

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Cal Fire officials start property inspections in Santa Cruz Mountains

By Tracey Kaplan
Mercury News

Posted: 05/04/2009 05:59:48 PM PDT

Updated: 05/05/2009 05:41:35 AM PDT

Monday got off to a soggy start after the weekend rains, not exactly ideal conditions for Capt. Matt Streck and his crew to start warning residents of the Santa Cruz Mountains about an enemy lurking nearby.

That overhanging tree branch. Those dead pine needles on the roof. Even the doggy bed on the front porch. All it takes is 12 hours of warm, dry weather to turn them into fuel for the kind of wildfire that last May consumed 35 homes.

Mindful of the power and early onset of that Summit blaze — and of the state's third year of drought — Cal Fire has assigned an extra nine seasonal firefighters to go door-to-door helping homeowners in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties create "defensible space."

The term refers to the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire in which the vegetation has been modified to reduce the threat of fire and give firefighters enough space to protect a home. Residents must clear an area 30 feet in diameter around their homes and reduce fuel within another 70 feet by leaving space between plants and not planting under tall trees. Those who don't comply face fines of at least \$100 for a first offense, and more than \$500 for repeated violations.

Defensible space may sound like yet another bureaucratic metaphor, but without that safe perimeter, Streck said, any house in the path of a wildfire is doomed.

"It's not a question of if there will be a fire, it's a question of when," said Streck, who at 6-feet-10 inches is tall enough to check most roof gutters for tinder-dry leaves just by peering down from a nearby hillside.

The inspection teams will be out all season long unless they're pulled off to fight fires — as they were last year, when dry lightning one weekend in June sparked more than 1,000 blazes.

Monday, Streck and seasonal firefighters Corey Ross and James Ausboe concentrated on the paved, more densely populated portion of Summit Road and its side streets, a world away from the remote section where the Summit fire blazed in 40 mph winds.

Cal Fire officials said they prefer to send fire engines with more experienced personnel, rather than cars marked with the department red and white logo, to the notoriously independent — and occasionally unlawful — end of Summit. While most residents there are friendly and law-abiding, the presence of some meth labs over the years has made Cal Fire cautious.

No one is home at the two-story peach house on foggy Morrill Road when Ross and Ausboe — dressed in blue uniforms — pull up the driveway and begin surveying the property. The first thing they notice is that the address isn't clearly marked: there's just a loaf-sized rock with faint lettering painted on it. So if the owners call 911, there's a chance fire crews won't be able to find the house in time.

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.



Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

There's moss buildup on the roof — the stuff makes great fuel when it dries unless it's pressure-washed or scraped off — and other hazards, including a red, highly flammable dog mat on the porch. One of the first things crews do when they arrive at a fire is grab anything flammable and throw it away from the house, a time-consuming and risky task since the fire is generally racing toward them.

But Ross and Ausboe don't cite the owner on Monday's inspection tour. Cal Fire prefers to warn residents, a policy that garnered some criticism last month after residents learned that a licensed contractor who was arrested on suspicion of causing the Summit fire had been warned twice about the risky way he was burning brush.

Instead, investigators will leave inspection forms on a front gate or door if the property owner isn't home. Ross and Ausboe say they'll try to get back within 30 days to reinspect the Morrill Road property.

"We're not here to pester or punish them," Ross said, "we're here for their safety."

Ausboe said homeowners are generally cooperative.

"During training, we went to one neighborhood up here, and when we went back a few days later, a whole bunch of landscaping trucks showed up to remove brush," he said.

The only resident they find at home Monday morning is Carol Christiani, whom they stopped to talk to while she was out hiking and arranged to visit later.

Christiani is a "fire brat," she said; her father was chief of the Hayward department. But even her house isn't quite fire-ready. The crew points out several hazards: the dead camellia in the garden bed right

up against the house, the dry fronds of a Boston fern hanging above the doorway, the stacked kindling in the carport next to the gas can.

"This rattan here would burn like crazy," Streck said.

Christiani said she appreciates the advice, especially in light of last year's Summit fire.

"You just know you're taking a risk living up here," said Christiani, who has lived in the mountains about 30 years. "We're afraid every year when the big fires break out."

Contact Tracey Kaplan at tkaplan@mercurynews.com or (408) 278-3482.

WHAT ARE THE PENALTIES?

The first time a property owner is cited for violating California's defensible-space rules, he or she faces a fine of \$100 to \$500.

If a person is convicted of a second infraction within five years, the fine ranges from \$250 to \$500.

If convicted of a third violation within five years, that person is guilty of a misdemeanor and faces a fine of at least \$500. Cal Fire may perform work necessary to bring the property into compliance and may bill the convicted person for those costs.

Source: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.



Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™