Eucalyptus hysteria has surfaced again, the result of the controversy over UC's clear-cutting thousands of tall trees in the Oakland-Berkeley hills. Too often, the public response to the devastation is: "They were only eucalyptus." First, not only eucalyptus are being felled. Secondly, the cutting is not achieving UC's stated goal, to reduce fire hazard.

Immediately after the 1991 fire in the Oakland-Berkeley hills, eucalyptus were identified as a prime culprit for the ferocity of the fire. It is clear this assignment of responsibility was a publicity "spin:" the Oakland Fire Department desperately needed a scapegoat to blame for its inability to anticipate, prevent, control and manage the fire. Many hill residents, anxious to not blame brave firefighters, bought into this simplistic explanation. But this is fact:

- **Eucalyptus did not start the 1991 Oakland – Berkeley hills fire, or the 1970 fire (that was arson);**
- **They did not contribute to the fire any more than other trees;**
- **Many eucalyptus survived in the midst of the fire where others – oak, madrone, bay, redwood, pine, acacia – did not.**
  For one of many examples, look uphill from the 600 block of Alvarado Road: handsome old eucalyptus stand tall where all else was incinerated.

Try this: next time you have a nice blaze going in your fireplace, throw on a eucalyptus log. Does it explode in flames and furiously burn? The opposite: it damps the fire, and because the wood is so dense, it takes a good while to get going. *There is a reason pine, oak and madrone – but not eucalyptus – are sold as firewood.*

The 1991 "firestorm" was started on Saturday by construction workers who lost control of their debris fire. The blaze consumed four acres of brush on a steep hillside above Buckingham Boulevard before it was brought under control. It was extinguished only superficially; smoldering embers remained beneath a crust of wetted ash. Sunday dawned hot, dry and windy, and Oakland's firefighters returned to disconnect and roll up their hoses. A lone fireman with a 5-gallon tank and sprayer climbed a distance up the blackened slope to check for wisps of smoke. His boots broke through the ash crust and fiery embers were whipped up by the wind into dry brush and trees, and the great fire was off and running. Surprised, unprepared and overwhelmed, the firemen jumped on their truck and took off. California Division of Forestry firefighters – who had stayed the night and had not picked up their hoses – saw what was happening and radioed for help. But they were up on Grizzly Peak at the top of the slope, not positioned to confront the fire as it roared west along Buckingham, Bristol and Norfolk, headed

toward Hiller Highlands and the Parkwoods Apartments. ***There were no eucalyptus, none, in the vicinity of the beginning of the fire.***

The “firestorm” portion of the Sunday fire lasted 45 minutes, surging out of the Buckingham canyon, past the eucalyptus grove above Charing Cross, and across the Hiller hillside where its primary fuel was the rows of clustered houses, consuming houses at a rate of one every eleven seconds. It was not until the fire reached the slopes bordering the HJ Kaiser school (which didn’t burn; Bentley School did burn, with no eucalyptus around) that it encountered significant groves of eucalyptus, and those trees still stand. At that point, wind-driven burning debris flew across the freeways and spread the flames toward Upper Rockridge and Broadway Terrace. From here on, the fire was no longer a “storm” but simply a vast fire with a huge perimeter. It burned through neighborhoods at a more conventional rate, one house gradually setting fire to the next. All but one of the 25 deaths occurred in that first 45 minutes.

Our home on Alvarado Road burned nearly two hours later. It was ignited by grass and brush burning up the slope below, having been set afire by a shower of flying embers from brush, small oaks and bays from the hillside east of us. ***There were no eucalyptus on that hill, and none within at least 500 yards of our house.*** That night, watching from the opposite hill, as the west face of the Alvarado hill burned, I saw pines and bays tremble in the escalating heat and then explode in bright flame – but there was no such spectacle among the eucalyptus.

When days later I heard that eucalyptus were being blamed for the fire, I questioned the evidence - and was met with a revised explanation: it wasn’t the trees themselves, the real problem was the fallen limbs and debris generated by the eucalyptus. Although that made somewhat more sense, then I thought: have these people, so quick to judge, ever burned a pile of debris from oaks, redwoods or woody brush? By comparison, the latter is wildly incendiary !

The recent fire in the eucalyptus grove near upper Broadway Terrace is a good example: my close-up photographs of the charred area clearly demonstrate that although the brush and debris at the base of the trees burned quickly, the trunks of the trees were merely scorched up about 24”, and the overhanging eucalyptus leaves were discolored and dried out, but they did not burn. I admired the quick response of the **aerial fire-fighting, but what it accomplished was not prevention of ignition of the trees, but prevention of spread through the underbrush.** (Because of its remote location, I suspect the fire was the result of arson, although I note with interest arson is not being investigated.)

I am not an authority on trees and their relative flammability so I refer to an expert: Colin Tudge’s book *The Tree: “As we have already seen, **many trees are highly fireproof, like redwoods and eucalypts . . . “** “ [beeches] were far more widespread there when Australia was wetter, but in these dry and fire-prone*

times they were largely supplanted by eucalyptus." "although they may burn spectacularly when things get out of hand – the crowns exploding as their essential oils are vaporized . . ." (if I may complete his sentence) it takes other non-fireproof trees and brush surrounding the eucalyptus for "things to get out of hand." In short, the eucalyptus torch when everything around them has already torched. That explains the majestic specimens than stood, in November 1991, and still stand in the ashes of other trees.

Therefore I seriously question what UC is doing in the Upper Claremont Canyon and elsewhere in the hills: clear-cutting areas of tall trees – eucalyptus, pines, madrone, laurel, acacia, cypress - with the stated intent of preventing wildfires. 10,000 trees are already cut, 15,000 more are next in line . . .

In the wake of the deforestation, UC leaves behind stumps, fallen logs, slash and mounds of chips. There is no replanting program. UC admits the area will be a dead zone for five years, before the chips and herbicides disperse, but experts at East Bay Regional Parks say it will be more like twenty years. (It almost looks as if a development is planned.) After some time, I suppose, grease brush, French broom and pampas will take over among the rotting logs – but how is that environment more fire safe?? And that is to say nothing of the impact on wildlife, drainage . . . and, oh yes, global warming.

Where is UC's Environmental Impact Report, required by law? As an answer, UC refers to a years-old EIR that addresses general campus development, but does not address environmental impacts of clear-cutting at the Claremont Canyon site – probably because the clear-cutting was not envisioned when the EIR was drafted. As an architect routinely dealing with EIRs, and as a citizen witnessing the environmental devastation in Claremont Canyon – including drainage and wildlife as well as plant life – I am outraged at UC's arrogant, high-handed, shoot-first method of handling this project.

Every property owner in the hills has the responsibility to maintain its area in terms of vegetation management, on holdings large and small. My lot is inspected annually, and I mitigate fire hazards accordingly. There are large-property owners in these hills: EBMUD, EBRPD, CalTrans, the City, and UC, and they have the same responsibility. EBRPD, for instance, knowing they can't do everything at once, is engaged in a study to prioritize specific areas – and then their response will not be to clear-cut, but instead to thin trees, clear underbrush and improve fire-fighting access. It is interesting that in EBRPD's fire-hazard rating system, which takes into account plant mix, elevation, wind patterns and proximity to structures, Claremont Canyon is a low priority. In contrast, UC has for decades made no attempt to maintain their forested hill properties. Now, suddenly, it has become a priority, because FEMA money is available (to avoid disasters, not a bad idea) and UC is busy getting **FEMA (our tax money) to pay for the maintenance UC should have been doing all along.** Even that is not my primary gripe; I am objecting to: 1) the way UC is doing it, 2) the fact that it does not mitigate fire hazard, and 3) it feeds the eucalyptus hysteria among hill residents.

When a project, on the face of it, lacks credibility, I figure there must be another agenda at work. A local, private organization called the Claremont Canyon Conservancy (CCC) successfully lobbied UC to do the clear-cutting, but for CCC this project is only a way-stop toward its ultimate goal: eradication of non-native plants, and

return of the hills environment to some arbitrary point in the past when all plants were "native." (ie, grassland, brush and scattered oaks; what about the animals?) The fundamental flaw in this concept is that nature is never static; over time, flora and fauna come and go, and to select some moment in time when the plant balance was ideal is sheer whistling in the wind, a patently foolish concept, about as sensible as proposing to restore the US population to entirely native.

The ironic aspect is that UC and the CCC are promoting planting of redwoods – clearly non-native in these hills. In this I do not object; the redwoods have earned a place in our environment - and so have the eucalyptus and laurels and pines.

* * * * *

In contrast to UC and CCC's, here is a plan worthy of your support:

1. Stop the deforestation (UC has plans for multiples of the current 10,000 tree project) by temporarily stopping FEMA's funding to UC;

2. Assist FEMA and UC in redefining the method of reducing wildland fire danger with a program of clearing out brush and debris from the base of the trees, and tree-thinning where it is advantageous to the health of the forest environment;

3. Develop a plan for firebreaks, long-term maintenance, and removing trees where their rootballs are exposed on slopes overhanging roadways;

4. Require UC to clean up the mess it has already made and embark on an aggressive replanting program;

5. Secure a commitment from UC that it will not support any plan for development within existing forested hill areas. Development would only exacerbate the urban / wildland interface that UC claims it is mitigating.

Note: Native California tribes used to employ regular controlled burns to open up space below the trees, to discourage uncontrollable fires, encourage healthy fresh growth, attract wildlife and facilitate their hunting. For bureaucratic reasons controlled burns have since been officially discouraged – but we can simulate their effect with intelligent maintenance. CCC's recent work in the Lower Claremont Canyon's Garber Park is an excellent and commendable example.

Peter Scott, architect; 1047 Alvarado Road
Resident witness to the 1970 fire and survivor of the 1991 fire;
instigator of and first witness before the1992 Grand Jury investigation of the fire

Executive board member, Hills Conservation Network