

NEWS

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County leads effort to remove tree threat from burn area

The recent wildfires in the San Bernardino County mountains may have been all but extinguished, but they have left behind thousands of towering hazards.

Although they may look strong and stable, the virtually countless blackened evergreens killed by the fires could fall at any moment, killing returning residents and emergency crews, destroying the homes that survived the infernos, and damming up waterways, leading to deadly debris flows when the rains come.

That's why the County of San Bernardino is leading a multi-agency effort to cut down the trees, and in many cases cause them to fall in such a way that they act to direct water away from communities and down the mountain into existing flood-control channels.

Crews from the San Bernardino County Fire Department, Department of Public Works, and Solid Waste Division have teamed up with Caltrans, Southern California Edison, the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, and U.S. Forest Service Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) teams to immediately identify, cut, and remove blackened trees.

"This effort is another example of how much better we have become in addressing disasters and dealing with the aftermath," said Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul Biane.

Chairman Biane cited improved public communication, smoother evacuations, and speedier establishment of assessment and relief efforts as other examples of how the County of San Bernardino has improved how it deals with emergencies.

"It's unfortunate that we're getting so much practice at dealing with calamity," Biane said. "However, we learn from each one, and we're applying those lessons in efforts that save lives and bring about quick recovery."

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Southern California Edison crews have already begun removing blackened trees that threaten power lines and nearby homes. This is a top priority because downed power lines are a leading cause of wildfires.

County crews are also busy marking and removing trees and planning for disposal. Those plans include transforming destroyed evergreens from flood hazards into flood control tools.

Deadly post-fire debris flows often occur after blackened trees fall into streambeds and block flowing water. The water collects until the weight and pressure break the blockage, sending a lethal torrent of water, mud, rocks, and other debris barreling down the mountain.

By bringing the trees down along the banks of creeks and streams, crews can help improve the safe and steady flow of water during storms, said San Bernardino County Assistant Fire Chief and County Fire Marshal Peter Brierty.

The county has already amassed a great deal of experience bringing down dead trees, leading the effort to cut down well over a million hazardous trees killed by bark beetles. Many of the county employees involved in the bark beetle effort are also taking part in the blackened tree removal program.

The public can obtain information on the county's other fire-related efforts by clicking on the disaster information link on the county's website at www.sbcounty.gov.

Relief and recovery information is also available on the website, as well as by dialing 211 within the county, 1-888-435-7565 outside the county, and by visiting the county Fire Emergency Local Assistance Center (FELAC) at the Dome building at the National Orange Show Events Center, 689 South E Street, Gate 7 in San Bernardino.

The FELAC is a one-stop recovery center with more than 40 federal, state, local, public, and private agencies providing disaster recovery services. Agencies housed at the center will help fire victims with medical services, disaster aid, rebuilding assistance, document recovery, communications, employment, voting, and other recovery programs.