



NEWS RELEASE

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

SURVEY SHOWS MORE MOUNTAIN PROPERTY OWNERS HAVE TAKEN ACTION TO PROTECT THEIR PROPERTIES FROM WILDFIRE

Significant increase in awareness that “Healthy Forest” means minimizing density, thinning live trees, reducing overgrowth

SAN BERNARDINO—A recent survey has found that more residents and property owners in the San Bernardino County Mountains have taken action to protect their homes and businesses from wildfire than two seasons ago. The survey also found that awareness and knowledge about fire safety measures increased significantly since San Bernardino County and the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) launched a public outreach campaign in 2006.

The County and MAST conducted the recent survey as a follow-up to a study performed in January 2007 to assess mountain property owners’ awareness of wildfire prevention efforts. The general results of the 2008 survey found that respondents reported greater awareness of wildfire prevention measures, were more prepared for a natural disaster, and had taken more steps to prevent the spread of wildfires and potential danger to their property.

“These results confirm the effectiveness of our public education effort to raise the awareness of and participation in fire safety and wildfire prevention programs on the mountaintop,” said San Bernardino County Fire Assistant Chief Peter Brierty.

For the 2008 study, a total of 506 residents, 127 non-resident property owners, and 109 local area business property owners/managers were randomly surveyed during October.

In terms of documented behavior change, the survey found that 96 percent of residents had taken steps to protect their homes from wildfire.

Moreover, the survey tabulated a 9.2 percent drop in residents who had not taken steps to reduce fire risk because they didn't know what to do.

“This indicated that the campaign had been successful in imparting specific action items—a necessary component for behavior change,” Brierty added. “Now we can adjust our focus and zero in on those areas where more work needs to be done to further reduce the potential for a catastrophic wildfire in our mountains.”

Compared with the 2007 study, the 2008 survey indicated that respondents from all three groups were more proactive in taking steps to protect their property:

- 10.9 percent increase in residents who had thinned and/or removed live trees from their property
- More than 80 percent of residents had taken most of the nine possible steps to reduce fire risk
- At least 75 percent of business property owners/managers took steps to protect their property

The overall majority of residents (78 percent) as well as non-residents (80 percent) surveyed in 2008 believe they are adequately prepared for a natural disaster.

A key component of the campaign, that the Forest Care Program could reimburse property owners up to 75 percent of the cost of thinning trees, saw a 20 percent increase in awareness among residents and a 32.5 percent increase among non-resident property owners.

The survey also found that 18.2 percent more residents and 19.7 percent more non-residents than in 2007 were aware that trees should be spaced 20 to 30 feet apart. In addition, a 14.6 percent increase, was measured among residents familiar with the term “Healthy Forest,” a key term pushed by the campaign in communicating fire-safety messages.

The number of residents who said the term “Healthy Forest” meant minimizing density/thinning trees/no overgrowth increased 12.7 percent, accompanied by a corresponding drop in those who said it meant live/healthy/growing trees. This is important because the term, as defined by the campaign, referred to reduced forest density, rather than the health of individual trees.

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

However, the 2007 survey found that while public awareness about the importance of removing dead trees and measures to protect homes from fires was high, it also demonstrated low levels of action and awareness about thinning green fuel.

The survey’s executive summary noted that the outreach campaign, conceived and directed by the public relations, advertising and marketing firm Cook & Schmid, was a shift in messaging from removing dead trees, which had been the focus for the previous five years, to removing live trees and green fuel.

“This represented an enormous challenge, not only because it required starting from scratch in terms of messaging, but also because there was a known bias in the mountain areas against cutting down live trees,” the report concluded.

Complete results of the 2007 and 2008 surveys can be found on the MAST web site, http://calmast.org/sbc/html/public_outreach_program.asp.

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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