

# Best practices

Disaster Mitigation Working in California



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## Ojai Community Builds Wildfire Resilience

**Ventura County, CA** Since its founding in 1874 the beautiful town of Ojai, ringed by rugged mountains and steep chaparral-covered canyons, has been threatened with destruction at least nine times. The Wheeler and Day Fires in 1985 and 2006 burned over 280,000 acres and destroyed homes and other structures near the town. The Ojai community placed a bronze plaque to express gratitude for the heroism of firefighters who successfully battled the Wheeler Fire during extremely dangerous conditions.

Those experiences brought an awareness of vulnerability, along with a determination to become a wildfire resilient community. Ojai Valley residents realized that awareness and vigilance alone would not suffice. To develop a plan of action a group of fire professionals, educators, insurance experts, homeowner associations and others formed the Ojai Valley Fire Safe Council (OVFSC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting wildfire safety through education and action. Since 2000, the OVFSC has successfully managed over \$1 million in federally funded grants; performed extensive vegetation management in key high-fire hazard zones in the Ojai Valley area; conducted extensive education programs for schools, homeowners, farmers, ranchers and landscape professionals; held its innovative Wildfire Safety Fair every two



years; developed high-quality online resources; and built strong effective partnerships with the USDA Forest Service, Ventura County Fire Protection District, City of Ojai, County of Ventura, Ventura County Sheriff Department, Ventura County Resource Conservation District and others.

The board of directors and advisory council have been able to effectively engage and coordinate with other agencies, organizations, volunteers and citizens to accomplish significant risk reduction. The OVFSC is working on expanding community planning and efforts with a focus on working from the home outward and, drawing from the lessons learned from previous fires, in preparing communities to live safely and sustainably in a fire-prone environment - before, during and after a fire.

The large Thomas Fire tested the

years of Ojai Valley preparation and planning. Extremely hot, dry and windy conditions caused that fire to grow and move with incredible speed. Readiness and detailed evacuations plans were critically important, since the two-lane county egress roads can be overwhelmed by traffic. Fortunately, the wind direction during the Thomas Fire spared the City of Ojai the fate of Paradise, California, but this lesson has not been lost on the Ojai Valley community. The Woolsey Fire in 2018 served up a harsh reminder to the Ojai Valley community that the new normal is a year-long fire season and that wildfire is a constant, unending threat.

The OVFSC's "whole community" approach has brought real progress. Individuals, families, business owners, ranchers, farmers, landscape professionals and others are all involved. Thanks to successful wildfire safety fairs and other outreach

efforts, people are developing or refining their safety, communication, and evacuation plans. The OVFSC's grant-funded projects have provided equipment and direct aid to cut back flammable vegetation and create and maintain defensible and survivable space around structures. Residents have learned how to create defensible space, build with fire-resistant materials, and retrofit older, vulnerable structures.

Chris Danch, Fire Safe Council Grants Manager and a life-long resident of the Ojai Valley, has fascinating stories to tell about the various conflagrations that have threatened the valley. The 2017 Thomas Fire alone burned 281,893 acres, destroyed 1,063, damaged 280 structures in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, and cost over \$204 million to fight. The Woolsey Fire in 2018 burned 96,949 acres and destroyed or damaged 1,643 structures in LA and Ventura counties. "We've had some close calls with fires that could have destroyed Ojai" says Danch. "We've also learned a lot of lessons about what works to reduce our risk, and what we need to do to protect lives and property."

As a homeowner in the North Fork Springs community in the mountains behind Ojai, his house was at ground zero of the Thomas Fire. In the North Fork Springs community, seven of the 21 homes were destroyed, nine more were damaged, and many other structures (a cabin, carports, garages, workshops, storage buildings, and fences) were burned completely. All but the Danch home had their water and electrical systems damaged. Most telephone poles were burned, along with burnt trees that had fallen onto

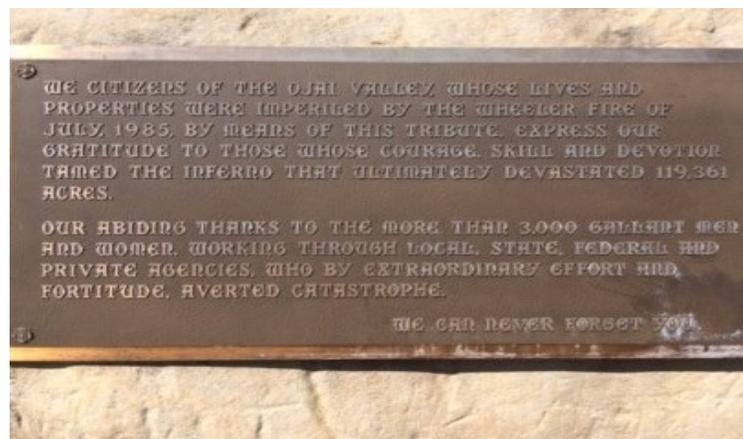
the roadway. Since the fire, Hwy 33 has closed numerous times from debris flows, and the North Fork Springs roadway has also suffered significant debris flows. A number of homes have suffered damage from debris flows after the fire.

Of the homes and other structures destroyed or damaged in his neighborhood, Chris said, "not a single one was lost from direct flame contact from burning vegetation. It was all about ember ignition or a burning house causing adjacent homes to catch fire." The Danch home was spared from the Thomas Fire because of both extensive fire clearance and structure design. When Chris and his wife Angie learned of the Thomas Fire they worked two 12-hour days fine-tuning the fire clearance and making sure that nothing flammable was near the house. That was before Chris and Angie evacuated for four weeks.

"I'm kept very busy with three

acres of weed whacking, brush clearance, tree removal, branch removal and more on our rugged little piece of land. When the fire came we moved everything outside away from the house, and we even threw the welcome mats out in the yard and left. The mats (and many other things) burned up!" The home was also built with materials that are resistant to wildfire and specifically designed with no eaves, understory or attached decking. The high ceilings mean no attic and no attic vents could invite embers.

The main message that Chris Danch and other members of the Ojai Valley Fire Safe Council want to relay is that fire safety in a high-hazard area needs to be the ongoing responsibility of all community members. Today, the scope and speed of wildland fires means that public safety agencies cannot alone fully protect our communities. Everyone needs to work together!



### In gratitude to the firefighters

#### More information:

**Ojai Valley Fire Safety Council**  
<http://firesafeojai.org/>

**California Governor's Office of Emergency Services**  
[www.caloes.gov](http://www.caloes.gov)

**National Fire Protection Association / Firewise USA**  
[www.nfpa.org](http://www.nfpa.org)