

Protecting against embers key to fire safety

“Once burned, twice shy” (Local, Aug. 24) reports that residents at The Trails at Rancho Bernardo, near San Pasqual Agricultural Preserve and Open Space, are demanding additional removal of vegetation under the impression that this would reduce chances of their houses burning down. They would be better off asking themselves what they can do to make their house more fire-safe and less likely to be penetrated by embers.

They would be well-served by taking a look at what's in their yard, what is sitting around that is ignitable. Looking at their decks and wood fences would be time well-spent. Brush management more than 100 feet from a structure has very little or no value compared with taking simple steps to protect the house.

The Union-Tribune previously reported that more than 70 percent of the houses in Rancho Bernardo burned because of ember intrusion. Taking steps to protect the house offers permanent annual returns for no extra expense. Rancho Santa Fe has a well-known and highly regarded shelter-in-place program that implements these principles.

CARRIE SCHNEIDER
San Diego

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Formerly revered trees get bad rap after wildfires

By Robert Krier
STAFF WRITER

September 6, 2008

Eucalyptuses are nothing more than multistory matchsticks ready to burst into flames when Santa Ana winds strike.

The neighbor's pine? Pretty. Pretty dangerous, that is. And that sycamore sucks up a zillion gallons of costly water.

In fire-and drought-ravaged San Diego County, such half-truths and myths have put formerly revered trees in a new light.

Yanking out any healthy tree, once seen as almost sinful, now is being viewed by some as prudent.

Chuck Eckels cut down six Australia-native Brisbane box trees on his half-acre Escondido lot about a month after the Witch Creek fire roared past.

"I look at trees as detrimental to the property as opposed to beneficial," Eckels said.

His attitude is not an aberration. A "less vegetation, the better" approach, Cal Fire urban forester Lynnette Short said, has led many people to needlessly chop down healthy trees.

"People are taking drastic measures," Short said. "There are a lot of misconceptions out there."

Local foresters and arborists want trees to stand tall again. They met last week to begin crafting policies that communities can use to save trees while protecting property. They say most well-tended trees pose little fire risk and can even prevent houses from igniting in some instances.

Pete Scully, a division chief for Cal Fire, said healthy trees have gotten a bad rap.

"Live trees, properly maintained and spaced adequately, are fine," he said.



U-T file photo
Carlsbad firefighter Colby Buckhouse (left) and Capt. Rich Vance sprayed water on a home and trees in Del Dios as the Witch Creek fire roared through on Oct. 23.



Union-Tribune file photo
A charred tree near Lake Hodges stood amid the barren landscape left by the Witch Creek fire in October 2007. Local arborists hope the public will see trees as part of the solution to fires.

Arborists say the threat from pines and eucalyptuses in particular has been exaggerated. They say healthy trees aren't the guzzlers people think they are, so tearing them out to conserve water is often unwarranted.

“We want the public to realize that trees are not the problem but part of the solution,” said Mike Palat, an arborist and chairman of the San Diego Urban Forest Council, which includes arborists, government agencies, landscapers and nonprofit organizations.

Good and bad

Fire-conscious arborists say the Mexican fan palm is one tree they won't defend. Drew Potocki, urban forester for the city of San Diego, said the palm's fibrous material ignites easily, and strong winds often turn burning bark chunks into “flaming, flying Frisbees.”

But pines and eucalyptuses – if solitary, properly spaced and 30 feet from a home – are equipped to survive most blazes, Short said.

“One of the major misconceptions I get, even from fire departments, is that eucalyptus are time bombs ready to go off in the next fire,” Short said. “That's really wrong. I have eucalyptus on my property, and I would never think of cutting them down.”

Arborists say no matter the variety, keeping the ground around trees free of litter is key in fire prevention. Yet many people erroneously conclude that any tree's presence greatly raises the risk.

That's how Eckels viewed it. He said some of his 15-foot trees, which all were more than 20 feet from his home, had singed leaves and blackened trunks, though the fire was hundreds of yards away. That was all the evidence he needed. He said he saw plenty of green trees going up in flames on television, and he wanted to eliminate that possibility on his property.

“I actually liked the trees,” Eckels said. “They provide shade, and they made the property look nice. But I don't want tiki torches next to my house.”

Eckels' fears are largely unfounded, said Anne Fege, co-founder of San Diego Partners for Biodiversity and the San Diego Fire Recovery Network.

“Fires don't ignite a house because your trees have a few scorched leaves,” said Fege, also a member of the San Diego Urban Forest Council.

Cal Fire's “100 feet of defensible space around the home” mantra has been taken to extremes, said Short, a former firefighter. The standard doesn't mean remove all vegetation within 100 feet, yet that's what many people are doing, she said.

Cal Fire says healthy, pruned trees 30 feet or more from a home, including pines, can safely remain if owners have created “horizontal and vertical spacing between plants” within 100 feet of the home.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune
Arborists say eucalyptus trees, such as these along Golden Hill Drive in Balboa Park, are equipped to survive most blazes if they are properly spaced and at least 30 feet from a home.

Many houses that burned in 2003 and last year ignited when wind-driven embers from a mile or more away landed on a flammable part of a home. Shade trees lining a property will catch flying embers before they can hit a home, Potocki said. “The trees could be doing you more good than harm.”

Some people have made matters worse since the fires by scraping their property clean down to the dirt, said Rick Halsey, a biologist, wildland firefighter and director of the California Chaparral Institute in Escondido. He said that's what a man down his street did.

“What these people end up doing is creating a bowling alley for embers to blow right through to the house,” he said.

Benefits to consider

Water issues are also a growing concern. Some trees could suffer – again because of misinformation, Palat said. He has seen people cutting back on tree irrigation, and if the drought continues, he fears people might jump to conclusions and remove trees unnecessarily.

Most established trees need less irrigation than common landscape plants and turf grasses, Palat said, because trees find their own groundwater. Shade trees also keep nearby vegetation cooler, Potocki said, and that reduces irrigation needs.

Despite fire and drought concerns, trees are more important today than ever, said Robin Rivet, associate manager of the Cool Communities Shade Tree program, which provides free trees to property owners as a means to help lower energy costs. Trees not only create shade to cool homes, they increase property values, help fight global warming, attract wildlife, reduce erosion and water pollution, and according to studies, even lower crime rates, she said.

“Most people have no idea of the value of a mature tree,” Rivet said.

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Uncut brush such as this in Valley Center makes for a high-risk fire area. (Photo by Waldo Nilo - staff photographer)

REGION: Still not ready to fight fire

By DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

As San Diego County moves into that scary time of year when hot, dry winds roar in from the desert and threaten to transform even the tiniest spark into an inferno, a question lingers: Could another deadly wildfire strike this fall?

The answer, experts say, is yes.

The disasters of 2003 and 2007 reduced much of the county to ashes. But two-thirds of the chaparral-carpeted backcountry remains and would provide plenty of fresh fuel for wind-fanned flames.



[Download the map](#)

As well, last year's fires dispelled a commonly held myth that brush, once it burns, won't threaten again for decades: the 198,000-acre Witch Creek fire tore through a swath of tender vegetation that sprouted after the 2003 fires.

However, regional leaders say they are taking steps to bolster San Diego County's ability to make a stand against the next wildfire.

The county government has spent millions to clear dead, dying and diseased trees in the forest, required fireproof building materials and automatic fire sprinklers in new backcountry homes, and urged homeowners to clear flammable brush around homes, said county Supervisor Dianne Jacob, who represents Ramona and East County.

But other measures, such as building a regional fire department and assembling a fleet of firefighting aircraft, will take time and require area residents to raise their taxes ---- something that, until now, they have been unwilling to do.

Increasing taxes to increase protection

Following the recommendation of a regional panel, the county Board of Supervisors recently decided to place a \$52 annual parcel tax on the November ballot. That ballot measure, which requires two-thirds voter approval, would raise \$25 million for aircraft and fire engines for the fledgling regional department, and another \$25 million for existing departments to spend how they see fit.

Given that there is so much more to do, though, another wildfire would overwhelm the region as badly as the last two, said former San Diego fire Chief Jeff Bowman, an Escondido resident.

Even if voters do approve the parcel tax, it won't provide money to hire regional firefighters, Bowman said.

"They have not done anything about boots on the ground, which is the No. 1 problem that firefighters face ---- that they get outmanned every time," he said.

Noting the breadth of the backcountry, where most wildfires start, county Supervisor Bill Horn defended the measure's focus on equipment.

"The area between Sunshine Summit and Fallbrook is massive," Horn said. "That's why we need air power."

In any event, Bowman was adamant.

"We're still not ready (for the next wildfire)," Bowman said. "We're not even close."

A million to one

Then again, some suggest the region, by definition, never will be ready.

Richard Minnich, a UC Riverside professor who studies chaparral fire behavior, contends there is virtually nothing humans can do to slow fires fueled by Southern California's infamous autumn Santa Anas, with their near hurricane-force winds, bone-dry humidity and hot temperatures.

In their frustration, politicians turn a blind eye to the overwhelming force of such fires, which outmatches the resources of any fire department by something like "a million to one," Minnich said. They put way too much confidence in tools such as helicopters and water bombers, he said.

"It makes no difference how many Tonka toys you've got," he said.

Still, a number of experts say the lack of a regional agency has hurt San Diego County, and is at least partly why it bore the brunt of the recent firestorms.

In the fall of 2003, raging wind-driven wildfires torched three-quarters of a million acres across six Southern California counties, killing 24 people and destroying more than 3,600 homes.

More than half that acreage, and about two-thirds of the deaths and damage, was in San Diego County.

Last October, another wave of wildfires swept across a half-million acres in four Southern California counties. Once again, San Diego County was hit hardest, with 368,000 acres burned. The county lost 1,750 homes and 10 lives.

The Old West

A blistering county grand jury report blamed the magnitude of local damage in part on the region's refusal to create a regional firefighting force, something every other large Southern California county has.

Jury members said the region's stubborn reliance on a backcountry volunteer fire protection system, which they likened to something out of "the Old West, when people banded together and formed groups to protect themselves," left San Diego County "woefully unprepared."

In their May 29 report, jury members detailed what happened in the two rounds of fires, and what experts said was necessary to better prepare for the next one ---- such as forming a regional agency and spending more money on aircraft and firefighters.

Bowman said it hasn't helped that agencies in San Diego County have been spending a combined \$470 million a year on firefighting compared to \$520 million in Orange County, which has the same population, but just one-fifth the land area. Los Angeles County agencies spend \$2.2 billion in a place that has many more people but about the same amount of land, he said.

"We realize that we cannot fight Mother Nature," said Michael Letendre, the 2007-08 grand jury foreman. "We're not saying that throwing money on the fire will solve the issue."

But Letendre said the jury believes a well-funded regional force can deliver a stronger, more coordinated response that saves homes and lives.

Regional benefits

Partly in response to the jury's report, and persistent criticism that San Diego-area residents are too stingy to dig into their pockets to protect their own property, the region's leaders are following through on plans for a regional department.

Leaders also recently created the position of county fire warden to direct regional firefighting efforts.

"We are trying to undo a bad decision made by the county three decades ago to get out of the fire business," said Jacob, the East County supervisor.

Jacob said the county government now is committed to spending \$15.5 million annually on

fire protection, which will keep more than 50 rural fire stations staffed all day, every day, all year.

She said the county is consolidating a dozen rural districts and putting full-time firefighters in areas that historically have had to rely on volunteers to douse flames. As a result, firefighters will be able to reach homes much faster than in the past, she said.

According to a new county report, firefighters will be able to travel from stations to threatened homes in less than five minutes 56 percent of the time, in five to 10 minutes 29 percent of the time, and in 10 to 20 minutes 8 percent of the time ---- or within 20 minutes 93 percent of the time.

Ralph Steinhoff, county fire services coordinator, said no reliable numbers from the past are available for a comparison because that wasn't a statistic the county kept. But he said the new times represent a clear improvement, given that backcountry stations often sat empty, forcing firefighters to respond from farther away.

Even so, the grand jury remains concerned that the county does not meet a national standard for response times.

Carl Peterson, assistant director of public fire protection for the National Fire Protection Association in Quincy, Mass., said that standard calls for full-time departments ---- such as the new regional one ---- to reach the scene of fires and other emergencies in five minutes 90 percent of the time.

County officials defend their lack of compliance with the nonbinding five-minute target, saying it is unreasonable in a diverse, spread-out, mountainous, unincorporated area.

Steve Erie, a UC San Diego political science professor who specializes in public safety issues, disagreed.

"With wind-driven events, don't you think that the same kinds of standards ought to apply, particularly when they have the potential to burn all the way to the coast?" Erie asked. "This isn't Kansas, Dorothy."

"Absolutely nothing"

Despite the new focus on a regional department, county officials dispute the notion that its presence would have made a difference last year or five years ago.

"During Cedar and in 2007, a majority of fire experts agreed that nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to stop the flames," Jacob said. "I was on the front lines both times and I heard the same thing from the chiefs in charge: The best we can do is get people out of harm's way."

Erie, the political science professor, disagreed.

"Los Angeles and Orange County and Riverside have been much more effective at early rapid response to wind-driven fires than has San Diego," Erie said. "And all of them have regional fire agencies."

He said the proof is in the numbers ---- San Diego County lost more houses and suffered more loss of life.

Nonsense, said Minnich, the UC Riverside professor who studies fire behavior. He said the losses were mere coincidence and proved nothing when set against the backdrop of the awesome power of nature.

Preparing to cope with that awesome power is something that not only fire departments must do, but something the residents of this fire-prone area must do as well, said Janet Upton, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or CalFire, in Sacramento.

Upton said homeowners need to clear brush around homes and make roofs, eaves, decks and outer walls fireproof.

"Living in the state of California, we have beautiful, beautiful surroundings," she said. "It is a wonderful place. But along with living here comes a responsibility. Unfortunately, there are four seasons here: fires, earthquakes, floods and mudslides."

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ENCINITAS: Council opposes fire tax proposition

By RUTH MARVIN WEBSTER - Staff Writer

ENCINITAS ---- Saying it was a bad deal for Encinitas, the City Council voted this week to draft a resolution opposing Proposition A, a regional fire protection measure on the November ballot.

The proposition, which requires a two-thirds majority to pass, would levy a yearly tax of \$52 on parcels up to 50 acres throughout the county to fund additional fire protection efforts and services in the region.

At Wednesday's City Council meeting, former Encinitas fire Chief Don Heiser urged the council to oppose the measure, saying it has some serious flaws.

"This county plan is aircraft dependent and I'll tell you what I teach and was taught to me ---- if your attack plan is aircraft dependent, it's a bad plan ...," Heiser said. "Don't support this; Say loud and clear, no."

Management Analyst Bob McSeveney and Fire Chief Mark Muir also presented a report to the council that said the Encinitas fire department spends more than \$10 million a year to protect approximately 19 square miles, while the county spends roughly \$15 million to protect 4,200 square miles.

Under Prop. A, half of the tax revenue raised in Encinitas would be sent back to the city for "new" fire measures. However, that money would be forfeited and returned to a regional fund if not used, said Councilwoman Maggie Houlihan.

The regional Joint Powers Authority would administer the program funded by Prop. A.

"We're putting all the power in their hands and giving them our checkbook," Councilman Dan Dalager said about the agency. "It's crazy."

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2007 WILDFIRES | ONE YEAR LATER

Fire danger zones

Updated maps show 3 areas at most risk of burning in giant blazes

By J. Harry Jones

STAFF WRITER

September 28, 2008

Last year, a fire task force created maps that pinpointed the areas of the county most vulnerable to infernos. Not long after, two of the October firestorm's largest blazes – Witch Creek and Harris – burned in those exact areas.

Now the task force has updated its maps to show three regions where the next massive blazes are most likely to hit.

The projections aren't meant to scare residents or suggest imminent danger, but rather to identify areas where federal and state money should be spent on protective projects such as forest thinning and building new firebreaks.

The bottom line is that although it seems San Diego County has burned and burned this decade, there are major swaths of land that haven't been touched in decades – in some cases more than 50 years.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

During a drought, stressed trees like this oak in the county's Wilderness Gardens Preserve near Pala in North County can add to an area's fire danger.

The three regions identified on the updated maps are:

- A 170,000-acre area stretching west from Mount Laguna to the outskirts of Spring Valley and El Cajon. The path of a fire there could mirror the Laguna fire of 1970, which at 180,000 acres stood as the second-largest ever to hit the state until 2003's Cedar fire.
- A 124,000-acre area stretching from the south side of Palomar Mountain toward Valley Center, Rainbow and Bonsall.
- A 32,000-acre area encompassing Rancho Santa Fe and touching parts of such communities as Rancho Peñasquitos, Fairbanks Ranch, Olivenhain, Del Dios and 4S Ranch.

Other areas of concern are the east and north sides of Palomar Mountain, the greater Julian area and 214,000 acres in the sparsely populated southeastern part of the county that includes the communities of Jacumba, Boulevard and Buckman Springs.

The Cedar fire destroyed hundreds of homes south of Julian, but the focus now is on a 6,000-acre area

mainly to the north and east of the town.

Minimizing the risk

The projections are based primarily on the age and density of brush in an area, as well as geographic characteristics and proximity to population centers. They assume Santa Ana wind conditions similar to those that existed in October 2003 and 2007.

The mapping is done by the Forest Area Safety Task Force, a collection of more than 80 federal, state and local agencies created in 2002 whose responsibility is making the county safer from wildfires.

That's not an easy task, and everyone in the firefighting community says that when Santa Ana winds are as strong as those in the 2003 and 2007 firestorms, little can be done to stop the advance of a massive blaze.

Combined, the Cedar, Paradise and Otay fires of 2003 and the Witch Creek/Guejito, Harris, Poomacha, Rice Canyon and Horno fires of 2007 burned more than 745,000 acres, or more than one-quarter of the county's total acreage of 2,687,936. The blazes also killed 29 people and destroyed about 4,300 homes.

There are ways to minimize risk before such disasters strike. Although a wind-driven wildfire can burn unchecked at its height, its flanks and heel, or backside, can be better controlled if firebreaks have been created and fuel thinned in those areas.

Agencies responsible for fire protection in "project areas" identified by the task force can make a better case for federal and state vegetation management funds.

Areas that have burned this decade can still be vulnerable. The fuel is much lighter, so fires would burn with less ferocity, but they could move faster as they rip through low-lying grass. Experts say homes in such areas are safer than before, but there will always be exceptions.

"After 2003, people thought they were safe because so much burned. Then look at what happened in 2007" in other parts of the county, said John Buchanan, spokesman for the North County Fire Protection District, which covers one of the areas highlighted by the maps.

"Basically anything that hasn't burned for a while can burn," Buchanan said.

The maps aren't predictors, and they don't suggest fire will hit this year. Although there were thousands of fires in the county between 1970 and 2003, there was a 33-year span between massive firestorms of the type the county has now come to dread.

But a decade-long drought in Southern California has heightened the fire risk. Lack of water means dry brush, which means danger.

Right now, conditions in the backcountry suggest the county might be spared a firestorm this year. Moisture levels of the brush are significantly higher than last year, and slightly above average for the past decade.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

A task force has identified 124,000 acres below Palomar Mountain - from Temecula on the north to Valley Center on the south - as being vulnerable to a firestorm.

Daryll Pina, a Cal Fire captain who specializes in fire prevention, said monsoonal flows have kept humidity levels relatively high this summer, and the mountains have seen above-average rainfall.

“That’s not to say there won’t be fires,” Pina said. “Even during our winter months we can experience fires in Southern California.”

The three regions

The 1970 Laguna fire began in the Cleveland National Forest near the Kitchen Creek area, not far from the community of Mount Laguna.

It began Sept. 26, when a tree branch downed a power line and sparked a fire. In only 36 hours, powerful Santa Ana winds carried the flames about 30 miles west, through thick chaparral, to the outskirts of El Cajon and Spring Valley.

The fire burned 175,000 acres, destroyed the communities of Harbison Canyon and Crest, consumed 382 homes and killed five people, all Mexican nationals who had entered the country illegally and were making their way through the backcountry.

In the intervening years, roughly one-third of the area burned in the Laguna fire footprint has burned again in smaller fires or in the massive Cedar fire, said Thom Porter, Cal Fire staff chief for the southern region of the state and head of the task force.

But many homes have been built where the flames once roared. Alpine, for instance, had 1,500 residents when the Laguna fire swept through. Now 17,000 people live there.

“There are areas of Alpine that are in particular risk,” primarily on the outskirts of town, Porter said.

Other communities that were in the Laguna fire’s path also have grown, including Descanso, Lakeside, Dehesa and Jamacha.

To the north, the 124,000-acre region encompassing Rainbow, Pala, Pauma Valley, parts of Valley Center and Bonsall also hasn’t burned in decades.

Pina says anyone who looks out the window while driving north on Interstate 15 can see the danger that lurks in the “rolling carpet” of 15-foot-tall brush.

Some of the natural growth in the Rainbow, Bonsall and Fallbrook areas is up to 90 years old, according to the Fallbrook Fire Safe Council. Funded with a \$100,000 grant from the federal Bureau of Land Management, efforts to get rid of hazardous vegetation have been ongoing all year.

As part of the effort, 2,000 notices to homeowners in areas identified as highest-risk were sent out this year offering help in creating a 100-foot safety clearance around the properties.

The maps suggest that 32,000 acres encompassing Rancho Santa Fe, with thousands of oil-rich eucalyptus trees and large properties, are also in jeopardy.

Eleven years ago, Rancho Santa Fe’s fire chief, since retired, predicted a blaze would someday leap from rooftop to rooftop in the exclusive community, where the median home price is about \$1.5 million. That

prediction hasn't changed.

Cliff Hunter, fire marshal for the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District, said the area presents special challenges. Most of the homes can't be seen from the road and have long driveways that are often gated. The lack of streetlights also makes it tough for firefighters to figure out which properties need protecting in a fire burning at night.

On the other hand, he said, property owners are quick to clear weeds or trim trees if asked, and their properties are usually well-irrigated.

Regardless of such measures, fire officials are always cautious, always watchful.

“Every acre in San Diego County has potential to burn, and it will,” Porter said.

The unanswered question is when.

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