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LA County Economic Impact Study Exposes Dangers of Wood-Framed Construction
Disadvantaged Communities will be Hardest Hit by Rising Costs to Fight Fires

Los Angeles, California—An economic impact [study](#) submitted by Urvashi Kaul, Consultant and Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University, seeks to address the issue of wood-framed residential fires, particularly multi-family wood-framed structures. By examining two California fires, Kaul utilized an economic impact analysis of losses incurred by citizens and local governments to determine the potential repercussions of similar fires over the next fifteen years. Focusing exclusively on the County of Los Angeles as a model, the study suggests that under current building codes, the area could be facing billions of dollars in losses over the coming years due to wood-framed construction fires.

“Los Angeles could lose \$22.6 billion in wood-framed residential fire losses over the next 15 years,” Kaul estimates. The study takes into account the rapidly-expanding need for affordable housing in Los Angeles, which includes more mid-rise residential buildings in close proximity.

Some organizations argue that framing these structures with combustible materials such as wood sets the stage for major fire losses.

“Low and moderate income communities will be the first to suffer, as they include residents that cannot afford insurance, that if they lose everything, are the least likely to bounce back, and will put a further strain on the public health and welfare systems in their communities,” says Gloria Colazo, Regional Director of the Southern California Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (SCHCC). SCHCC is a member of Build with Strength, a coalition of the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association consisting of community organizations, fire safety professionals, engineers, architects and industry experts committed to strengthening the nation’s building codes and ensuring greater access to secure housing.

One of the cases cited in the study examines a 2011 fire at a wood-framed apartment complex in Carson, a suburb city in Los Angeles County. The fire, which destroyed five buildings and damaged six more, wound up displacing 139 people and forced the evacuation of senior citizens from two nearby buildings. A nearby mobile home park was also evacuated, and thirty units were either damaged or destroyed.

The study also points to the 2014 Los Angeles fire at the Da Vinci apartments, where four surrounding buildings were damaged, including the Los Angeles County Department of Health and the Los Angeles Department of Aging. Kaul sees these examples as indicative of the risks associated with combustible residential framing.

National and local building codes have been relaxed considerably over recent years, which has led to an increase in wood-framed residential construction. Given the findings of this recent cost study, Colazo suggests restricting the use of combustible materials in residential framing.

“The continued use of combustible wood framing places not only our buildings and their residents at risk, but entire neighborhoods, and even the city of Los Angeles itself,” says Colazo. “Our families, friends, and neighbors deserve safer buildings than this. These fires burn so quickly and at such great temperatures that they spread within minutes. And unfortunately, they often end up displacing our most vulnerable citizens, sometimes permanently.”

Build with Strength works with communities, lawmakers, and industry employees to advocate for safer, sustainable building materials. Strengthening local and national building codes is among the organization’s top priorities.

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