas to ameliorate the problem.^{11,12}

Ingress and egress is from Los Angeles County Highway N9 (Kanan Dume Road) near the eastern border of the unit, US Highway 101 (Ventura Freeway) to the north, and Los Angeles County Highway N1 (Malibu Canyon Road) to the east. Mulholland Highway bisects the unit. Lateral roads in the area are narrow, winding, and steep, with little shoulder and turn-around space except in developed subdivisions. Many streets in this unit are cul-de-sacs. Several bridges cross lakes and creeks. Some, such as those at Malibou Lake, are more than 50 years old. The County of Los Angeles recently upgraded a condemned 75-foot bridge at Malibou Lake. Three thousand pounds of asphalt on top of the bridge were removed to allow the structure to accommodate more vehicle weight. This bridge currently is designated for emergency vehicle use only.¹³

CAL FIRE designated the entire Santa Monica Mountains region as a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, including this area. This determination by the state is based on factors such as fire weather, slope, and fuel loading, among others.

The Cornell unit has a history of many wildfires, with the number of incidents increasing over the last 20 years: Calabasas (1903); Montgomery Ranch (July 15, 1926); Agoura #2 (January 10, 1933); 14,960-acre Woodland Hills #65 (November 6, 1943) with 150 homes destroyed in the burn area; 28,201-acre Wright (September 25, 1970) with 403 homes destroyed in the burn area and ten fatalities; Park (October 14, 1975); unnamed (February 13, 1977); unnamed (July 27, 1977); unnamed (July 3, 1978); unnamed (September 3, 1978); unnamed



(September 22, 1978); 43,090-acre Dayton (October 9, 1982) with 74 homes destroyed in the burn area; Mulholland (July 12, 1985); Park (October 14, 1985); A-Team (September 12, 1986); unnamed (October 1, 1986); Agoura (January 1, 1987); Mulholland (August 6, 1987); Lady Face (May 31, 1992); Tapia (November 13, 1992); Malibu (April 25, 1997); Morning (August 15, 1997); Malibu (September 30, 1997); Mulholland (May 22, 2002); Bulldog (July 7, 2003); Latigo (February 8, 2006); Rocky Oaks (January 17, 2007); Triunfo (May 9, 2007); Kanan (July 3, 2007); Creek (August 1, 2007); Triunfo (June 4, 2008); and Malibu (July 4, 2008).^{14,15}

Structures in the Cornell Planning Unit have a variable age-class. Older structures tend to be wooden. Newer structures generally are constructed of stucco, plaster, or masonry. A large mobile home park is located at Seminole Hot Springs. Most homes, regardless of age, have wooden decks and/or fences. Mature, lush, and tall ornamental

⁹ Robert McLaughlin, Malibou Lake Mountain Club, personal communication, 2004.

¹⁰ US Environmental Protection Agency – Region 9 (March 2003), Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for Nutrients – Malibu Creek Watershed.

¹¹ County of Los Angeles, Board of Supervisors (October 26, 2004), Meeting transcript.

¹² County of Los Angeles, Department of Regional Planning (2003), Santa Monica Mountains North Area Plan, Significant Ridgelines Map [Data].

¹³ M. Picarella (August 12, 2004), “County says Malibou Lake emergency access problem is solved,” *The Acorn*.

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

¹⁵ Mike Davis (1998), “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn.” In *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Henry Holt), pp. 93–147.

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vegetation is found around structures in most of this unit and predominates in the older areas. Several single-family homes throughout the unit are gated. Utilities are aboveground. Homes built in the last few years are those in the planning unit that are constructed to current California WUI Fire and Building Standards.¹⁶

Municipal water supply for the Cornell planning unit is from Las Virgenes Municipal Water District.¹⁷ Mandatory water conservation and enforcement measures were established in 2009. The district has one emergency 9,500-acre-foot back-up reservoir.¹⁸ Enchanto, Malibou, and Seminole lakes historically have been used to augment the domestic water supply during emergencies. Siltation poses threats to water-holding capacity and water quality of these lakes.^{19,20}

Los Angeles County Fire Station #65 is located on Cornell Road in the Wagon Road neighborhood. Station #89 is located on Canwood Drive near the junction of Kanan Dume Road and the Ventura Freeway.

The Malibou Lake community is currently organizing a Fire Safe Council (FSC). A board is formed, a community survey designed, and records of historic fire-safe activities are being exchanged with former community leaders and the FSC board.^{21,22} The Malibou Lake Emergency Response and Preparedness Program organizes and plans for various possible scenarios in the community.²³ Two vegetation management projects were conducted to date in the



Cornell unit. A 450-acre vegetation management project was completed by California State Parks and Los Angeles County Fire Department at Malibu Creek State Park to enhance native plant populations and eliminate non-native species while creating increased fire protection for the park and City of Malibu.²⁴ Malibu Lakeside Homeowners Association collaborated with Los Angeles County Fire Department Forestry Division utilizing a federal grant managed by California Fire Safe Council to selectively remove mature eucalyptus and pine trees primarily from private properties in 2004.²⁵

¹⁶ State of California, Building Standards Commission, www.bsc.ca.gov (accessed February 8, 2010).

¹⁷ Las Virgenes Municipal Water District (2010), District Map [Data], www.lvmwd.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=838.

¹⁸ Las Virgenes Municipal Water District (2010), www.lvmwd.com.

¹⁹ Robert McLaughlin, Malibou Lake Mountain Club, personal communication, 2004.

²⁰ US Environmental Protection Agency – Region 9 (March 2003), Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for Nutrients – Malibu Creek Watershed.

²¹ Debbie Larson, Malibou Lake Fire Safe Council, personal communication, March 2010.

²² Julie Ringwood, Malibou Lake Fire Safe Council, personal communication, March 2010.

²³ Malibou Lake Emergency Response and Preparedness Program (ML-ERPP), Operations Committee (2009), Draft Malibou Lake Citizen Volunteer Team Emergency Plan.

²⁴ Los Angeles County Fire Department, Forestry Division (2010), “Vegetation management projects,” www.fire.lacounty.gov/forestry/vegetationmanagement_projects.asp.

²⁵ Murray Sumner, Past President, Malibu Lakeside Homeowners Association, personal communication, November 2009.

17.2. Cornell Evacuations

Possible impediments to emergency ingress and egress include downed power lines, trees, traffic, compromised bridges, and locked gates. Many streets in the unit are cul-de-sacs, narrow, and have little shoulder. Several venues in the Cornell Planning Unit host large groups: Malibu Creek State Park, Tapia Park, Paramount Ranch, Malibu Junction commercial and retail district, eateries and wine-tasting venues, Troutdale, horse ranches, Camp David Gonzales, Peter Strauss Ranch, Camp Keystone, Sunny Skies Day Camp, Malibou Lake Mountain Club, and Seminole Hot Springs community room. Many homes have large livestock and/or small domestic animals. There are many equine facilities that board or raise horses in the area. Two domestic animal rescue organizations are located here. Paramount Ranch's mowed open-space area along Cornell Road has the potential to be considered a safe area in this unit. The many private tennis courts and swimming pools might be options. These factors should be taken into consideration with local law enforcement and fire authorities when planning evacuations.

17.3. Cornell Community Meeting Summary

The Cornell community meeting was held at Diamond X Ranch on October 26, 2009. Eight residents and two non-residents attended.

The following assets at risk were identified at the community meeting. These can be located on Map II.17-1 at the end of this document.

FIGURE II.17-1. COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED ASSETS AT RISK

- 210-foot new bridge across Triunfo Creek (to accommodate fire trucks)
- Beach/fishing at the dam
- Canyon Grill
- Commercial rock store/biker hangout
- Los Angeles County Fire Department Station #65
- Malibou Lake
- Malibou Lake Mountain Club Clubhouse
- National Park Service Fire Station Engine 73 and Engine 74
- Paramount Ranch
- Peter Strauss Ranch
- Public Works Yard
- Reagan Ranch
- Road / Caltrans maintenance yard
- Rocky Oaks
- Seminole Hot Springs Community Center
- The Old Place
- Troutdale Farm



17.3.1. 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.17-1 at the end of this document.

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FIGURE II.17-2. CORNELL COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED PROJECTS

IDENTIFIED ITEM DESCRIPTION	PROPOSED PROJECT CATEGORY	PRIORITY RANK
Wildfire notification/communication program – “Real time” (like Twitter) with radio and/or phone tree	Emergency Preparedness	1
Cooperative fuel-reduction project where private/public land meet at Malibou Lake	Fuel Reduction	1
Map book for incoming fire resources	Fire Protection	
Upgrade vents program as incentive/grant	Hardening Homes	
Appoint a State Park liaison assigned to community –Malibou Lake and Lakeside	Policy	
Disaster program response guide (all emergencies)	Education / Preparedness	
Relocate recreational vehicle camping proposed for Reagan Ranch by involving state decision makers	Risk Reduction	
Coordinate and create safe areas within community	Evacuation	
Malibou Lake/Lakeside, Lobo, Mulholland Corridor, Triunfo, Cornell, Seminole Hot Springs Fire Safe Council created/expanded	Fire Safe Council	
Eucalyptus and Arundo (giant reed) eradication program	Fuel Reduction	
Fuel reduction, North Malibou Lake/Lakeside	Fuel Reduction	
Increased law presence at party spot #17	Risk Reduction	

17.4. Cornell Action Plan

The following projects are the initial priorities for community action for the Cornell Planning Unit.

- Support efforts to form a local FSC in the Malibou Lake area, and explore options for neighboring areas. 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 through a Fire Safe Council (FSC), homeowner’s association (HOA), or other community organization starting in the Malibou Lake area in priority order:
 - Along the spur roads to main evacuation roads, including Lake Vista, Lakeshore, and Crags drives, Triunfo Canyon Road, and Troutdale.
 - Near homes, especially trees that threaten more than one home, starting in the Malibou Lake and Seminole Springs areas.
 - In the interface between public and private lands, and including removal of invasive species.
 - Trees in or near power lines.
- Work through FSC and HOAs 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.²⁶ A

²⁶ 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.

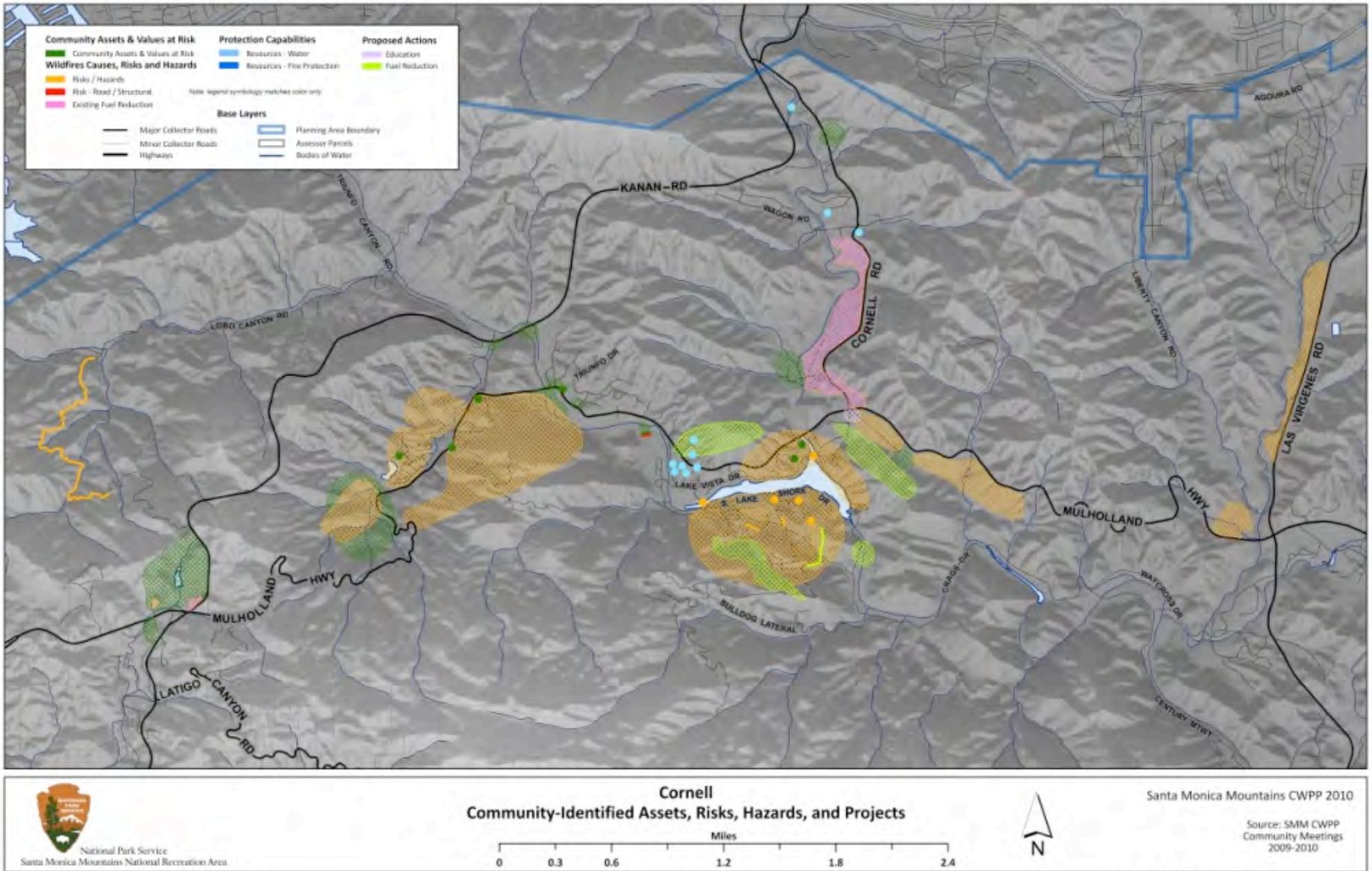
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neighborhood-organizing project would include creating off-street parking where it is limited. Neighbors can work together to help each other stay in compliance.

- Ensure that at least one team from each homeowner’s association or neighborhood undergoes Community Emergency Response Team training (CERT). This is the venue to begin organizing locally for evacuation planning, including local emergency communication (e.g. Twitter and other social networking options, as well as local phone trees), 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 public land management agencies to help with Arson Watch in local parks and other public lands during Red Flag weather. This could also be the vehicle to develop an open and effective communication link between State Parks and other public land management agencies and local residents.
- 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 fire.
- Work through the new FSC or 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.
- 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 organization to develop a local evacuation plan. Efforts should be made to ensure that local gates are open or accessible during Red Flag conditions.

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MAP II.17-1. CORNELL: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED ASSETS, RISKS, HAZARDS, AND PROJECTS²⁷



²⁷ This map prints best at 11x17. Visit to www.forevergreenforestry.com/smmcwpp_pub.html to download a print version.