

MAY 2026



reporter



Fighting Wildfires

*Southern California Mobilehome Community
Unveils Unique Plan of Action*





FEATURE ARTICLE

Erin Mathe | Mathe Communications

The March 24th demonstration at Oakridge Mobile Home Park in Sylmar was spearheaded by the late Bob Baranek.

The New Frontier of Wildfire Defense

How Oakridge Mobile Home Park Is Rewriting the Playbook on Community Resilience

The residents of Oakridge Mobile Home Park in Sylmar will never forget November 15, 2008.

That was the night the Sayre Fire tore through the Angeles National Forest, driven by Santa Ana winds approaching 80 miles per hour. When the smoke cleared, Oakridge had become the epicenter of a historic tragedy.

Four hundred and eighty-eight homes were reduced to ash in a matter of hours — a catastrophe that, at the time, marked the greatest loss of structures to wildfire in Los Angeles history.

For nearly two decades, Oakridge has stood as a symbol of recovery. But on Tuesday, March 24, it became a symbol of community-scale resilience — demonstrating what’s possible when an entire community prepares to face wildfire together, determined not to relive the losses of 2008.

Under a clear California sky, Oakridge hosted a full-scale operational showcase of a first-of-its-

kind wildfire defense system — not a demonstration of a single tool, but the live activation of a coordinated approach to mitigation and defense. The demonstration was performed by Wildfire Water Solutions (WWS).

What was on display was a shift in philosophy — from fragmented, individual actions to a system designed to perform as one under real-world conditions. Leaders

from fire management, insurance, and government gathered to witness what it looks like when a community prepares for wildfire not in theory, but in practice.

An Integrated System

“The central premise is simple: No single strategy prevents wildfire loss,” said Bob Baranek, former Director of Operations for Continental Mobile Housing, the management company for Oakridge. “True



WWS crew member can be seen applying moisture to vegetation.

resilience emerges when multiple strategies operate together before the moment of ignition.”

For Baranek, this mission was personal. Before the Sayre Fire devastated Oakridge, he watched the 2003 Cedar Fire in San Diego burn within three homes of his own front door.

He saw firsthand the shift from rare, catastrophic events to a persistent and growing threat.

“Roughly 75% of California’s 20 most destructive wildfires have occurred since 2015,” Baranek noted.

“Wildfires will continue to be part of living in California. We need better strategies and better tools to reduce the impact they have on our lives.”

A New Layer: Deployable Water Infrastructure

At Oakridge, the shift in strategy wasn’t about doing more — it was about doing it differently.

Individual actions were brought into alignment, forming a coordinated system that integrates home hardening (using fire-resistant construction materials and design in order to protect homes from wildfire embers and radiant heat), vegetation management, and infrastructure designed to perform under stress.

Wildfire Water Solutions played a central role in building that system — introducing deployable water infrastructure proven in wildland fire and adapting it for community protection, while ensuring each component works together at the density required to produce measurable results.



WWS' Director of Field Operations Cody Gibson (center) and CEO Mike Echols (right) talk to attendees at the event.

The scale and flexibility of the system are substantial. It includes 630,000 gallons of dedicated water storage, high-capacity diesel pumps (up to 800 horsepower), and nearly six miles of large-diameter hose.

ber cast, and deliver water-based suppressants and retardants to reduce ignition potential and slow fire spread. Integrated with fire agency operations, it can support both aerial and ground resources through water supply and fill capabilities.

At Oakridge, the shift in strategy wasn't about doing more — it was about doing it differently.

Rather than sitting only at the perimeter, the system is deployed throughout the community — creating internal control lines and compartments designed to interrupt fire progression and reduce structure-to-structure spread.

More than 100 pre-positioned high-capacity monitors provide water coverage across all 600 homes.

This layer of defense is designed to wet surfaces and fuels, disrupt em-

ber cast, and deliver water-based suppressants and retardants to reduce ignition potential and slow fire spread. Integrated with fire agency operations, it can support both aerial and ground resources through water supply and fill capabilities.

With the ability to recapture and reuse water, the system can operate independently for 24 to 48 hours — even if municipal water systems are compromised.

For residents like Sharon Hawkins, the physical presence of the system provides a welcome peace of mind.

“The amount of water and length was impressive,” Hawkins noted. “The sound of the water gushing and covering homes with a dome



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of protection against embers was incredible.

“Knowing that this system uses water means it can be deployed more than once during an event. It’s cost-effective and, most importantly, readily available to replenish.”

As attendees watched the system in operation, the scale of coverage was immediately clear.

But Mike Echols, CEO of Wildfire Water Solutions, was quick to shift the focus — emphasizing that the infrastructure is not a substitute for mitigation, but is what enables communities to act now while reinforcing the work already done and building toward full resilience.

“This isn’t about one tool or one tactic,” Echols said. “Wildfire outcomes aren’t determined at the individual level — they’re collective.

“The shift is getting entire communities to act together before ignition, at the density required to change the dynamics that drive loss — creating protection today that buys time to complete the work and amplifies the impact of what’s already been done.”

The Layered Approach

The Oakridge model is built on multiple coordinated layers of defense — each contributing to the reduction of probability, severity, and correlation.

In other words, it reduces how often fire impacts a community, how severe the damage is, and how easily it spreads from structure to structure.



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1. **Risk Reduction (Fuel & Structure)**

The foundation begins with reducing fire intensity and structural vulnerability.

Oakridge has removed over 250 tons of vegetation to establish a 200-foot shaded fuel break.

The community has also achieved 100% Class A roofing and more than 80% home hardening.

These measures reduce ember exposure and slow fire progression at the community edge.

2. **Community Alignment & Preparedness**

Preparedness at Oakridge is not theoretical. It combines education with real-world training — where evacuation routes are not just planned, but practiced, and residents understand what to do because they've done it before.

The goal is simple: no one experiences their first evacuation during an actual fire.

As a newly recognized NFPA Firewise USA site, Oakridge has aligned residents around a shared standard of participation — moving beyond individual effort toward collective readiness.

3. **Operational Integration (with Fire Agencies)**

A dedicated five-person

team, trained and qualified within the national Incident Command System (ICS), operates the system.

During the showcase, this team demonstrated how private infrastructure can integrate seamlessly with public fire agencies — supporting incident command rather than complicating it.

4. **Deployable Infrastructure (Enabling Backbone)**

The infrastructure is what allows every other layer to perform under stress.

With dedicated storage, high-capacity pumps, and a distribution network capable of placing all 600 homes under active water coverage, the system maintains flow, pressure, and duration when traditional systems are strained.

It also enables the delivery of water-based suppressants and retardants in coordination with fire agencies, extending effectiveness in extreme conditions.



Over 100 of these high-capacity water monitors were used that day.



View of the front of Oakridge Mobile Home Park's Community Center.

Individually, each layer reduces risk. Together, they change outcomes — altering fire behavior, reducing structure-to-structure transmission, and improving the probability of community survival.

Implications for Insurance and Risk

Beyond physical protection, the Oakridge model addresses a growing crisis in California: insurability.

As wildfire risk has increased, many insurance carriers have withdrawn from high-risk areas or dramatically raised premiums, leaving communities with limited options.

Baranek and the Oakridge team believe that proving a community can materially reduce risk may help stabilize coverage and bring insurers back to the table.

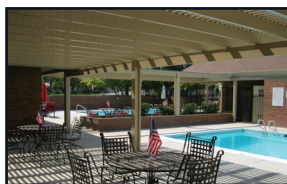


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“We want insurance companies to see what’s possible and give our residents a break on skyrocketing premiums,” Baranek said.

“At a minimum, we want to give them confidence to continue writing policies in California — especially where systems like this are in place.”

Cost remains a barrier for many communities, but that dynamic may be shifting. As adoption increases, economies of scale are beginning to drive costs down.

The Oakridge team is also advocating for legislative changes to allow these types of integrated defense systems to qualify for state and federal funding support.

A Legacy of Resilience

Holding the event at Oakridge carried deep meaning.

As wildfire risk has increased, many insurance carriers have withdrawn from high-risk areas. ... Baranek and the Oakridge team believe that proving a community can materially reduce risk may ... bring insurers back to the table.

The community only recently filled its final vacant lot from the 2008 Sayre Fire. It took nearly two decades to fully recover from a single night of destruction.

For many, this system is about ending a cycle of fear. Hawkins, who has been evacuated approximately

12 to 14 times since 1990 across different high-risk areas, feels a shift in the atmosphere.

“Each time we leave our homes under evacuation orders, I drive away and look back, knowing it could be the last time I see my home,” Hawkins shared. “This is the first time in

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Inside Oakridge Mobile Home Park during the demonstration on March 24. A total of 63 pre-positioned high-capacity monitors with a 450-foot reach provided water coverage across all 600 homes in the park.

all of those years that I feel a sense of stability. This system gives my home a chance to survive.”

What took place at Oakridge was not just a display of equipment. It was a demonstration of what be-

comes possible when preparation is taken seriously, aligned at scale, and tested before it is needed.

The Takeaway

Wildfire resilience is not achieved parcel by parcel. It emerges when

an entire community reaches critical mass — when mitigation is no longer uneven or optional, but coordinated, practiced, and built to perform together.

That threshold is where outcomes change. Oakridge has crossed it.

The question is no longer whether this model works, but how quickly it will be adopted where it matters most. ■



WWS used high-capacity diesel pumps (up to 800 hp each).

Erin Mathe is President of Mathe Communications, a media relations and corporate communications agency in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Before going out on her own, Mathe spent several years working on national media campaigns for Carmichael Lynch Relate PR agency. She began her career in television news as a reporter and anchor in Denver, Colorado Springs, and Great Falls, Montana. She can be reached by email at erin@mathecomm.com.



The joint efforts of ALL members of the WWS crew contributed to the demonstration's success at Oakridge.

..... *Photos by Tyler Robison*

"Each time we leave our homes under evacuation orders, I drive away and look back, knowing it could be the last time I see my home.

"This is the first time in all of those years that I feel a sense of stability. This system gives my home a chance to survive."

~ Sharon Hawkins, Oakridge MHP resident



Each water monitor has adjustable spray patterns.



Another view of one of Wildfire Water Solutions' high-capacity diesel pumps.