



NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Tracey Martinez
Public Information Officer
San Bernardino County Fire Department
(909) 386-8408

Paul Laustsen
Public Information Officer
Natural Resources Conservation Service
(951) 684-3722

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY ANNOUNCES LAUNCH OF PUBLIC OUTREACH PROGRAM FOR MOUNTAIN FIRE SAFETY AWARENESS

Two-Year program initiated to encourage property owners to make forest more fire-safe as public funding for tree removal expires

SAN BERNARDINO — San Bernardino County officials today announced the launch of a two-year program designed to urge property owners in the San Bernardino Mountains to thin the trees and vegetation on their property to help make the forest more fire-safe.

The focus of the program is to inform property owners of the need to remove not just dead trees, but certain live trees and vegetation, from their property to gain an upper hand on the bark beetle infestation and reduce the risk of devastating wild fires like the Grand Prix and Old fires in 2003. The program is being designed and implemented by Cook & Schmid, under a contract approved by the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Nov. 7.

The tree removal program will ultimately save property, homes and lives in the San Bernardino Mountains, County officials said.

“A thinner forest is a healthier forest, and healthier forest is a fire-resistant forest,” said San Bernardino County Assistant Chief Peter Brierty. “The county’s funding source is limited, so it is more important than ever for property owners to do more to remove trees and trim their bushes.”

While maintaining fire safety on private land has always been the responsibility of property owners, over the past three years, the County and other members of the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) — including the U.S. Forest Service, California Department of Forestry, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Southern California Edison, and CalTrans — have worked together to remove approximately 500,000 hazardous trees, of which more than 250,000 were dead and dying trees on private property, thanks to a \$70 million grant from the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. In addition, several hundred dead and dying trees have been removed utilizing funding from other programs.

Existing grant money for dead tree removal is expected to run out by December 2007. Any trees eligible for removal under existing grant money must be identified and marked by authorities no later than May 2007.

“The removal of tens of thousands of dead trees surrounding mountain communities was a critical first step to help reduce fuel hazards,” said Tom Schott, resource conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. “The focus of the tree removal program is now moving to ‘green fuel,’ live trees in densely wooded areas.”

The greater the density, the greater the danger of bark beetle infestation, Schott explains. The trees need to be thinned out to reduce competition among the trees for moisture and restore the health of the remaining trees and the watershed. This will help make the trees more resistant to bark beetle attack and reduce the extreme fire hazard.

While existing grant money for dead tree removal is running out, property owners can still get free advice from a licensed, professional forester in developing a forest thinning plan and many are eligible for up to 75 percent reimbursement for implementing their plan through the California Department of Forestry’s Forest Care program. For more information, call 1-888-883-THIN or visit www.sbnfa.org.

Millions of trees have died from the bark beetle infestation, and trees continue to die. When the bark beetles attack, they can kill a stand of trees in as little as two to three weeks, increasing the fire danger. That’s why it is imperative property owners begin to act now, County officials said.

“Before the late 1800s, frequent wildfires cleared the forest understory, keeping the forest open and park-like,” said Glen Barley, a Forester with the California Dept. of Forestry and Fire Protection. “But more than one hundred years of fire suppression has allowed many more trees to grow and survive than the ecosystem can support.

“Followed by a six-year drought, this has resulted in too many trees competing for too little moisture,” Barley added. “As a result, the trees are highly susceptible to bark beetle attack. Beetles have been at epidemic proportions.”

The bark beetle infestation continues to kill trees. The forest’s hallmark pine trees have a natural resistance to bark beetles — when attacked, the trees produce sap that expels the beetles. But years of drought have made it difficult for trees to produce enough sap to ward off beetle infestation and the trees die.

“If we want to save our forests and protect our property from devastating wild fires, we need the cooperation of all property owners,” Assistant Chief Brierty said. “This is a communitywide issue and it requires communitywide participation for it to succeed and ensure not only the safety of the forest but the lives of the people who live, work and play in the forest.”

Brierty said he understands why property owners don’t want to cut down live trees, but the forest must be made fire-safe. “People live in our mountains because they love the forest.”

It’s also the law. The state legislature revised Public Resource Code 4291 in 2005, mandating property owners in mountainous areas, forest-covered lands or any land that is covered with flammable material must create at minimum a 100-foot defensible space (or to the property line) around their homes and other

structures. This does not mean the property must be clear-cut to bare soil. It primarily involves thinning and breaking up the continuity of ladder fuels and large areas filled with contiguous shrubs that can readily transmit fire.

County and state officials remind the public that property owners are responsible for making their property fire safe. They point to public education programs and the success of the weed abatement program as evidence that property owners, once they understand the value of reducing the fire danger, will initiate fuel reduction activities around their homes well before any abatement notices come out

“And there is, literally, a bright side to this — by thinning your trees, you will let in a lot more sunlight and your property looks nicer, more park-like,” Brierty said. “We have dozens of property owners who have already complied, and they now acknowledge the multiple benefits of thinning the trees on their property and around their homes. The healthier forest will also add natural support to the region’s valuable watershed.”

For general tree removal advice, including information concerning regulatory requirements, financial assistance programs, and tree removal services in the San Bernardino Mountains area, contact the San Bernardino County Fire Department Hazardous Tree Abatement Program at (909) 867-1240, or the San Jacinto Mountain Area Resource Center at (951) 659-3337, or the California Dept. of Forestry and Fire Protection, San Bernardino Unit, (909) 881-6900.

Officials advise that keeping a mix of plant species of varying ages on the property lessens the chances of severe insect or disease problems. Species diversity also provides better habitat for wildlife. And property owners should consider eliminating their lawn or reducing its size and planting low-water-use ground cover and shrubs instead.

For guidelines on how to manage vegetation and recommendations for low-water-use plants, see “A Landscape Guide for Mountain Homes.” The booklet is available online at http://www.calmast.org/mast/public/pdf/landscape_guide.pdf or by calling (909) 337-8555.

For additional information, contact your local fire protection agency.

ABOUT MOUNTAIN AREA SAFETY TASKFORCE

MAST is a coalition of local, state and federal government agencies, private companies and volunteer organizations in San Bernardino and Riverside counties 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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