

Level Up Audio Project – Episode 5

Wildfire Risk and Community Outreach: Butte County

- Voice-over Welcome to *Level Up*, a FEMA audio project for practitioners where communities share their stories about building resilience and reducing risk from a disaster.
- On November 8, 2018, the Camp Fire tore through Butte County, California, terrorizing the residents of a town called Paradise. For this episode, Asia King spoke with Calli-Jane DeAnda from the Butte County Fire Safe Council about how her community outreach around wildfire mitigation prevented the damages from Camp Fire from being even worse.
- Calli-Jane De Anda, Butte County Fire Council The Fire Safe Council has been in operation just over 20 years. We’re a local, nonprofit, grassroots organization. We serve as an “umbrella” throughout our county region with local Fire Safe Councils. Those groups are really dedicated to their unique geography, and we support their efforts with grant-writing and education outreach, and we work together.
- Working to get the outcome of safety, resilient forests, aesthetic communities, and places that people want to live and invest and grow in.
- Voice-over Fire Safe Councils are grassroots, community-led organizations that work with residents to protect their homes, communities, and environments from catastrophic wildfire. Many have successfully implemented projects that reduce wildfire risk and keep communities safer.
- Calli-Jane De Anda, Butte County Fire Council Fire Safe Council movement began in California, out of the Oakland Hills Fires in the 1990s.
- They’ve all taken on different kind of shapes and forms throughout the State. Some are more partnered to a volunteer fire company, or to a resource conservation district.
- Some are very small scale, some have the nonprofit status, some don’t. They’re really just a reflection of the partnerships around them and the resources that they’ve been able to gather.
- Asia King, FEMA How does the geography of Butte County make the Fire Safe Council particularly important?
- Calli-Jane De Anda, Butte County Fire Council Butte County is located from the valley floor up into the high-mountain region, and we have a lot of different “fingers,” kind of ridge lines that come down.
- The area where our wildland urban interface is concentrated, we have about seven core regions that you cannot drive from one right across to the other because of these canyons.
- So it would only take five minutes if there was a bridge to drive from one, one community to the other. But you can’t, you have to drive all the way down the mountain to the valley and then cross the valley and then up the other side to get to

the community right next to you. And that's really an important piece of the story with the Camp Fire.

In a normal geography, a half a mile from somewhere is, is nothing, but there's no connectivity between the communities, with roads that are passible.

And so, they are very, very isolated from each other, but the fire doesn't, fire doesn't see it that way. Fire sees that as a very small gap.

Voice-over

The Wildland Urban Interfaces are where houses are right next to forests. Communities in this area are at risk of catastrophic wildfire due to their proximity to areas that burn.

As California's population is expanding, people are moving outside of the populated, developed valleys and up into the forested mountainsides. Often these wildland urban interface areas can be the last remaining affordable places to own homes in California.

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

Many of our wildland urban interface communities are a mix of folks who are retirees, who have selected to live in these beautiful mountain areas. And then, some families and, and some 'renegades', you know, those who don't want to be necessarily part of things.

They have a strong mix of different kinds of personalities and, and skill sets.

Great people, wonderful places to live, but really, most of the time, there are few businesses, maybe one gas station, maybe one store, that's it. And so, they're heavily reliant upon the urban areas in the Valley floor for all of their resource needs, groceries and gas, and such.

Asia King, FEMA

What projects are the Butte County Fire Council working on right now?

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

Right now, we have four grants that were funded last October by Cal Fire to work in these different communities, to do roadside fuel-reduction and, kind of, large-scale "fuel breaks."

And so, just imagine a 7-mile stretch of roadway that's "choked" with brush, and there are 90 landowners in that seven miles. And we have to go to every single one of them, mail them a letter, go to their door, ask their permission. And now, we're asking the landowners to participate.

Because again, the wildland-urban interface is full of private—it's all private land.

Voice-over

Calli-Jane realizes that before she can do the technical work like permitting or even apply for the grant, she has to get community buy-in first. So, she begins mitigation projects by reaching out to a comprehensive list of stakeholders.

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

So, when it comes time to do a large project funded by a grant, we check in with all of those folks and make sure that we as the Fire Council are anticipating the needs that they are most concerned about. We reach out to the local Fire Councils and talk with them. And, a lot of times, we already know what their main concerns are. And then we rely on that document, called the "Community Wildfire Protection Plan", to ensure that the projects have already been listed as being important by all these different partners.

So, from the time we start writing the grant we've been working on landowner participation. So here a full year later, we are just in the very early phases of the environmental compliance process.

And then, once that's done, then we can hire the contractor and go do the work.

Voice-over

These grant funded projects reduce fuel in sections of the finger-like mountainside, so there are some areas where brush has been cleared and where trees have been thinned right next to areas that are still overgrown with large, dry brush. This creates a "patchwork of mitigation."

Asia King, FEMA

So, the task of maintaining fuel reduction in all the forests in Butte County seems daunting. Does this patchwork of mitigation approach still reduce the fire risk?

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

It does reduce the risk. And, we have to look at the glass as "half full," because, if you are in your vehicle on that particular road and one area has not been cleared, and a fire is coming, and you can see up ahead that it's safe for you to drive and park, then we saved a life, and we made a difference. And so, the way that fires burn, it's a "patchwork" across the landscape of intensity. Based on, you know, the wind and the topography, and so, we are, kind of, "countering back" with a "patchwork" of mitigation projects -- the best that we can create. And so, it does make a difference.

Asia King, FEMA

Can you describe successes that you've had with your extensive outreach efforts?

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

Well, we really have "keystone" success stories with the Camp Fire.

And the first is about protecting the drinking water for the town of Paradise. And that began about a decade ago. We had started to work with the Paradise Irrigation District on thinning and clearing on their lands. And so, if you imagine, there's a lake at the top of this little valley, and then, a creek that flows down into a reservoir.

Over time, we were able to bring in different grant funds to get about 60 percent of that property to a state that we felt a fire could burn through and not just kill all of the trees.

And, at the same time that we were doing our work, just about a quarter of a mile away, the Sierra Pacific Industries had undertaken a timber-harvest project right next to the lake and then in the canyon adjacent. And so, their project really opened the canopy up, but left a lot of healthy, beautiful trees.

And so, by us all having had dialogue, knowing what's Sierra Pacific Industries was doing, working with them, working with the Irrigation District and the U.S. Forest Service, we ended up being able to, together, accomplish probably 400 acres of fuels reduction.

With the intention that we wanted to make sure fire wouldn't burn right up to the Lake and damage the water.

And so, when the Camp Fire took place, that's exactly what happened. The fire burned out of the Canyon, up into those areas, and was able to be slowed.

And so, the homes on the other side of the Canyon were able to be saved with fire suppression, more easily. And the water at the lake is untouched. There's no contaminants in it.

And the forest, for the most part, is looking like it's going to have high survival.

Voice-over

Through strategic partnerships and planning, homes, drinking water, forests, and potentially lives were saved during the Camp Fire.

Asia King, FEMA

What are your top three suggestions or pieces of advice on how to help communities who would like to do this kind of work?

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

Part of our success is, is very strongly attributed to collaboration, and that's the nature of the Fire Council movement. That's really the best way that we're going to create a "culture of change" is through collaboration. That's "number one."

"Number two" is having funding to have some paid staff, even if it's only one. Somebody needs to be able to "keep the energy flowing and to be the magnet that things pass through."

"Number three" would be, really looking to the long-term plan. And so, having a roadmap of where you're going with the plan. For us, that plan entails, fuels reduction, as well as education, messaging and having that in place to communicate for those stakeholders is, is really great.

Asia King, FEMA

Thank you so much Callie-Jane. It's really inspirational to see all of you working together.

Calli-Jane De Anda,
Butte County Fire
Council

Thank you. What we do does matter, and we can make a difference.

Voice-over

Some key takeaways from Calli-Jane are:

- Collaborate with a variety of stakeholders and community members to create a culture of change.
- Hire someone. Establish dedicated funding for a full-time staff member to lead mitigation efforts.
- Plan for the long term. Use your hazard mitigation plan as your roadmap.

If you are interested in learning more about hazard mitigation, go to [FEMA.gov](https://www.fema.gov) and search "hazard mitigation."

This episode of *Level Up* was produced by FEMA Region IX's Mitigation Division and *Resilience Action Partners*. Your host is Asia King. Many thanks to Calli-Jane DeAnda from the Butte County Fire Safe Council for taking the time to talk to us about outreach and fire mitigation. For more information, please go to Firewise USA's website and/or Cal Fire's website.