



NEWS RELEASE

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FIRE SEASON BEGINS EARLY THIS YEAR

Fire protection officials cite above-average number of fires in first eight weeks of 2007

SAN BERNARDINO — The 2007 fire season got an early start this year due to prolonged drought. This means mountain-area residents need to be more vigilant and better prepared than ever, officials with the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) say.

Although San Bernardino Mountains have fared better than other areas in the state, the low rainfall this winter keeps the fire danger high. Residents and property owners need to create a defensible space around their homes and property.

“We want every person living, working or playing on the mountaintop to be our lookouts, to be another set of eyes and ears to anticipate fire hazards and do their part to reduce the danger of a catastrophic wildland fire,” said Fire Chief Pat Dennen of the San Bernardino County Fire Department. “The continuing drought conditions and bark beetle infestation have left the forest tinder dry and with tens of thousands of dead trees as fuel.”

Fire risk reduction is the responsibility of property owners, and they need to act soon if they want assistance with dead tree removal. They have until June 30, 2007, to get dead or diseased trees marked for removal. MAST expects the removal of trees registered by the June 30 deadline to continue through the end of 2008. Property owners can contact the San Bernardino County Hazardous Tree Abatement Program at (909) 867-1240.

Although tree mortality appears to have leveled off, trees continue to die at an alarming rate. MAST member Southern California Edison reports that crews under contract to the power company are removing, on average, 800 dead trees per month, about the same as last year. However, before the drought—now in its seventh year—and the resulting bark beetle emergency, SCE’s vegetation maintenance contractor removed about one tree a month in the mountain area.

To reduce the fire hazard, MAST members have taken out more than 1 million dead, dying or diseased trees since 2004. The Hazardous Tree Abatement Program has significantly reduced the potential for catastrophic wildfires, but the \$70 million in funding from the federal government is due to expire at the end of the year.

Equally important, the focus of the MAST abatement program is now shifting to the thinning of live trees (green and ladder fuels) to restore the health of the forest and further reduce the fire danger.

Green trees and vegetation, especially those with low moisture content and high oil content, also burn and can fuel a fire. Ladder fuel consists of small trees and vegetation growing under mature trees, allowing flames to climb into the higher tree branches and cause crown fires in the treetops.

“The forest is overstocked due to years of fire suppression, so it’s critical that live trees are thinned to further reduce the fire hazard, restore the health of the forest, and help stop the spread of the bark beetle infestation,” said Forest Supervisor Jean Wade-Evans.

Statewide, in the first eight weeks of the year (January 1 through February 25), 643 fires had burned 1,665 acres on land under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, now known as CalFire. In terms of the number of fires, that’s an 18 percent increase over the five-year average for the same interval. During the first eight weeks of last year, 642 fires had charred 1,654 acres, while the five-year average for this interval is 544 fires burning 1,856 acres, CAL FIRE reported.

The U.S. Forest Service, which administers 20 million acres of parkland in California, reported 1,888 fires burned 453,500 acres last year. That’s the third-highest amount of acreage burned in a single year in the last two decades.

During the 2003 fire season, the devastating Grand Prix and Old fires swept through the San Bernardino Mountains. Fire protection officials do not want a repeat. The Grand Prix fire, which burned out of control for two weeks in late October and early November that year, charred 66,894 acres, destroyed 136 structures, and damaged 71 structures. The Old Fire, which burned three weeks before it was contained, charred 91,281 acres, destroyed 1,003 structures and damaged seven structures.

ABOUT THE MOUNTAIN AREA SAFETY TASKFORCE

Formed in 2002, MAST is a coalition of local, state and federal government agencies, private companies and volunteer organizations in San Bernardino County that are concerned with public safety in the mountain areas of their respective jurisdictions. For more information about MAST, visit www.calmast.org.

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