

# **Wildfire Aftermath In San Diego County**

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## **Wildfires Shaping Up As Watershed Event In San Diego History**

October's vicious and wide-ranging wildfires in San Diego County took a huge toll in dollars, property and lives and now we have evidence that they also cut a wide swath through the community's psyche as well. Incredibly, more than half of the County's residents say they know someone whose house was destroyed in the fires. Getting closer to home, over a quarter have personal friends or family members who lost their home.

The survey also shows that the fires are likely to produce serious political fallout. There is an intense feeling that public officials could have reduced the damage had they been better prepared. Fifty-five percent say "a lack of preparation on the part of public officials made the fire damage worse" (36% feel strongly that way) while 32% say no reasonable amount of preparation could have lessened the damage.

Respondents were also asked what should be done to better prepare for the next wildfire and then heard a list of six options ranging from things like better communication between firefighting agencies to increasing efforts to remove dead trees and brush. Solidifying the impression that residents are "mad as hell," 32% essentially said everything on the list should be pursued despite the fact that "all of the above" was not an option given to them. Of the six options, bringing in more firefighting equipment, including aerial vehicles, tops the list with 20% focused on that.

When it comes to actually funding those options, most San Diegans seem to be saying they will approve more taxes to get it done. However, the devil is certainly in the details because, while 40% say taxes should not be raised, those favoring increased taxes are split over precisely which ones to hike. Sixteen percent say they would support raising taxes on those in fire prone areas, but 13% would rather stick tourists with the bill and another 13% believe all property taxes should increase. Adding to the complexity, 8% believe that all the taxes we mentioned should be raised to improve the County's firefighting capabilities while 6% seem to be suggesting that they would support a type of tax we did not mention.

Now that the fires are out, residents are primarily focused on two things: preventing similar fires (34%) and helping displaced residents (32%). Few are mainly concerned with holding accountable those who might be to blame and only 10% appear to have moved on entirely.

## **Political Fallout**

The fires dominated the news media for weeks, but the finger-pointing began even before the flames were fully doused. Our analysis shows that the negative repercussions should be

strongest in the City of San Diego. Interestingly, residents in the east county – the area most affected by the fires – are the only group who believe, on balance, that public officials were as prepared as they possibly could be for this fire. Constantly living with the fire threat, backcountry residents were not surprised by the destruction. They therefore tend to dismiss the idea that any force could have stopped such massive fires. On the other hand, those in San Diego proper are shocked the fires could do so much damage in what they thought were “safe” neighborhoods. Therefore, 62% of San Diego residents feel public officials were not prepared (39% strongly) and only 29% feel there was nothing they could have done to mitigate the damage. Outside the City, however, less than half subscribe to the lack of preparation theory and over one-third believe the damage could not be reduced no matter how much public officials had prepared. This significant difference may play itself out at the ballot box in March’s Mayoral primary. This is not to say that County officials will get a free pass on the fire issue, but City officials are definitely on the hot seat.

### **Who was More Personally Affected?**

Though ash fell across virtually the entire county, residents in some areas obviously took the brunt of the fire’s destruction. The survey shows that, indeed, those living in the east county and the east suburbs (El Cajon, Lakeside, Santee are all in this area) were far more likely to experience the damage up close and personal. More than one-out-of-nine in the east county had a family member lose their home or had their own home destroyed and another 52% know a friend who lost their home! Only 12% of east county residents did not know someone who lost a home. The situation in the east suburbs is not quite so bad but even here 34% know a friend or family member who lost their home.

But the fires touched more than terrain. The survey found that residents in all regions of the County were personally exposed to loss. Racially speaking, white residents are significantly more likely to know someone who lost a house. The same is true for more affluent residents regardless of race. Seventy percent of those earning over \$80,000 (about one-in-five County residents fit this criteria), know someone who lost a house.

### **What is to be Done?**

Residents definitely want action, but what’s a policy maker supposed to do? The answers are more difficult to come by when public opinion on the proper course of action ranges so widely and so many people want “everything” to be done. The survey did show that many San Diegans focus on two things: more equipment is needed to fight the fires and better internal communication among firefighting agencies. Adding the 32% who say “all of the above” to those whose main desire is for more equipment produces a 52% majority that would presumably support bringing in more aerial firefighting tools. Using the same logic shows that 51% support the relatively low cost but possibly difficult to implement and definitely less sexy

solution of enhancing inter-agency communication.

The survey finds that those who say a lack of preparation as contributed to the damage are more likely to favor bringing more equipment on-line. This strongly suggests that the lack of firefighting helicopters is at the center of their argument that officials were under-prepared. On the other side, the results show that those who believe that public officials had done all they could to prepare may actually not be excusing officials entirely. That is because they mainly favor better communication between the firefighting agencies. This indicates that they may also blame officials, but they just do not see *preparation* as the problem. In other words, perhaps nearly everyone is blaming public officials; it is just a matter of timing: do they deserve blame for what happened *before* the fires or *during* the fires?

There are some courses of action that this survey shows have little public support. Only 7% say limiting development in rural areas is the most important thing to do; just 4% would have officials focus primarily on forcing property owners to protect themselves better and only 1% urge the hiring of more firefighters.

It is interesting to note that men tend to focus on improving communication while women focus on more equipment. This seems to fly in the face of most stereotypes regarding the sexes.

### **The Million Dollar Question: To Tax or Not to Tax**

Despite San Diego's image as a community which rarely sees a tax it likes to hike, the fires may create an environment where a tax increase could gain majority approval. Surprisingly, the survey found that the most hostility toward a firefighting tax would come from younger residents while those over 54 are much more likely to support raising taxes for that purpose.

It is also refreshing to see some signs in the survey that residents are realistic about their desires. We found that, among those who say they want officials to pursue all avenues of fire mitigation, a hearty two-thirds would support a tax increase to fund all those measures. In contrast, those who supported the "cheaper" option of removing dead brush and trees generally did not support raising taxes. The one bit of disturbing news here is that those who focus on getting more aerial equipment are less willing than average to support a tax hike. If they favor an increase, they are most likely to support a hike in the tourist tax.

Overall, fifty-five percent say they would support a tax; the question upon which there is no unanimity is *which tax*? Raising taxes on people living in fire prone areas seems to have the inside track. However, it is strongly backed by just 24% of the population and it promises to be divisive as it pits rural residents against urbanites. Twenty-six percent of those in areas away from where the fires scorched the County support this type of tax but only 19% who live in or near the fire's path think this is good idea. Instead, they are more likely to support raising the

tax on *all* property owners.

## **Conclusions**

San Diego County residents have endured a widespread disaster. This research documents the extent of the impact the October wildfires have had. There is, to be sure an economic cost, but with most people aware of someone who lost a home there is a psychic cost as well. And with results that reflect deep dissatisfaction with preparation efforts on the part of local officials, a political cost will likely be paid in the City. Even where residents did not fault local fire preparation, they tended to fault bureaucratic inefficiencies which add to the potential political ramifications. This political fallout, if it happens, will come at a time when opinions are fractured on how to best to prepare for future fires and whether to (and even how to) pay for efforts to deal with them. With only 10% saying they are now unconcerned with the fires' aftermath, this promises to be an important civic issue for a long time to come.