

Fire and Forest
Fire Safety Muster; Climate Change
by Mike Esnard
(from The Town Crier - April 2014)

On the last Saturday of this month there will be a festive and informative gathering in Idyllwild of people connected to fire prevention and fire fighting. The event is for the public, has no admission charge, and we hope everyone will come and enjoy the activities.

Saturday, April 26 is the Fire Safety Muster, which will take place at the Idyllwild Community Center site in the center of town, from 10:00 a.m.-- 3:00 p.m. There will be representatives and booths from all the agencies and related groups, along with demonstrations and lots of equipment. It is designed as a very family friendly event, with lots of ways to interest and engage kids.

The last one of these we did two years ago. They are not easy to put together, since they require so many different people and agencies, and spring is a time of training for the fire fighters. But this year worked and we will have what I am sure will be a great gathering. And if you attended the last one, you might remember that the demonstration that stole the show was the K9 demonstration (dog immobilizing “bad” guy) from the Forest Service. They will be back, and given that Idyllwild is a town with a canine mayor, I am sure they will be as popular as they were last time.

Another popular event is Idyllwild Fire extricating an “injured” person from a damaged vehicle. Exhibits from Cal Fire and BLM will be there, and the Forest Service will not only bring the K9 unit and Smokey Bear, but their many clever ways to engage kids with water and hoses.

The goal of the event is to get everyone’s attention regarding fire prevention. Residents and people who know the area are quite aware of the threat of wildfire and what we need to do, but people new to the hill are

usually not, and some of us forget. There will be more information about this event as the time approaches.

Moving on to another topic, climate change is not going to make our fire prevention and suppression efforts any easier. A recent report from the California Natural Resources Agency entitled “Safeguarding California”, which is an update on climate adaptation plans, states the widely held position that warmer temperatures bring more frequent large fires. Climate changes that are currently affecting forests are “longer, hotter summers, changing water availability, the spread of invasive species, and more tree mortality due to the spread of pests that were previously kept in check by colder, longer winters.”

Climate change for our mountains is very likely to produce higher average temperatures, less snow and moisture in general, and more extreme weather events, which can be anything from exceptionally hot days to powerful thunderstorms. Our recent winter, with a virtual absence of snow at the height of the season, fits this pattern. We have also seen two pests spread in our local forests this past decade. The Gold spotted oak borer is the invasive pest, while the pine bark beetle is the native that has flourished in the warmer, drier seasons. We can expect dead trees to add to the dry fuel in the forest, increasing the severity of fire.

As we consider our own plans for fire safety, it seems prudent to expect the overall climate to increase risk, rather than diminish it.