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Los Angeles County Study Exposes Dangers of Wood-Framed Construction
Cost Study Cites Safety Hazards and Negative Economic Impact

Los Angeles, California—A study released 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 a cost-benefit analysis of the economic impact 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 city 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. While property damage accounts for roughly \$20.5 billion of this figure, potential city expenditures could amount to \$132.5 million, with \$70.1 million going to police, fire, and sanitation departments, and another \$62.4 million of indirect costs, such as remediation, insurance, and planning.

Such conditions, the study suggests, set the stage for major fire losses should the structures be framed with combustible materials such as wood.

“I lost most of my belongings, the family dog, nearly everything due to an electrical fire that burned my wood-framed childhood home,” says Rabbi Jonathan Klein, Executive Director of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE). CLUE 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 example analyzed in the study involves a 2011 three-alarm fire in Carson, CA. The fire, which occurred at the Renaissance City Center, destroyed five buildings. One hundred firefighters were required to extinguish the flames, and over a hundred people, including many senior citizens, were displaced from nearby buildings and mobile homes.

The second example in the study involves a 2014 fire in Los Angeles at the Da Vinci apartment complex. The fire required 250 firefighters to extinguish, and it damaged four surrounding buildings and caused a shutdown of the northbound 101 for several hours. Additional crews of firefighters worked for 24 hours after the fire started to quell the flames.

National and local building codes have been relaxed considerably over recent years, which has led to an increase in wood-framed residential construction. Rabbi Klein sees the examples analyzed in the study as indicative of the need to prevent fire losses by restricting the use of combustible materials in residential framing.

“It could have so easily been prevented had there not been tinder. In a flash, everything was consumed,” says Rabbi Klein of his childhood home. “Thank God my parents survived. No one should have to experience that kind of a loss, which is why I’m a big advocate for safer building materials.”

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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