

Fire and Forest

Fire Season Here/Prevention Setback

by Mike Esnard

(from The Town Crier - July 2013)

Southern California jumped into the fire season with a large fire in the Angeles Forest in early June. The Powerhouse fire burned over 30,000 acres in dense, mature chaparral just north of Santa Clarita. Fire Safe Council Board member Norm Walker, an Incident Commander on the fire, told the council that the wind, the old fuel, and most importantly, the severe dryness, gave the fire great speed, burning 7.5 miles in 6 hours. The fire destroyed 24 homes, mostly around Lake Hughes. Fire suppression cost \$23 million.

Most hard hit by drought of the western states is Colorado. In an eerie repeat of last year, fires broke out all over the state in the month of June, but the worst fire occurred close to where the worst fire occurred last year, in Colorado Springs. Last year the Waldo Canyon fire burned 347 homes on the western edge of the city, making it the state's most destructive fire at that time. This year the Black Forest fire burned 511 homes northeast of the city, setting the new state record for fire destruction. Fire suppression cost \$8.5 million.

As this column is written the West Fork fire complex in southwest Colorado has burned over 95,000 acres with 2% containment. Over 1500 fire fighters are deployed.

One feature driving the Colorado fires is the presence of vast stretches of dead spruce, killed by an epidemic of the spruce beetle. This will remind many in our area of the swaths of dead pines killed by the pine bark beetle around 2002. Lucky for us Senator Feinstein and Congressman Lewis were able to obtain an earmark for fuel reduction in our forest that removed many of the most dangerous dead trees.

However, the threat is not exactly gone. There are still many dead trees throughout the forest, and we are seeing a resurgence of the pine bark beetle. In addition to our well known pine beetle, we face the threat of the newcomer, the Gold Spotted Oak Borer, which has made the trip from San Diego, most likely on oak firewood, into our community. (Many thanks to the Idyllwild Garden Club for their signs warning about transporting oak firewood.) The number of trees identified as having been killed by the GSOB is small at this point, but it will certainly grow, and we will face the prospect of having a significant number of dead pine and oak trees in our forest at some point in the near future.

Drought conditions throughout much of the west, including California, will mean many large fires between now and the first cold storms in November. The money spent to suppress these fires will be very large, and probably to no one's surprise will be beyond planned budgets. The US Forest Service budget is being steadily eaten up by firefighting costs. The New York Times reports that the percentage of the USFS budget devoted to firefighting has increased from 13 to a current 40 percent in the last 20 years. And this happens as the number of acres treated in fuel reduction projects has decreased from 1.87 million in 2012 to 687,000 for this year.

This reduction in prevention comes at a time when just about everyone agrees these projects work. They turn very destructive fires into smaller, less destructive ones. So we are cutting effective and economical prevention programs to fund huge fire suppression efforts on big, destructive fires, which could have been prevented. As my daughter would say, "Really?"