

Fire and Forest
Some Thoughts on the Year

by Mike Esnard

(from The Town Crier - January 2014)

Another year to enjoy our mountains! On this topic, the vision of the Mountain Communities Fire Safe Council is “Fire Safe Communities in a Healthy Forest.” It is not that our members are people who have always wanted to cut brush, prepare firewood, or write and administer federal grants (though they are good at it). It is that we share the simple wish to preserve the unique beauty that surrounds us, and to do what we can to live safely within it.

So we wish that all who live or visit here may have another year of enjoying the splendor of these mountains. And of course, we wish that everyone will do what is necessary to keep them healthy.

This was a good year for the Fire Safe Council. Our project managers were able to help many home owners with fire abatement using both county and state grants. The Woodies, our volunteer group, was amazingly consistent in processing firewood for the Help Center and in abating homes for those in need.

Our biggest project of the year was to meet the requirements of the FEMA grant which will provide financial assistance to homeowners to replace wooden shake and shingle roofs. Executive Director Edwina Scott sent into CalEMA, the grant administrator, a massive amount of documentation in December, and we are hoping that actual construction work will begin this spring. The project will result in the replacement of well over one hundred roofs, which constitute nearly all of wooden roofs in the mountain communities. Since these roofs are a major vulnerability for our communities, we are most eager to see them replaced this year.

On the negative side we had two setbacks, one directly related to us and one to the forest. The first was that we did not have our 2013 grant for

property abatement awarded by the California Fire Safe Council (CFSC). The CFSC is the state clearing house for federal money for fire risk reduction projects targeting private property, and over the past several years the funds they distribute have been decreasing, while the number of applicants has been increasing. This year they were able to award about a third of the requests they received.

We have been among the most successful organizations in receiving money through CFSC over the years, so we can't very well feel too bad about not being funded this year. Overall the CFSC has been very generous to our mountain communities, and a great deal of grant money has been put to good use for fire safety. Though this will mean less money for home owner abatement, our educational work will continue throughout the year. Fortunately, we planned for this possibility by creating reserves and we will be able to continue our work and hope that we will win a grant for 2014.

The other negative was the appearance in Idyllwild of the Goldspotted Oak Borer (GSOB). This beetle has decimated oaks in San Diego County over the last several years and everyone was hoping it would stay out of Riverside County. But with the discovery of an infested black oak right in the middle of town in November we now know it is here, and we will have to act.

A town meeting to address the GSOB threat will be held on Saturday, January 19, from 2:00-4:00 PM at the Idyllwild Town Hall. Meanwhile, the beetle spreads through firewood, so please buy only locally cut firewood.