



## HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATIONS AS PROMISING STRUCTURES FOR WILDFIRE RISK REDUCTION

### THE HAWKEN AND CAUGHLIN FIRES IN CAUGHLIN RANCH, NEVADA

FACT SHEET 1 • SUMMER 2014

**L**ocal organizations can play a prominent role in wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery. The Caughlin Ranch community experienced two destructive fires—the Hawken Fire in 2007 and the Caughlin Fire in 2011—which together burned a total of 4,645 acres. Both fires resulted in neighborhood evacuations, and the Caughlin Fire produced significant damage to homes in a nearby subdivision. The Caughlin Ranch Homeowners Association is a major community-level organization that plays a substantial role in regulating landscapes, building materials, and appropriate development in the Caughlin Ranch community. It operates within the context of other local, state, and national organizations, all of which play a role in fire response and risk mitigation. This case demonstrates the potential for homeowners associations to incentivize risk mitigation in wildfire-prone communities by assuming greater responsibility for wildfire protection in development and maintenance codes, covenants, and restrictions.

#### COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Caughlin Ranch is a subdivision located on the western fringe of Reno, NV. Native desert scrub vegetation, including rabbitbrush and sagebrush, extends throughout the community, but the neighborhood also contains many planted trees, watered lawns, ponds, and walking paths. Many residents feel strong place attachment and value the park-like landscape as a contrast to the surrounding desert environment, but some fail to see how the presence and layout of this vegetation can contribute to wildfire risk.

A number of different organizations have roles and responsibilities related to fire preparedness and safety in and around Caughlin Ranch, including the City of Reno Fire Department, Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District, the University of Nevada-Reno Cooperative Extension (via their “Living With Fire” project), and the Caughlin Ranch Homeowners Association (HOA). The HOA is particularly influential given its authority to shape the physical condition of individual properties and the community as a whole. Since the earliest days of the subdivision in the 1980s, HOA Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs) have required homeowners to plant and maintain evergreen trees and shrubs on their properties. While this policy contributed to the verdant setting for which Caughlin Ranch is locally famous, it also created



a potential fire hazard throughout the community. Other CC&Rs are better suited to fire safety, including a rule that prohibit wood shake roofing materials (a major fire risk factor); however, until recently the process required to remove existing vegetation remained onerous. Existing CC&Rs also require split wood fencing around every property and in common areas, further adding to potential fire danger. These examples demonstrate the power of CC&Rs to either improve or negate fire preparedness in communities with prominent HOAs.

### THE HAWKEN AND CAUGHLIN FIRES

The Hawken Fire burned from July 16-24<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Originating from construction work occurring in a neighborhood of Caughlin Ranch, the blaze spread through scrub vegetation on Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and private lands west of the community. Although no structures were destroyed, the fire necessitated several neighborhood evacuations and road closures. In total, the fire burned 2,710 acres and cost 3.2 million dollars to suppress.

The Caughlin Fire ignited when a power line hit a tree on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Exceptionally windy conditions contributed to significant damage in the first few hours, but responders were able to contain the fire completely by November 22<sup>nd</sup>. Over 4,000 residents were evacuated, and several neighborhoods to the east and south of the community were significantly affected. As the fire burned, one resident died from a heart attack during evacuation, twenty-nine homes were demolished, and another eight were damaged. The fire burned almost 2,000 acres, the majority of which were on private land.

### AFTERMATH

The Caughlin Fire was highly publicized in the media due to the significant level of property damage it caused. A study completed by the Reno Fire Department after the fire showed that existing vegetation proximate to structures, closeness of structures to one another, wood shake roofing, and location near a canyon were associated with wildfire damage and residential home loss during the fire. Investigators concluded that defensible space creation around residences was a powerful means for reducing the risk of wildfire damage. After the fire, the Caughlin Ranch HOA responded by instituting fuel reduction efforts in common spaces throughout the community, prohibiting the use of bark mulch in landscaping, and working with the University of Nevada-Reno Cooperative Extension to provide more resident outreach and education regarding wildfire risk and preparedness. The HOA also modified their CC&Rs so that flammable vegetation could more easily be replaced by “fire-safe” plant species identified in a UNR Cooperative Extension publication. While these

are important steps toward greater fire preparedness, significant fuel loads and fire danger persist within the community, and mitigation efforts to substantially alter these conditions continue to rely on the knowledge and voluntary behavior of individual homeowners.

### LESSONS LEARNED

HOAs can have substantial impacts on community wildfire preparedness due to their ability to design and enforce rules and regulations that affect all residents. The case of Caughlin Ranch demonstrates that in landscapes prone to wildfire risk, HOAs can be powerful players in driving physical conditions and resident activities. While they must often contend with challenging tensions between community fire safety and homeowner preferences and perceptions, their central structure and authority has high potential to ultimately reduce or intensify vulnerability to wildfires in many communities.

### MOVING FORWARD

Despite successful efforts to reduce fuel loads in common spaces and nearly eliminate the use of wood shake roofing materials, dangerous vegetative fuel conditions persist throughout the community and much more work will need to be done to engage homeowners in understanding fire danger and taking proactive steps to reduce their vulnerability. It is likely that the Caughlin Ranch HOA will continue to be the most effective organization for accomplishing these efforts within the community. By strengthening its ties and working collaboratively with other community, state, federal, and academic organizations in the area, the HOA may further realize these goals.



### LEARN MORE

For more information about the project and additional publications go to:

[ewp.uoregon.edu/wfresilience](http://ewp.uoregon.edu/wfresilience)

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