

Pla-Vada Community Association Firewise Community Application Text

General Site Description

Pla-Vada Community Association is in Nevada County on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada, near Kingvale, at about 6000 feet elevation. The boundary of the Pla-Vada Firewise Community is the same as the Pla-Vada Community Homeowners' Association, and includes 242 developed parcels and 113 undeveloped parcels, totaling 115 acres. About 10% of the homes are year-round residents, 25% are vacation rentals (especially popular during ski season) and 65% are family vacation homes.

The community sits slightly above the South Fork Yuba River opposite US Highway 40. Interstate 80 lies slightly south of Pla-Vada.

In a heavy snow year snow lingers into June or July, and can begin falling in October. Normally there is snow on the ground, at least in patches, from December to early May.

Common Vegetation Types

The vegetation is primarily lodgepole pine forest and high elevation Sierra mixed conifer (with lodgepole pine, Jeffrey pine and white fir). The understory is a combination of grasses and forbs, bracken ferns and shrubs. Closer to the river there is a combination of cottonwood, dogwood and willow.

Granite outcrops are scattered through the community.

Topography

The topography ranges from flat along the south side of the community, near the S. Yuba River, to about 30% slopes along the upper edges of the community along the north side. Slopes are generally south facing.

High winds occur within the community primarily during strong Pacific storms (SW wind) and fall foehn wind events (NE wind). At other times, due to topography and dense tree cover, winds are generally much less than at the Sierra summit or the east side of the Sierra. The most likely fire scenario is a fire burning up the Yuba River canyon being pushed by the prevailing southwest winds. However, a fire under a northeast wind late in fire season could approach the community from the opposite direction.

Common open space or adjacent areas

To the north, and upslope, of Pla-Vada Firewise Community are extensive private forest lands managed for low intensity timber and recreation. These lands could provide possible human-caused sources of ignition, such as campfires or equipment fires.

An undeveloped subdivision is located immediately adjacent to Pla-Vada, and has little infrastructure in place and no management activities. When developed this subdivision's ingress and egress will be through the Pla-Vada Firewise Community.

Immediately to the east of Pla-Vada are individual private lots with homes and a small lodge. These homes are likely used mostly as family vacation homes or vacation rentals, primarily during ski season.

A public school is located to the south of Pla-Vada, adjacent to the highway.

A major trans-Sierra electric transmission line corridor passes just north of part of the community on the western finger, and cuts through the eastern part of the community. This corridor is over 100 feet wide and is regularly maintained to protect the electric lines and towers from falling debris during wind and snow events. There are no trees within the corridor and only low-growing vegetation is maintained to prevent impedance of electricity transmission. This corridor can act as a fuel break for part of the community from fire moving from the north.

Additional Comments

Building construction within the Pla-Vada Firewise Community is much different from lower elevation construction. Due to the construction design for snow loading, about 90% of the homes have metal roofing, steep roof angles and soffit vents are rare in this community. However, a few older homes have wood shake roofing. Multi-paned windows are the norm and many of the newer homes have non-combustible siding. Most homes do not have rain gutters.

Lot size averages about 1/4 acre, placing the 30 to 100-foot defensible space zone onto a neighbor's property. Undeveloped lots generally are unmaintained and contain high fuel loading of accumulated needles, branches, logs, stumps and snags, creating a significant fire hazard to the adjacent homes.

The community water source consists of several wells pumped to water tanks uphill from the development. During power outages there is still water pressure, if the tanks contain adequate water. Fire hydrants are well distributed throughout the community and are highly visible. There is also a pond along the south side of the community with road access for possible draughting by fire engines and water tenders.

The nearest fire station is 2.75 miles east of the community on Donner Pass Road. Good collaboration and communication are occurring between the Truckee Fire Department and the Pla-Vada Firewise Community.

Summary – particularly defensible space and home hardening

Canopy cover of primarily conifers is high (70-90%). Needle drop accumulates on roofs, at the base of buildings, and within understory plants. This will require regular cleanup and monitoring.

Many of the homeowners have done significant work on fuel reduction - thinning, pruning and chipping – around buildings and along roads. There is still more fuel reduction work to be done throughout the community, particularly on undeveloped parcels. The community has organized a chipping program to assist homeowners with disposal of brush, small trees and limbs. The program uses volunteer and low-cost labor.

Pla-Vada has a lot maintenance policy that can provide notification to an owner that is not meeting the fuel reduction and vegetation maintenance requirements. Fines can be assessed or the HOA can assist in completing the work. Enforcement of lot maintenance on undeveloped parcels is difficult and stricter enforcement is recommended.

Firewood is an important heat source for many residents and firewood storage during fire season creates additional risks. With small lots it is difficult to store firewood more than 30 feet from any structure. Firewood is currently being stored under or on many decks and porches, creating a perfect situation for ember ignition leading to a house fire.

Pacific Gas & Electric Company is responsible for the electric transmission and distribution lines through the community. Lot owners should cooperate when PG&E requests permission to remove trees or limbs. Homeowners are responsible for their individual service lines that connect to their homes. Many service lines need tree limbs trimmed to keep the lines clear. Even service lines can be a source of ignition with contact with tree limbs.

Many homes have combustible materials, such as outdoor furniture, doormats and plastic tarps, within 5 feet of a structure. These items could create an ignition source from flying embers during a wildfire. Some of the vacation homes do not get regular maintenance and pine needles are accumulating on roofs, decks and at foundations. Emphasis needs to be placed on the “Home Ignition Zone”, the structure and 5 feet beyond, as this is the most common place fires start that consume homes.

Home address signs are difficult to see at night or with smoke in the air. Some addresses are posted in various locations on homes, garages or signs. In cooperation with the fire department, a community address sign policy should be implemented to make signs more consistent and visible from the roads at night.

There is very little landscaping in the Pla-Vada Firewise Community. Native plants act as landscaping and will need to be monitored and maintained by removing dead branches and fallen leaves.

Easily visible fire hydrants are distributed less than 1000 feet apart throughout the community. The hydrants should be periodically tested in cooperation with the Truckee Fire Department. A large pond is located near the southwest portion of the community, which is suitable for draughting by engines and water tenders, and could be used for dipping by helicopters. The access road to the pond should be kept clear, with no overhanging branches for at least 15 feet above the ground.

Recommendations

Planning for an evacuation is critical. Ensure that all residents are familiar with Ready-Set-Go preparedness and are psychologically prepared to leave all belongings behind. Encourage all lot owners and homeowners to sign up all phones for CodeRED. Prepare a written evacuation plan and a “Go Bag” of essential items in case of a rapid evacuation. Be aware of fire conditions in your area and red flag warnings.

Since many homes are rented to vacationers, homeowners need to provide emergency evacuation information and instructions to all renters during fire season.

Improve the visibility of address signs at night or in heavy smoke. Some level of consistency is desirable on signage to make finding and reading the signs easier for emergency response personnel. Numbers and letters on signs should be 4 inches or greater in height, reflective and with a contrasting background. Addresses posted on the siding of homes are difficult to see from the road, especially in the dark.

Review the HOA lot maintenance policy to determine its effectiveness, especially with undeveloped lots. Consider amending the policy or improving the enforcement procedure if it is not meeting the desired objectives. Consider adopting the “30-Day Courtesy Notice” being used by other Firewise Communities in Nevada County. Request assistance from Truckee Fire Department in enforcement of lot maintenance. In addition to the Pla-Vada HOA lot maintenance policy, California Public Resources Codes 4290 and 4291 and Nevada County Hazardous Vegetation Abatement Ordinance also apply and can be enforced.

To aid lot owners in cleaning up their lots, Pla-Vada Firewise Community could suggest contracting with one well regarded local contractor to work on many lots as one group project. This will improve efficiency and may lower the cost to each lot owner, as opposed to each lot owner contracting individual crews.

Work with residents to improve the number of homes that have removed flammable materials 0 to 5 feet from the home. This includes such things as wood piles, patio furniture and flammable door mats. Residents should be educated on the impact of embers on home ignitions, which would contribute to further heat and fire spread in the community. Encourage community members to watch the video [Be Ember Prepared](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAuhNDb963Y) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAuhNDb963Y>. Show this video and discuss it at a community meeting.

Create enclosed buildings to house firewood during fire season. These buildings need to be ember resistant, just like a home. In lieu of enclosed buildings a California State Fire Marshall certified fire-resistant tarp can be utilized to cover firewood, if it is solidly anchored with no gaps for ember intrusion.

Defensible Space Advisory Visits are offered for free from the Fire Safe Council of Nevada County and provide recommendations to homeowners on ways to reduce fire hazards. The Pla-Vada Firewise Community should have at least one person attend the Defensible Space Advisory Training offered annually by the Fire Safe Council of Nevada County. These trained volunteers could then provide assessments for properties within Pla-Vada and adjacent communities.

The trans-Sierra electric transmission corridor acts as a 100 feet wide fuel break on the north part of the community. The Yuba River forms a good fuel break to the south. However, an effective fuel break must surround the entire community. Pla-Vada Firewise Community should contact adjacent landowners north of Red Fir and Manzanita Streets to connect the fuel break to the developments to the east. California Forest Practice Rules allow a silvicultural prescription of “shaded fuel break” to lower forest density and clean up ground fuels. Dialog with the adjacent landowners should encourage the use of this prescription. As a concession to assist the adjacent landowners in implementing the fuel break prescription, Pla-Vada HOA could offer a temporary easement to allow hauling of logs through the community on a limited basis to shorten the haul to the highway and minimize unsurfaced road maintenance.

The community of homes to the east of Pla-Vada Firewise Community should be encouraged to continue the fuel break to the north of their community, to connect the fuel break to the river and Highways 40 and I-80.