



Commentary | Fuel breaks saved lives during the Camp Fire

COMMENTARY

Fuel breaks saved lives during the Camp Fire. They can spare California from future devastation

BY JOHN HAWKINS
MAY 21, 2024



Using hand tools and chain saws, firefighters from the Eel River Department of Corrections cut a line through a thick brush to contain the West Fire near Stirling City in 2008. Photo by Bill Husa, Chico Enterprise-Record

GUEST COMMENTARY WRITTEN BY



John Hawkins

John Hawkins is a retired forestry worker and a Butte County volunteer firefighter. He leads Stirling City’s Firewise USA community, which focuses on wildfire preparedness.

In the relentless battle against [wildfires in California](#), it's clear that agencies and landowners must prioritize and implement wildfire prevention measures while continuing to build and maintain [firefighting resources](#).

[Fuel breaks](#) have emerged as an effective approach to wildfire suppression, and it's vital these projects move forward expeditiously on private and public lands. If strategically placed, these areas of reduced vegetation can slow the spread of [wildfires](#), buying wildland firefighters more time to get ahead of rapidly developing wildfires.

Fuel breaks are critical buffers to protect infrastructure such as homes, roads and powerlines. When weather allows, fuel breaks can serve as an effective drop zone for aerial fire retardants. They are also a safe place for firefighters to navigate the landscape.

Fuel breaks have proven their efficacy in several instances, but to those of us who call Stirling City, home, one example is forever seared in our memory. In November 2018, the [Camp Fire](#) tragically burned over 150,000 acres, killed 85 people and destroyed over 18,000 structures – a harrowing reminder of how wildfire prevention measures can be the difference between life and death.

As the Camp Fire raged closer to our community, Cal Fire and volunteer firefighters quickly leveraged existing fuel breaks to [connect new containment lines](#), further protecting our community. The U.S. Forest Service, Butte County officials and private landowners had worked together to implement fuel breaks long before the Camp Fire tragedy, and it ultimately saved our community.

Through these proactive measures and combined quick actions, a nearby elementary school, countless homes and lives were likely spared. I personally watched an enormous DC-10 plane drop retardant on the west side of our town, directly on the shaded fuel break built only a couple of years prior by the landowner.

Our neighbors in Paradise had also completed fuel breaks and a community wildland preparedness plan. Unfortunately, due to the incredibly speed of the wildfire, their community faced catastrophic loss.

One success, though, was a fuel break installed east of Paradise Lake. The fire came up from Feather River to the ridge but slowed once it reached that shaded fuel break, making it easier to stop. That fundamental fuel break is [credited with saving upper Magalia and beyond](#).

Paradise continues to rebuild six years later, but we are all still reminded of the urgent and ongoing need for wildfire prevention measures in California. Efforts by a very capable and active Butte Fire Safe Council have helped homeowners better prepare for the possible recurrence of fire on the ridge.

READ NEXT**ECONOMY****Californians are protecting themselves from wildfire. Why is there still an insurance crisis?**by [Levi Sumagaysay](#).

Although fuel breaks may not stop wildfires entirely, they are an essential tool to slow their spread. Fuel breaks also cause wildfires to burn at lower temperatures, preserving soil composition and making regrowth efforts far more successful. Lower burn temperatures maintain the soil's cohesion, resulting in less debris contamination in our creeks and river systems, too.

For fuel breaks to be most effective, their placement across the landscape must be done in a coordinated, strategic manner. For example, the U.S. Forest Service must work with the state of California and private landowners to not only share information on the location of fuel breaks but also redouble efforts to construct fuel breaks in strategic areas that leverage existing work to protect homes and communities.

Fuel break effectiveness also hinges on continuous management. Over time, vegetation and debris can regrow in these areas where the fuels were removed, so consistent monitoring and maintenance across multiple landowners and agencies is imperative for established fuel breaks to remain viable. Maintenance of fuel breaks is done effectively using herbicide, mechanical mastication and even goat and sheep grazing.

This is another reason for state and federal lawmakers to establish long-term maintenance funding for these projects.

While fuel breaks are a crucial component of our wildfire prevention and suppression strategies, we must view them as one part of a comprehensive approach to wildfire management. Incorporating fuel breaks with fire retardants, prescribed burns and strategic community planning can maximize our ability to prevent future catastrophes.

We must arm ourselves with every potential resource.

Many Californians still remember the Camp Fire like it was yesterday, and we know all too well that tomorrow is never promised. This is why we must do everything we can to plan and implement projects that lower wildfire risks and protect our homes and properties.

[READ MORE](#)



WILDFIRES

California requires new homes to have solar panels. Should wildfire victims get a break?

APRIL 12, 2024



WILDFIRES

Drones, satellites and AI: How California fights its unpredictable wildfires with analytics

JULY 12, 2023