

Regional Approaches to Urban Interface Problems: the Bay Area Wildfire Forum¹

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Abstract: Fire agencies throughout the San Francisco Bay Area formed a grassroots organization to influence a firesafe environment. The Bay Area Wildfire Forum (BAWF) was organized in 1992 to coordinate wildland fire training while promoting and encouraging further activities regarding wildland firefighting and fire prevention.

The Bay Area Wildlife Forum (BAWF) has sponsored, organized, and instructed four live fire training burns in the last 2 years. Hundreds of student firefighters learned to control, suppress, and survive a wildland fire. Also, a newsletter is circulated every other month to provide a valuable means of interagency communication. This has never before occurred within Bay Area fire departments. BAWF attributes its success to regional coordination, cooperation, and participation.

The San Francisco Bay Area has fast developed a fire history like that of southern California. The problems include years of drought, an oppressed vegetative fuel load, and the building of homes in the once undeveloped wildlands. Bay Area fire departments, already stretched thin by staggering budget cuts, have recognized that they can no longer handle these problems alone.

After the Tunnel Road Fire of October 1991, several Bay Area firefighters discussed the problems they were facing with today's wildfires. Most departments were experiencing problems with staffing levels. Different equipment, technology, procedures, terminology, and radio frequencies have created operational nightmares. They recognized the need for fire departments throughout the Bay Area to network on a regular basis.

Thus a grassroots organization, the Bay Area Wildfire Forum (BAWF), was formed. The bi-monthly meetings are hosted by a different fire agency. An educational presentation is given, followed by a roundtable discussion, and then the host fire department presents its agency's wildland firefighting program.

BAWF has made available to all member departments a cadre of highly skilled wildland firefighting instructors. In light of today's budgetary belt tightening, this is an invaluable resource. BAWF will also provide assistance to communities that want to develop a pre-suppression plan by designating the high-risk areas in the community and developing a written

report. The plan can outline the local streets, fire hydrants, back-up water supplies, command post locations, staging areas, designated radio frequencies, helicopter landing zones, evacuation areas, etc. BAWF has established an excellent library of educational books, pamphlets, slides, and videos. Additionally, BAWF has a speakers' bureau for public speaking engagements in community organizations and schools.

It is the vision of the Bay Area Wildfire Forum that, one day, all the Bay Area fire departments will have a working knowledge of each other's organization and a sustained commitment by each organization to educate their community and enforce a wildfire hazard reduction program.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Bay Area Wildfire Forum is to provide for a broad base of support for speaking with a unified voice influencing a firesafe environment throughout the Bay Area and surrounding communities; to provide, through cooperation, practical and usable technology on an outreach basis; to assist the general public, planners, and governing bodies in implementing firesafe practices; to coordinate wildland fire training and fire safety activities; and to provide a model for agency cooperation and leadership to other areas of the state and country, which are examples of the progress that can be achieved through local, State, private, and Federal cooperation.

Goals

- To provide a forum for a group of local, state, private, and federal fire agencies who all have a common interest in the advancement and promotion of wildland fire control, training, and prevention.
- To promote and encourage standardization in wildland fire control.
- To promote and sponsor wildland training throughout the Bay Area.
- To promote enhanced interagency communications.
- To be a resource center for wildland public education and wildland fire prevention materials.
- To promote pre-fire suppression planning throughout the Bay Area.
- To remain available to anyone interested in the promotion of wildfire interagency cooperation and training.
- To sponsor the construction of a wildland fire simulator.

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Accomplishments

BAWF has more than 50 member agencies and a handful of individuals. BAWF has the full support and endorsement of the California State Fire Marshall, California State Board of Fire Services, eight of the nine Bay Area County Fire Chief and County Training Officers Associations.

Being a grassroots organization, BAWF has recognized the necessity to bring aboard a group of individuals who, based on their experience, can assist the command staff in avoiding "reinventing the wheel" and other common mistakes that new organizations are prone to make. This advisory board is composed of Dan Coffman, State Board of Fire Services (SBFS); Mike Vonada, SBFS; Chief Mike Bradley, Hayward Fire Department; Battalion Chief Mike Martin, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection; Battalion Chief Bobby Dixon, Milpitas Fire Department; John Ackerman, Publisher, American Fire Journal; and Chief Douglas Sporleder, Santa Clara County Central Fire District.

Live Fire Training Burns

BAWF is most proud of its success with live fire training burns. It has sponsored, organized and instructed four live fire training burns in the past 2 years. Hundreds of students learned to control, suppress and survive wildland fires while under controlled live fire situations. Student firefighters were placed inside a tent shelter, and the fuel around them was burned. This simulated the heat, smoke, and sounds that one would encounter if forced to deploy their fire shelter.

In June 1993, firefighters from four counties participated in a 110-acre training burn. Representatives from two other counties were on hand to observe the exercise, gather information and report back to their respective agencies. The local media was invited to participate in the activities. The media attended a survival course, developed by BAWF, to give the media the tools needed to survive a wildland fire incident.

Communications

A newsletter is written, published, and circulated by the members and distributed every other month. This provides pertinent interagency information regarding training, prevention, and political and organizational facts. Included are training tidbits, meeting minutes, and other essential information. This has proven to be a valuable means of interagency communications that has never before occurred within the Bay Area fire departments.

Conclusion

The Bay Area Wildfire Forum is committed to raising the level of service, increasing efficiency, and maintaining interagency cooperation. Total support and participation by its member departments will be the only means by which goals will be accomplished. It is our hope that egos can be set aside so agencies will talk and begin to walk side-by-side. Many agencies have taken the first step, to endorse and support our organization. The next step is to get involved, assist with change, take a chance, and stake ownership so the same message can be sent to the public, lawmakers, and our firefighters.