



NEWS RELEASE

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SURVEY SHOWS NEARLY 90% OF MOUNTAIN PROPERTY OWNERS HAVE TAKEN STEPS TO PROTECT THEIR PROPERTY FROM WILDFIRE

Importance of removing dead trees now widely understood, but survey will inform MAST's public outreach efforts to educate public about thinning "green fuel" to reduce wildfire risk

SAN BERNARDINO — Eighty-nine percent of the respondents to a recent telephone survey conducted by San Bernardino County and the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) said they have taken steps to protect their property in case of a wildfire.

The survey, conducted in late December 2006 and early January 2007, was designed to measure the level of fire-safety-awareness among residents and property owners and to gauge how many had acted to reduce the risk of fire. The survey follows a five-year campaign by MAST and its member agencies to remove trees killed by the bark beetle, reduce fire danger, and educate the public about what preventive measures they can take to protect their property from catastrophic wildfires.

The results of the survey also will be used to guide a two-year public outreach program launched in November. The new campaign will shift MAST's program focus from removing dead trees to encompass thinning live trees, or "green fuel," to make forests more healthy and fire resistant.

Over the past five years, MAST agencies have removed roughly 1 million dead or dying trees using \$70 million in grants from the U.S. government. However, existing grant money will expire by December 2007, and residents have until June 30 to register trees for removal at no cost to homeowners. MAST expects removal of trees registered by the June 30 deadline to continue through the end of 2008.

The survey results showed that only 16 percent of respondents knew the dead tree removal program was ending and only 18 percent know about the June 30 deadline for marking trees for removal.

Marks for the MAST programs were high, with 90 percent of respondents ranking the education program as "very" or "somewhat" effective. Ninety-six percent of respondents said the MAST tree removal program was "very" or "somewhat" effective.

For the random survey, more than 500 mountain property owners participated, including residents, non-residents and business owners. Of those, 86.4 percent said they had cleared brush within 30 feet of their home and structures, or within 100 feet if on a hillside, while 83.5 percent of the respondents said they had removed dead or dying trees, all important goals of the MAST education program.

“The results are heartening in that in the five years since we formed MAST, public awareness of the taskforce and our healthy forest message has increased significantly,” said Assistant Chief Peter Brierty, San Bernardino County Fire Department. “However, there is still work to be done. We need to get all the mountain property owners aware of MAST’s goals and translate that awareness into greater action.”

While public awareness about the importance of removing dead trees and measures to protect homes from fires was high, the survey also demonstrated low levels of action and awareness about thinning green fuel. For example, only 39 percent of respondents said they had thinned live trees on their land.

Due to years of fire suppression, the forest is overstocked, with some 100 to 200 trees per acre, where a healthy forest has 40 to 60 trees per acre. Thus, thinning live trees is a key component of MAST’s healthy forest initiative.

“We recommend spacing trees about 20 to 30 feet apart to promote a healthy forest and fire safety, so we’re asking property owners to thin out the saplings and low-value trees,” said Chief Tom O’Keefe, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. “Typically, low-value trees are eight to ten inches in diameter or less. Taking out these small trees will free up more resources for the larger, mature trees, allowing them to regain their vigor and be more resistant to attack by bark beetles.”

Seven years of drought and the bark beetle infestation have combined to kill millions of trees in Southern California forests, resulting in the extreme fire hazard in the San Bernardino County mountains.

“Thin is in — with these continuing drought conditions, we need to thin live trees to restore the vitality of the forest and reduce the potential for a catastrophic fire,” said Chief John Morley, Big Bear Lake Fire Department. “It’s important for the public to understand that the trees on their property are part of the forest, too. And, ultimately, it’s their responsibility to create a defensible space around their homes and structures.”

A number of resources are available to property owners. They can contact officials at their local fire protection agency for information on fire safety and tree removal. They also can get free advice from a licensed, professional forester on developing a forest thinning plan through the Forest Care program initiated by CDF and the San Bernardino National Forest Association. Property owners also may be eligible for reimbursement of up to 75 percent of the cost of implementing a Forest Care Plan for forest thinning. They can contact Forest Care toll-free at 1-888-883-THIN or visit www.sbnfa.org.

The full results of the MAST survey are available upon request.

ABOUT THE MOUNTAIN AREA SAFETY TASKFORCE

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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