

# Fire Season 2003

As a result of growing concern in southern California caused by four years of drought and catastrophic bark beetle infestation, numerous cooperating agencies united in an effort to address the environmental factors confronting them. Agencies joined forces and groups came together including: 1) U.S. Forest Service; 2) California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection; 3) Law Enforcement; 4) Local Government Fire Departments/Agencies; 5) Fire Safe Councils; 6) Office of Emergency Services; 7) Private businesses; and 8) Concerned citizens/community groups. The overall objective of this working group was to reduce the immense threat to public safety and property within the affected areas. The following are some of the actions these working groups took:

- In San Bernardino and Riverside counties, coordination committees continue to support the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST).
- San Diego Forest Area Safety Taskforce (FAST) was adopted countywide.
- Federal, State and local fire agencies are working closely with private landowners to create “defensible space” around their homes. “Fire Safe Councils” and the implementation of projects to reduce hazardous fuel conditions on private lands occurred throughout the counties.
- Significant dead tree removal projects are initiated utilizing Federal and State fire crews from around the state to create: 1) safe evacuation routes; 2) safe shelter-in-place centers; 3) safety zones on U.S. Forest Service land; and 4) strategic community protection zones.
- More than \$14 million dollars of federal funding was secured by the U.S. Forest Service to combat the problem. In March, 2003, an additional \$3.2 million was provided by FEMA. In early August 2003, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture announced an allocation from the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 to the San Bernardino National Forest to promote “healthy forests” and to treat hazardous fuels. In cooperation with state and local partners, the removal of several miles of dead trees along evacuation routes has been underway or completed.
- On March 7, 2003, Governor Davis recognized conditions of extreme peril to the people, property and environment in Southern California. These conditions were due to imminent fire danger caused by the extraordinary number of dead, dying and diseased trees resulting from prolonged drought, overstocked forests and infestation by bark beetles and other decay organisms. A State of Emergency Proclamation was declared in which state agencies were ordered to take a number of steps to reduce the extreme peril. These steps included preparing safety/evacuation plans, reinforcing firefighting resources, assisting landowners with tree removal and expediting the clearing of dead trees.
- Public Utilities Commission orders electric utilities to speed up the trimming of trees near power lines.
- Regional Forester, Jack Blackwell and Director of CDF, Andrea Tuttle conducted a wildland firefighter readiness review in the San Bernardino area in anticipation of a severe fire season.
- On June 20, 2003, Governor Davis signed an Executive Order, providing funds to deploy additional CDF resources in the Southern Region due to the extreme fire danger. This funding provided for: 1) Additional staffing on 53 engines; 2) Staffing of an additional 10 engine companies in the Southern Region; 3) Staffing of four additional Fire Crews in the Southern Region; 4) The staffing of an additional medium helicopter with crew to be placed in the CDF-San Diego Unit; and 5) The addition of a fourth firefighter on the 41 CDF-funded fire engines within the contract counties of Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura. The Governor also directed OES to implement a program to proactively pre-position fire engine strike teams.
- The U.S. Forest Service received fire severity funding up to \$15 million for additional resources for the Region. The funding provided for: 1) maximum staffing levels for 123 engines in Northern California; 2) the addition of four contract heavy helicopters; 3) the addition of 20 additional fire crews; 4) the addition of 15 fire prevention patrol units; 5) addition of resources specifically for the San Bernardino National Forest included adding a plane with 26 Smokejumper, four additional Hotshot Crews, 10 additional hand crews, 10 additional fire engines, and two bulldozers.
- Predictive Services at the Southern Operations Center in Riverside closely monitored the weather and fuel conditions in the Region. They predicted the Santa Ana conditions before they actually impacted the area. This intelligence initiated the movement of fire resources from northern California to southern California before most of the large fires started.
- Around October 20, 2003, the U.S. Forest Service moved additional aircraft into the southern California region. By October 21st, 18 CDF and U.S. Forest Service Air Tankers and 21 Helicopters were available for quick deployment.