

Danger signs in the Oakland hills as wildfire risks intensify, homeowners lose insurance

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Three decades after deadly firestorms, overgrowth and dead trees have residents on edge

Admiring East Oakland from a lookout point at Joaquin Miller Park, Dale Ridsen feels right at home, having lived just a block away from an entrance to the park's 500 acres of redwood-laden open space his whole life.

But he easily recalls a day nearly 32 years ago when, instead of city streets, all anyone could see from that observation point was a blanket of black smoke emanating from the tragic 1991 Oakland Hills firestorm, which killed 25 people and consumed more than 3,000 homes.

Three decades later, thousands still reside in the hills, and it's a favorite local spot among hikers and cyclists. But for Ridsen, the trauma of the fire — and fear of history repeating itself — loom large, as it does in other areas of increasingly high fire risk as the consequences of climate change continue to intensify.

"I stay here in Oakland because I love this park," Ridsen said. "But I'm getting so worried the risks need to be addressed faster."

Fire risks are nothing new in forested regions, with parks across Oakland in need of regular maintenance to mitigate the threats. At Joaquin Miller, though, they seem particularly dangerous to its longtime community stewards.

Unpruned vegetation from fallen, dead trees are a common sight along Joaquin Miller's trails and paths, especially Sanborn Drive at the park's east end. If it isn't entangled branches and limbs, it's dead

stumps.

Much of it is due to years of overgrowth by invasive acacia trees, which along with non-native eucalyptus contain oils, resins and saps that are more flammable than those of native redwoods and oaks.

The realities of climate change appear to have entered a new chapter these past few years, with a wide range of scientists noting that, going forward, hotter and drier conditions will be expected in more years than not.

Insurance providers have caught on across California, they are dropping fire coverage. For homes in the wooded Oakland Hills, such as those on Skyline Boulevard that are wedged between Joaquin Miller and Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park, the risks of losses are simply too great. Many residents have lost their home insurance, too.

“There’s no question that the cost and scarcity of insurance options in rural and forested areas are impacting home sales,” said Amy Bach, the executive director of United Policyholders, a nonprofit founded in the Bay Area that advocates for insurance customers.

Fire department officials conduct thousands of safety inspections at homes each year, while community groups are helping teach property owners how to defend their lots from spreading flames.

But if a fast-moving blaze were to strike, officials say there wouldn’t be many escape routes for some of these residents.

In May, the fire department installed 10 wildfire sensors around Oakland, as part of a free two-year pilot program. The city will invest further in the sensors if officials determine that it’s effective.

Around the turn of the decade, city officials developed a vegetation management plan to broadly curb wildfire dangers around Oakland. It cleared an environmental review in 2021, but two years later it still awaits City Council approval.

Even without it, Oakland Fire spokesperson Michael Hunt said, the city has “the most comprehensive fire prevention effort in the state, especially at the volume we do it.”

Most park-goers, for instance, are familiar with the thousands of goats deployed through outside contracts, and herded mostly by Peruvian migrants that feast all day on dried thistle, occasionally looking up from behind waist-high fencing to make serene eye contact with human hikers and dogs.

Once upon a time, the goats were paid for by a tax district in the Oakland Hills, where enough homeowners in 1992 — a year after the devastating hills firestorm — agreed that preventing another disaster was worth \$65 a year.

But the momentum had died off by 2013 when a tax renewal measure failed by 62 votes. Leftover money will continue funding the grazing livestock until the long-awaited vegetation management plan puts more public money into the cause.

Some, like Ridsen, who know intimately the brutality of wildfires also perceive in others an unacceptable lack of urgency. He ended up buying his parents' house near Joaquin Miller, where he serves on a "friends of the park" environmental advocacy group.

When the city's vegetation management plan was under development, one of its most vocal critics was Sue Piper, who lost a home to the 1991 hills fire and subsequently became Oakland's most well-known wildfire prevention activist. "We're just frustrated, and frankly, disappointed, that the solutions have taken so long," Piper said.

When Piper and her husband, Gordon, moved to Oregon in early 2022, they quickly found out their neighbors had spent almost no time building community awareness of wildfire danger. Oakland, by contrast, has the Firesafe Council, which was formed in 2016 and holds local seminars about defensible space — cleaning gutters of pine needles, safe storage of propane, the hazards of floating embers. Thirty years after the hills fire, some residents need the crash course.

"It's particularly concerning that there are a lot of new people who have moved in and who may not understand the risks," said Doug Mosher, who sits on the council.

On a recent walk through Joaquin Miller Park, he and Ridsen — who devotes most of his time to the park's well-being — were deep in conversation about the various sights. There's a lot to see: a small "pyramid to Moses" with mysterious origins, a historic former funeral pyre, a stone monument built by Joaquin

Miller himself.

As a cool breeze swept up the road, Mosher's attention refocused on the immediate topic at hand. These westerly winds, he explained, would blow a hypothetical wildfire back into the park, potentially torching the park's offerings in its path.

But hot Diablo winds would, as they did in 1991, usher a blaze out toward the surrounding communities, and even potentially — in a scenario more commonly seen as global wildfires rage faster, and for longer — down into the city below.