State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection  
Sacramento, CA

June 13, 2021

Dear Chair Gilless and Board Members:

RE: Proposed Revisions to State Minimum Fire Safe Regulations.

Please consider the following amendments to said regulations:

I am a property owner a 2202 Diamond Mountain Road and have been compiling photographic evidence pertaining to ingress/ egress from my property at the top of the road in case of sudden evacuations with the simultaneous accommodation of heavy firefighting equipment using the same road. Diamond Mountain Road is a typical hillside road in Napa County's wooded hillside areas. As you can see, I began compiling this evidence in 2017 long before the devastating fires on our mountain in 2020. Luckily, there was fair warning from the Glass Fire across the valley for us to evacuate and avoid the traffic conflict that would have been devastating if the fire had started on our mountain.

PUBLIC ROAD WIDTHS:
Based on all evidence, the proposed 14' road width is patently ineffective and unsafe in these areas. The minimum width should be the same as the minimum Napa County Road standard of 20' wide with 1' drivable shoulders on each side. This standard should apply at a minimum to new commercial/industrial developments and to additional land uses of existing ones. These developments are labor and visitor intensive reflecting recent Napa County approval policies.

Numerous studies, have shown that 84% (and more) of all fires are caused by human activity and increasing such activity by introducing more labor and especially visitors into these areas heightens the chance of wildfires. An additional consideration in mandating the 20' road width is the fact that hillside roads are curvy and firefighting equipment is substantially longer (and wider) than passenger vehicles. A 14' wide road standard will create a bottleneck on the hundreds of curves on the typical roads on these hillsides requiring smaller cars to backtrack. This is an untenable situation eloquently highlighted by the attached photographs.

PUBLIC ROAD SECONDARY ACCESSES:
All new or additional commercial/industrial development in these areas must require a secondary access of the same standard as the one described above. During the 2017 Atlas Peak Fire in Napa County, Soda Canyon Road where the fire started with essentially no warning, was blocked by a large fallen tree preventing both escape and access routes rendering the entire community landlocked. Said tree was not removed by a public agency which came to the area much later but by the fortuitous presence of a person who had the appropriate chainsaw and help.
Many trapped residents had to be evacuated by helicopter. More than 130 residences were destroyed and people perished. This road adheres to the proposed 14' wide standard to most of its length but all evidence has shown that this is not enough.

The requirement of a secondary access road is paramount because if one access road is blocked by fallen trees (in case of fire) or by the slides of the prevailing upslope banks - sometimes even downslope banks cave as in the case of our own road - neither evacuations nor emergency equipment can access properties. This makes an equally improved secondary access essential for simultaneous access and evacuations. The Paradise Fire is a case in point.

Such primary and secondary roads must not converge before they independently reach the State of California Highway System.

TURN OUTS:
I agree with the standard of 400' turnout intervals (with the road qualifications described above). However, for such turn outs to be effective in these predominantly curvy roads, such turnouts must be intervisible. Wherever they are not, the spacing must be shortened.

DEAD END ROADS:
I agree with the 1/2 mile limit set in the proposed regulations as many municipalities in the state (city of Los Angeles is one) have imposed substantially shorter requirements. The size of the parcel served by a dead end road bears no relevance to safety, the number of lives In harm's way is. Unfortunately, the Napa County government (and its Fire Marshal) have a culture of approving large commercial developments served by much longer dead end roads. The recently approved Mountain Peak Winery is situated at the end of a 6.5 mile dead end, narrow hillside road, heavily impacted by the Atlas Peak Fire. This winery was permitted to produce 100,000 gallons, and to accept over 15,000 visitors annually as well as to stage several large events.

I implore this Board to research the record of Napa County in granting large developments in the fire prone hillside areas and take it into account before it approves any of its requests for exceptions to the proposed regulations.

ROAD DESIGNATIONS:
Napa County's record of approving permits based on its nominal road designations has been disingenuous. In granting the permit for the aforementioned winery, it disregarded its own maximum dead end standard of 1 mile (stretching it to 6.5 miles) by arguing that Soda Canyon Road is a Collector Road. Though nominally a Collector, this road is not improved according to Collector Road standards over its entire 6.5 mile length.

I urge the Board to require all municipalities to adhere to all the designated improvement standards set forth in these regulations before they may claim their service levels. Napa County has not done so.

PRIVATE DRIVEWAYS:
Many of the commercial/industrial developments in the fire prone hillsides are served by long driveways, many several miles long. While the Board has set the 1/2 mile standard for dead end public roads, it has failed to set a standard for private driveways. Commercial/industrial developments who accept visitors are acting as public spaces accommodating dozens - sometimes hundreds - of visitors at a time.

Typically, such driveways are just as curvy into the hillsides if not more so than the public roads.

Escape and firefighting access issues which were considered safe for public roads, must also apply to private driveways as the public is entitled to the same protections when attending public accommodations and events on private properties. Based on the argument set forth above, such driveways must also adhere to a the minimum 20' width, 1' shoulders and intervisible turnouts.

PRIVATE DRIVEWAYS MEASUREMENT:
The Board must define how such measurement shall apply. The relevant factor is the space visitors and labor occupy on private property. Any definition of length must include these spaces/improvements such as production, entertainment, parking etc.in their totality. If 1/2 mile is the standard for a dead end public road, the same consideration must apply for private driveways.

PRIVATE DRIVEWAYS OFF DEAD END ROADS:
The Board must consider that a commercial/industrial facility private driveway located on a bidirectional public road, affords labor and visitors a certain level of safety which is not the same when the same driveway is located on a dead end public road, let alone off the dead end turnaround. In these cases, the dead end private driveway length is in addition to the 1/2 mile public road length.

My recommendation is to set a 1 mile limit for private driveways (which includes all the facility improvements used by the public) only if such facility is located on a bidirectional public road and set a limit of 1/2 mile for facilities located off a dead end public road as long as its 1/2 mile length limit is maintained despite Napa County's request to increase it.

COMMERCIAL INTERESTS V. SAFETY:
In its response to the Board, Napa County has argued that a balance must be struck between commercial interests and the proposed fire safety regulations. I would argue that there are many factors one may ignore or water down in favor of commercial interests. I can think of the level of deforestation, even the associated increased level of water runoff and river siltation in many cases. But public safety is not one of them. Considering the enormous increased fire danger by the introduction of visitors and labor in the fire prone hillside areas, the only mitigation - partial as it is - is safe access and evacuation routes even though this does not mitigate the enormous public cost and human tragedy that wildfires cause.
The road standards the Board has proposed are not nearly safe enough. As argued above, 14’ wide roads are patently inadequate and must be replaced by 20’ foot roads. The same apples to private driveways which serve the public. Municipalities must cease basing their permits on nominal road designations unless such roads are actually improved according to their respective standards.

EXEMPTIONS:
All existing commercial/industrial permitted facilities as of the adoption of the proposed standards shall be exempt. Facilities which have incurred partial or complete destruction must be permitted to rebuild the same facilities in compliance with their existing use permits at the time of loss.

All additional use permits and improvements to existing facilities must comply with the additional mitigations in these regulations as of the time of their adoption. This shall include projects "in the pipeline".

The Board must consider the enormous fast track permit approvals Napa County has instituted in the past two years. It will help it ascertain the agenda governing its proposed exemptions.

Effective evacuation and access routes is the least the public deserves.

Sincerely,
George Caloyannidis
Architect, PhD.
left: 2/7/2017 Huge fallen tree blocking 18' road

below: 2/22/2017 Same tree finally removed over 4 days, one week later
left: 10/12/2018 truck and car 15’ road segment
right: 10/22/2019 truck 14’ road segment

left: 9/2/ 2020 truck 14’ road segment
right: 11/28/2020 truck 15’ road segment
left: 12/21/2020 truck and car 13' road segment
right: 12/24/2020 truck and car 15' road segment

left: 10/9/2020 truck 14' road segment