

# Metal Roofs Help Prevent Spread of FIRES



**Top photo:** Four of the seven homes that survived on Rue Parc in the Scripps Ranch neighborhood had stone-coated steel roofing with a Class A fire-resistance rating.

**Photo above:** Homeowners with stone-coated steel roofs believe their homes were spared because of the metal roofs.

**Photo on right:** "What happened in Southern California may not have been preventable, but if there were more metal roofs on residences it might have been more easily contained," says Jim McMullen, former California State Fire Marshall.

As residents in Southern California began to clean up from the wildfires last fall, the survivors wondered what preventive measures they might take to avoid this level of devastation in the future.

The Metal Roofing Alliance (MRA) and fire prevention experts suggest that installing a metal roof is one of the most proactive steps that can be taken to reduce the chance of a house being destroyed by fire and the ability of the fires to spread.

"I've seen too many homes burned to the ground, (a tragedy) that could've been prevented," says Jim McMullen, former California State Fire Marshall. "A metal roof is one of the best steps a homeowner can take to prevent the spread of residential fires and save their own homes."

"What happened in Southern California may not have been preventable, but if there were more metal roofs on residences it might have been more easily contained. As residents look ahead to rebuilding their homes, residential metal roofing should be considered as a strong preventive measure," he adds.

According to MRA, most forest fires decimate residential communities, as burning pine needles and other debris are blown from roof to roof. More conventional roofs, such as asphalt, catch fire relatively easily and the home subsequently burns to the ground. With a metal roof, however, those same homes could be saved.

"Metal roofing is a wise choice, especially in the West because of its resiliency to fire," says Tom Black, MRA's executive director.

Industry manufacturers also have firsthand experience with how metal roofing offers protection from rampant fires. Metro Roof Products, a producer of stone-coated steel roofing, is headquartered in Oceanside, Calif., about 20 miles north of the path of the fires that swept through San Diego County. The company provided the accompanying article and photos, which show the effects of the fire and reactions from those involved.



# Trial by **Fire**

By Randy Franz

Joy Cox and Pat Conroy live in homes separated by 9 miles (15 km) of rolling hills but united by tragedy. They are strangers who tell the same survival story: Adjacent houses in their respective neighborhoods burned to the ground in the Southern California firestorms of October 2003 while theirs stood unscathed.

What Cox and Conroy share is a common belief that their homes were spared because of their metal roofs. Both had replaced wood-shake roofs with stone-coated steel roofs within the last two years.

"We just had some little peelers on the curb that were singed and the front-door mat was burned, but nothing was burned on the house at all," said Cox, whose home is in the hillside community of Ramona in east San Diego County. Homes with other roofing materials on both sides of the Coxes burned down.

## Facing Reality

When Conroy heard the fire was in Ramona, she figured she had plenty of time to prepare in case it moved closer to her home in the Scripps Ranch community. It was 8:15 Sunday

morning, and Conroy and her husband Bill began to leisurely pack a few necessities and valuables into boxes upstairs. She kept an eye on the sky through a window. "The smoke was getting really, really dark and it was changing its look," Conroy said.

She was unaware that winds had picked up to 40 mph (18 m/s), sending a mile-wide wall of flames straight toward Scripps Ranch. In minutes, it hopped over a freeway and was within a mile of the Conroys' home. Pat looked out the window and saw flames on the hill.

Forget the boxes. There wasn't enough time to cart them downstairs and put them into the car. She and Bill rushed out of their house, told the single mother next door to bring her two children and animals and get into their car, and they evacuated.

"I expected to lose my home," Conroy said.

Her fears were all but confirmed 15 minutes later, when they received a call on a cell phone from their home-security company.

"Your smoke alarm is going off," the dispatcher said.

"We know," Conroy answered. "Don't call the fire department; they're already there."

Two doors down, a house with a wood-shake roof ignited and quickly was reduced to ash. Flaming embers swirled and



Some houses burned to the ground while other adjacent homes with metal roofing stood unscathed.

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blew hundreds of feet into the air. Fire swooped down brush-covered slopes and into the housing tract, feeding its need for fuel. But when the flames and embers encountered the stone-coated steel roofs, they did no damage. Four of the seven homes that survived on Rue Parc had Metro's stone-coated steel roofing, which has a Class A fire-resistance rating.

"I am 100 percent sure that the steel roof saved my home," Conroy said. "Look around. Every wood-shake roof is gone."

Just four months before the fires, the Conroys' house also had a wood-shake roof. When they chose the metal roof, fire safety was their primary consideration.

For Steve Kelchlin, president of West Coast Roofing in San Diego, a contractor who installed many of the steel roofs in the Conroys' community, the post-fire situation was mind-boggling. "I came here to do roof inspections and people were coming up to me in tears thanking me for saving their homes. It was very humbling. I'm grateful we helped them, but I'm also saddened by the others that didn't make it."

## A Saving Grace

Nine miles (15 km) to the east, Joy and William Cox experienced emotions similar to those of the Conroys. Two years ago they also had a wood-shake roof on their home on La Plata Court in the hills of Ramona. Then a neighbor dumped a barbecue grill full of hot coals and ash onto the ground and immediately set the neighborhood on fire.

William Cox battled with a garden hose to save their wood-topped house. Fortunately, a plane swooped overhead and dropped fire retardant to quell the blaze. After that, the Coxes decided to reroof--this time with a metal shake roof from Metro.

"Thank goodness we did," Joy Cox said.

Her thankfulness increased in the days after the October 2003 fires. Before the fire reached Scripps Ranch, the Coxes saw it in full force. Three houses with other types of roofs farther up the hill on their street went up in flames. A house across the street and one next door also totally burned.

"When we were evacuated at 2:30 in the afternoon, our house was standing but the neighbors' homes were gone," Cox said.

A fire truck from the California Department of Forestry barreled up La Plata Court during the onslaught and saw the homes burning. According to Cox, a firefighter said they noticed the steel roof, pulled the truck onto the Coxes' side yard, and sprayed a wall of foam "because we could save yours; we couldn't save theirs." ○

Randy Franz is an independent writer in the metal construction industry.



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