

[Firewise leaders push for regional emergency preparedness](#)

The Acorn

More than 150 wildfire preparedness leaders, residents and fire safety professionals from across Southern California gathered in Calabasas May 9 for a regional Firewise Leader workshop focused on helping neighborhoods better prepare for increasingly severe wildfire seasons.

The gathering at the Calabasas Community Center invited Firewise community volunteers, public safety officials, wildfire mitigation experts and insurance advocates to share strategies aimed at reducing wildfire risk and strengthening community resilience.

Coming just prior to this week's almost 1,400-acre Simi Valley Sandy fire, the event was co-hosted by the Calabasas Firewise team and the Santa Monica Mountains Fire Safe Council. Participants included volunteers from EPIC-FSC (Emergency Preparedness in Calabasas—Fire Safe Council), along with representatives from fire-related agencies, technology companies and community organizations from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara counties.

The Firewise USA program is a national wildfire-preparedness initiative that has become especially prominent throughout fire-prone Southern California, and organizers said the workshop was designed to educate and empower local leaders with practical tools and strategies they can use in their own neighborhoods.

Approximately 70 to 80 personnel attended, along with some 50 industry stakeholders, Fire Safe Council representatives and companies involved in fire technology, geographic information systems, fire prevention and fire suppression, organizers said.

Fire Safe councils are grassroots organizations under the Firewise umbrella that work with residents to protect homes, communities and surrounding open space from catastrophic wildfire.

Local efforts include promoting defensible space, home hardening and coordination among residents and fire agencies.

“The level of engagement we saw today is exactly what’s needed,” said Brian Cameron, president of EPIC-FSC.

“Wildfire preparedness is most effective when communities come together, share knowledge, and act at the neighborhood level. That’s how we create real, lasting impact” Cameron said.

Throughout the day, speakers emphasized practical approaches to wildfire mitigation, including vegetation management, home hardening, defensible space and the process of creating and maintaining Firewise Communities. Discussions also focused on the importance of neighbor-to-neighbor collaboration, which officials said is among the most effective ways to reduce wildfire risk in fire-prone communities.

Peter Fehler, a wildfire mitigation consultant and one of the event organizers, said the workshop was intended to encourage residents to move from awareness to action.

“This workshop is about equipping people with the tools and confidence to take action,” Fehler said. “The more communities that step up to become Firewise, the stronger and more resilient our entire region becomes.”

Speakers included Michele Steinberg, wildfire division director for the National Fire Protection Association, who traveled from Boston to discuss national wildfire mitigation efforts and the Firewise USA program. Steinberg highlighted the role that organized neighborhood action can play in reducing wildfire losses.

Anthony Marrone, chief of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, discussed the scale and complexity of wildfire response across a region that includes more than 4.1 million residents in 60 cities and 120 unincorporated communities.

Assistant Fire Chief Drew Smith spoke about wildfire behavior, fuel management and operational strategies in areas including the Santa Monica Mountains, stressing the importance of proactive planning and interagency coordination.

And Capt. Dustin Carr of the Los Angeles County Sheriff 's Department addressed evacuation coordination, public safety and communication among agencies and residents during wildfire emergencies.

Insurance and wildfire recovery were also major topics of discussion.

Amy Bach, executive director and co-founder of United Policyholders, traveled from San Francisco to speak about insurance preparedness, claims and recovery planning. An insurance panel also included Julia Svetlana Juarez, deputy insurance commissioner for community relations and outreach, and Victor Joseph, president and chief operating officer of Mercury Insurance.

Organizers said the workshop reinforced a central message that wildfire preparedness depends on collective community action rather than individual efforts alone.

The turnout reflected growing concern across the region as wildfire seasons become longer and more destructive, organizers said. Leaders at the event encouraged more neighborhoods to pursue Firewise recognition and expand public education efforts throughout the region.

The workshop concluded with a common message from participants and organizers: The most effective wildfire protection begins at the neighborhood level, with communities working together to prepare before disasters occur.