



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 4, 2007

Contact: Tracey Martinez, Information Officer
San Bernardino County Fire Department
(909) 386-8408, (800) 426-8689, pager #3307

MAST CREATES COMMUNITY-BASED BUFFER ZONES TO REDUCE FIRE HAZARD IN SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY MOUNTAINS

Thinning green vegetation decreases risk of catastrophic wildfire and promotes forest health

SAN BERNARDINO — To further reduce the fire hazard in the San Bernardino County Mountains, the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) is thinning green vegetation in strategic locations to create community-based buffer zones. This reduces the potential for a devastating fire and promotes a healthy forest.

Buffer zones significantly decrease the amount of fuel available to a fire and help firefighters protect not only individual homes but entire communities from catastrophic wildfires like the Grand Prix and Old fires in 2003, fire officials say.

While the focus of MAST has been on the removal of dead, dying and diseased trees, the emphasis has shifted to thinning green vegetation to reduce the density of brush and small trees that help a fire spread on the ground and, ladder-like, into the forest canopy.

The fundamental concept is to target community-based fuel areas for fire protection. This connects large areas by removing the trees that could either assist a fire moving from community to community or get from the forest into the homes.

“Now that more than 1.5 million dead trees have been removed by MAST members, it’s a natural progression to begin thinning green vegetation,” said Assistant Chief Peter Brierty. “We’re continuing the mission that Congressman Jerry Lewis started; it’s just that we’ve transitioned from the dead tree concept to thinning the forest.”

Dead trees that pose an immediate danger to property or access roads will still be removed, but this next phase of the community-based fire protection program is to remove ground fuels and ladder fuels, Brierty added.

The buffer zones are being created on both private land and forest service land, from Wrightwood to Oak Glen. Private landowners need to continue to fulfill their land clearance responsibility in order to provide total community protection.

“We are getting phenomenal cooperation from the Forest Service,” Brierty said. “We have negotiated projects going onto national forest land, which makes the program more effective than it would have been if limited to private land.”

Where private land is targeted for the creation of a buffer zone, MAST representatives will contact the property owner for permission to remove live vegetation. Once permission is granted, NRCS officials establish the parameters for the project and identify the trees and brush. The County’s Hazardous Tree Abatement Program awards the contracts to private contractors through a bidding process.

The buffer zones are selected by fire officials at the local, state and federal levels, including the San Bernardino County Fire Department, local fire departments, CAL FIRE, Natural Resources Conservation Service and the U.S. Forest Service.

“The targeted areas are based upon what fire behavior analysts, fuel analysts and fire chiefs believe will best protect a community from catastrophic wildfire,” Brierty explained.

Because the moisture content of the trees and brush is so low, it makes them more vulnerable to fire and parasites, such as the bark beetle. Thinning green vegetation not only reduces the fire danger, it helps restore the vigor of the drought-afflicted forest by freeing up more resources — water, minerals and sunlight — for the remaining trees and vegetation.

The thinning concept also helps property owners create a defensible space around their homes. They are being urged to cooperate by thinning the live trees and vegetation on their property, whether they are within one of the buffer zones or not, to gain an upper hand on the bark beetle infestation and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The problem fire officials face is that not only does green vegetation burn, the forest is overstocked — 100 to 200 trees per acre, where a healthy forest has 40 to 60 trees per acre. It is recommended that trees be spaced 20 to 30 feet apart (trunk to trunk), depending on the ground slope and other factors. This will also create a park-like environment.

“Thinning green vegetation ultimately saves property, homes and lives in the San Bernardino County Mountains,” said MAST officials.

ABOUT 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.

###