Hillside Fire Safety Group Potluck
Henry DeNero Remarks
October 2, 2022

Welcome to all our neighbors, elected officials and fire fighters. We have with us today, Vice Mayor **Kate Harrison**, City Councilmembers **Rigel Robinson** and **Sophie Hahn**, and Interim Fire Chief **David Sprague** along with several members of his team.

We formed the Hillside Fire Safety Group (HFSG) in 2021 under the 30-year-old Hillside Association of Berkeley (HAB) to focus on fire safety. HAB and HFSG have 15 board members and leaders. We seek to represent the interests of about 2,500 homeowners and renters, including students, professors, and even some monks and priests.

Our first president, **Pam Gleason**, got us started and had the idea to ask the UC Berkeley student service organizations to volunteer in our clean ups. We now have 15 leaders who meet monthly to plan our activities. I took the job this year so Pam could write a book. I'm a retired corporate executive with experience in what Corporate-America calls "Enterprise Risk Management"- focusing on the risks that threaten the whole enterprise.

Our primary focus is to clean up under and then remove and replace the eucalyptus trees in northeast Berkeley. We also support evacuation planning, but we are mostly focused on the eucs.

<u>Why the eucalyptus?</u>

All trees will burn in an intense fire. But from a fire risk perspective the eucalyptus is far more hazardous than any other species.

- Its oil-impregnated leaves and bark are highly flammable.
- It produces 10 times the debris of a Live Oak.
- It has the unique ability to burn up the trunk into the canopy.
- And in a firestorm, treetops literally explode, sending flaming "torches," as the foresters call them, into the wind.

The eucalyptus is the only fuel that can drive a catastrophic firestorm in Berkeley.

We know this from research gathered by one of our leaders, **Nancy Gillette[1].** Nancy holds a PhD in Forestry from UC Berkeley and spent 30 years as a researcher with the US Forest Service. We have also confirmed the science with UC Berkeley Professor Emeritus of Forestry **Joe McBride[2]**.

And we know this from experience. It has happened in Australia. And it happened in Oakland. The eucalyptus is the elephant in the room. Those who think the eucalyptus is no more hazardous than other species are simply not following the science.

A great man I once knew described leadership as the ability to define reality. We all have a duty to understand this reality and act accordingly.

By our count, there are 1,550 eucalyptus trees in northeast Berkeley, including along our boundary with the university and Berkeley Lab on those properties.

- Roughly two hundred are divided between City of Berkeley property and the Zaytuna College campus at the top of Marin Avenue.

- Another 800 are on approximately 125 private residential lots, almost all of which are in just 10 groves.

- And 550 are in 6 groves along the UC Berkeley and Berkeley Lab boundary. We call these groves “The Line of Fire” because they form a perfect east-west line from Tilden Park deep into our neighborhood just two blocks from here.

All 1,550 of these trees are directly behind us, less than a mile from this location.

[1] See “Blue Gum Eucalyptus and Fire: Selected Publications” compiled by Nancy Gillette, Ph.D. (Forest Entomology, U.C. Berkeley 1987) on HFSG Website (link)

[2] See “The failure of planning to address the urban interface and intermix fire-hazard problems in the San Francisco Bay Area, ” International Journal of Wildland Fire, by Joe R. McBride and Jerry Kent, January 7, 2019

There are more eucalyptus groves inside Berkeley Lab, the Berkeley campus, and Tilden Park. But our top focus is the eucs inside the neighborhood because it is these trees that will carry a firestorm deep into the city.

What is the Risk We Are Trying to Prevent?

Here is only one catastrophic fire scenario in Berkeley, a fire in the eucalyptus canopy in Diablo winds.

- o A hot Diablo wind is blowing from east to west at 30 MPH.
- o A fire on the ground climbs into a canopy, or a canopy is ignited by "torches" from Tilden Park.
- o Wherever it starts, this quickly turns into a full-fledged firestorm in the canopies of multiple eucalyptus groves.
- o The fire moves west at 100 feet/second and sends tons of flaming torches over a mile ahead as treetops explode along the fire's edge.
- o This rain of fire ignites dozens or perhaps hundreds of houses and buildings.
- o Once enough structures are burning, it is the buildings that drive the fire, unchecked row-by-row, block-to-block.
- o Throughout most of the fire, our firefighters can only help with the evacuation.

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Although important in mitigating many fire risks, none of our other fire safety measures will prevent or stop this fire.

- o If it comes from Tilden Park, the firebreak along Grizzly Peak Boulevard doesn't work as the torches blow right over it.
- o The Red Curbing and Undergrounding are of only limited benefit in a full-fledged firestorm, as thousands of people abandon their vehicles

and flee on foot, clogging the streets. Those who are not able remain in their cars and homes, many of whom perish.

- Even our home hardening efforts are not fully effective at stopping this type of fire, as rows of burning houses carry the fire block-to-block.

- This is not to say that we should not take the above fire safety measures. But in this worst case scenario, they will not prevent a catastrophe.

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When the fire ends it has destroyed an area a mile wide and all the way to the railroad tracks.

- The Apple Store on Fourth Street is gone, and everything in between.

- Hundreds of people have died, and property damage is in the tens of billions.

- Berkeley's housing crisis is now a housing catastrophe.

- And the impacts are disproportionately felt by the poorest among us. A study done by **Gradiva Cousin** for the Fire Department several years ago on housing impacts projects this[3]. As happened after Hurricane Katrina, there is a migration of our poorest Berkeleyans out of the city. _____

This is not a theoretical or hysterical scenario. It has happened and the science supports the role of the eucalyptus in fueling such a fire. It has happened in Australia, and it happened in Oakland in 1991, the Tunnel Fire that killed 25 people and destroyed over 3,000 homes. And the Tunnel Fire could have been much worse had the wind not shifted and had our valiant firefighters not saved the Claremont Hotel. If the hotel had burned, it could have fueled the fire down Ashby Avenue, perhaps all the way to the Bay. With many more eucalyptus trees and more limited escape routes, conditions in northeast Berkeley today are far more dangerous than they were in south Berkeley in 1991.

[3] See Gradiva Couzin, "BRIEF: Impact and Risks to Berkeley's Housing Stock from Earthquake and Wildfire," December 1, 2018 (link)

This is not a "Hills Problem." It is a problem for all of Berkeley – the city and the

university.

What Is Being Done about this threat?

There is progress.

Our group has removed an estimated 50 tons of highly flammable eucalyptus debris from the understory of 4 groves over the last 2 years. This cleanup involves removing low limbs and saplings, stripping the loose bark off the eucalyptus trees 10 feet up from the ground, and removing all flammable leaves, branches and fallen bark from the understory. This "Healthy Forest Operation" prevents a fire on the ground from climbing into the canopy where the real danger lies.

- o We did this on 15 Sundays with a handful of our leaders, one chainsaw operator, yours truly, and over 300 UC Berkeley student volunteers.

- o Berkeley Lab and dozens of residents granted access to their properties, some joining the cleanup.

- o And the City provided its green bin service without charge.

But we estimate there is still 250 to 500 tons of flammable material under the Eucs in leaves, fallen bark, low branches, and saplings.

Assistant Fire Chief and head of the Wildlands-Urban-Interface (WUI) division of our fire department **Dan Green** toured one of the areas we had cleaned up and commented that he could now suppress a fire on the ground without the danger of it igniting the canopy. His observation emphasizes the importance of completing this cleanup in the remaining eucalyptus groves.

In addition to our efforts, Zaytuna College recently removed 50 eucalyptus trees from its campus and intends to remove the remaining 100 when it receives an expected $250,000 grant.

And Berkeley's Department of Parks & Recreation recently removed 25 eucalyptus trees from city parks and rights-of-way and plans to remove more.

And Berkeley Lab now intends to replace all 1,500 of the eucalyptus trees on its

campus with a $2.9 million grant it has just received from CalFire, including 150 of the 550 in The Line of Fire.

And finally, Interim Fire Chief **Sprague** and Parks & Recreation Director **Scott Ferris** are working together to develop a program to clean up the remaining understory on private property.

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While the above actions represent significant progress, they are not yet enough to prevent a catastrophic firestorm in the eucalyptus canopy. If all these actions are taken, we will still have the 800 eucalyptus trees on private properties, 400 of the 550 in The Line of Fire, and some remaining on city property. Those inside Berkeley Lab would be gone, but most of the trees in the neighborhood, Tilden Park and the UC Campus would remain.

What Should Our City and University Leaders Still Do?

First and foremost, we need the City to clean up the remainder of the understory of the 800 eucalyptus trees on private property; then remove them, selectively replacing them with Live Oak or other low fire-risk species. The way to do this quickly and equitably is with Measure FF, the money we approved for disaster and fire safety. If this doesn't qualify, what does?

The cleanup phase will cost only a few hundred thousand dollars and can be done in a matter of months with a combination of tree and landscape contractors. Once approved and begun, the 800 eucalyptus trees on private property could be removed in just two years by tree contractors at an estimated cost of $1.8 to $3.6 million. This is only a fraction of the $17 million in tax dollars coming from Measure FF over just two years. And Measure FF funds will continue to flow to the City to the tune of $8.5 million per year indefinitely[4].

For a precedent, we need only to look across the Bay. Marin County is using taxpayer money to remove hazardous vegetation from most of the county, and mostly on private property.

[4] More information on Berkeley's Measure FF can be found on the BallotPedia website.

Our city leaders should follow suit as quickly as possible. And UC Berkeley should

act with equal urgency.

What Can You All Do as Individuals?

There are several things that each of us can do.

- o First, have a personal and neighborhood evacuation plan.
- o Know your exit routes, by car and on foot if you're able.
- o If you aren't, arrange now who will get you out. 911 will not be there for you when the fire starts.
- o Organize a plan with 10-20 of your neighbors, including who will help those who need it.
- o Decide in advance if you will leave during an "Extreme Fire Danger" alert as the Fire Department recommends, and where you will go if you depart.
- o Get AC Alert on your smartphone[5].
- o Prepare an evacuation Go Bag. Be ready to leave in 5 minutes.

A sample evacuation and notification plan has been prepared by our Hill Court neighbors and is available on the Hillside Fire Safety Group website. www.berkeleyhillsidefiresafety.org.

Second, as always, we need money. We have raised over $17,000 from community donations over the past two years, including one $3,000 and several $1,000 donations. We pay a $500 honorarium to each student service organization who recruits 15 or more of their members to help in the cleanup. We will use our remaining funds this year to complete 6 more clean ups. Please make your 2023 donations now. Our Treasurer, Cynthia Chen, will tell you how[6].

[5] See City of Berkeley website https://berkeleyca.gov/safety-health/disaster-preparedness/emergency-notifications for details

[6] More information on the HFSG website https://www.berkeleyhillsidefiresafety.org/donations

And finally, write to ask our city and university leaders to remove the eucalyptus

threat from our city. Ask them to eliminate Berkeley's greatest fire risk. We know they agree, but we need action as soon as possible; BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

Thank you.