



“Bobcat Smoke” by sjrankin, licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/24354425@N03/50415125628>

We are students in UCLA Law’s [California Environmental Legislation and Policy Clinic](#), a course in which students work with legislative staff in the California State Legislature to advance environmental policy goals. In Fall 2020, working with staff for State Senator Henry Stern, we developed recommendations for local government efforts to manage wildfire risk.

Now, new legislation could help make proposals like ours a reality: This week, SB 85, allocating \$73 million to fund local wildfire prevention efforts, was [signed into law](#). Another bill, [SB 63](#), introduced by Senator Stern this legislative session, would enable local governments and organizations to access this funding for home hardening, public outreach and education, and vegetation management efforts, among other things.

Over the course of four months, we created a [proposal for how to allocate state resources to improve wildfire prevention and mitigation in Southern California](#) for implementation in Ventura County (dubbed the Ventura County Fire Prevention Pilot Program, or FPPP for short), designed to build upon and optimize wildfire prevention and mitigation efforts through community-driven initiatives related to home hardening, defensible space, fire area risk mapping, fuel treatment, community outreach and education, and partnership with the private sector and research institutions.

Because state-level wildfire management efforts have historically focused on wildfire suppression, the state agency primarily charged with wildfire management responsibilities, the [Department of Forestry and Fire Protection \(CalFire\)](#), [lacks](#) a strong prevention and mitigation focus, and structural barriers exist that decrease the likelihood of a shift in focus.

With sweeping statewide reform unlikely in the short term, we focused on steps that could be taken at the regional level in Southern California.

Southern California faces significant impediments to wildfire risk reduction. State funding for prevention and mitigation efforts has historically been focused on forest management in Northern California, as opposed to [chaparral and desert ecosystems](#) in Southern California. The region's meteorological conditions lead to fire mechanics that require specialized mitigation practices which differ from fire management measures utilized in other parts of the state. In addition, a patchwork of approaches to wildfire risk reduction, variability in available funding, and extensive development in high fire-risk areas contribute to the relatively low fire resilience of the region.

The local approach we proposed had the benefit of designing specific prevention and mitigation strategies to meet the needs of specific communities. Our proposal focused on a few key concepts:

- ***Creating a community-based model for home hardening and defensible space.*** Many homeowners in fire-prone areas are already required by law to harden their homes and maintain proper defensible space, but these measures are often [inadequate to fortify whole communities](#). Even one non-compliant house [can create serious risk](#), as house fires burn at extremely high temperatures, meaning an on-fire home can ignite neighboring structures regardless of whether that neighbor properly fortified itself against the wildfire. Much like the need for herd immunity in fighting a pandemic, neighborhood “herd immunity” from fire is ultimately the best way to reduce wildfire risk and keep homes that are already in compliance with home hardening and defensible space standards even safer. We proposed allocating funding toward awareness campaigns and programs to enable indigent property-owners to comply with home hardening and defensible-space requirements, establishing a funds-matching program for home hardening retrofits, and creating partnerships with third-party organizations. Our report also proposed a series of community-based measures to encourage thinning, pruning, and piling combustible biomass, including field-based workshops, fuel treatment volunteer days, and frequent chipper days.
- ***Improving existing educational resources, creating more interactive teaching tools, and increasing community engagement.*** Existing educational tools tend to

be unidirectional (e.g., PDFs, pamphlets, brochures), a style of outreach that [research has shown](#) is less effective. For this reason, the FPPP included proposals for interactive, hands-on learning tools, from smartphone apps to short courses in wildfire safety. We aimed to tap into existing community group networks to maximize impact.

- **Improving the hazard mapping system.** Existing wildfire hazard maps [are inadequate](#), and the report envisioned remaking these maps using “micro-area” level risk mapping to determine the appropriate amount of defensible space on a neighborhood scale and facilitate the development of community exit routes in the event of a wildfire.
- **Dedicating resources to developing beneficial fire management-related partnerships with the private sector and public institutions.** We imagined conducting research on all manner of subjects relevant to Southern California wildfire management, the development of better fire detection and risk mapping systems, and even a regional coordinator for the development and implementation of new wildfire technologies.

We presented our proposal to Senator Stern’s staff in November 2020 and were excited to see language in both SB 63, introduced on December 7, 2020, and in SB 85, introduced on December 16, 2020 and passed this week, consistent with the recommendations we made.

Section 8 of SB 63 updates CalFire’s existing Fire Prevention Grants program, expanding it to allow local governments and organizations (including local agencies, resource conservation districts, fire safe councils, the California Conservation Corps, certified community conservation corps, the University of California Cooperative Extension, Native American tribes, and qualified nonprofit organizations) to apply for state funding for the very kind of home hardening, public education and outreach, risk planning, and vegetation management projects we envisioned in our FPPP proposal. SB 85 provides \$73 million in funding for the Fire Prevention Grants program, meaning that these local entities will actually have access to a pool of funding to make targeted local wildfire prevention efforts a reality. And SB 85 even makes it more likely that Fire Prevention Grants money will find its way to historically underfunded Southern California by emphasizing the prioritization of grants for areas that have had a low participation rate in the program in the past. In short, these two bills provide a pathway to create precisely the programs we imagined with the FPPP.

Researching wildfire mitigation in California presented a host of unique challenges. Even gaining a strong sense of existing efforts proved a considerable task. We conducted our research during a historically severe fire season but were nonetheless able to speak with numerous experts in the field with a variety of backgrounds—the natural sciences,

firefighting, architecture, city planning, law, and grant management. Our proposal brought together ideas from different fields and reimagined how resources might be allocated to prevent wildfire in light of new understandings about wildfire risk. Now, we're excited to see the potential for local communities to improve their approaches to wildfire prevention in smart, impactful ways, strengthening their wildfire defenses with the support of the state.

Leeza Arbatman (UCLA Law '22), Michael Cohen (UCLA Law '21), and Shawna Strecker (UCLA Law '22) were students in the Fall 2020 California Legislation and Policy Clinic, and worked on this project under the supervision of Prof. Julia Stein.