2003 Fire Siege
Success Story and Model Programs

2003 Fire Siege — Success Story and Model Programs

4-meter False Color, 10-28-2003, Space imaging

The San Bernardino County mountain communities surrounding the greater Lake Arrowhead area were in the cross hairs of the Old Fire. Stopping the fire would be a formidable challenge due to over a million standing dead trees in the area due to bark beetle infestation. As the fire threatened the mountain communities, mandatory evacuation orders were issued to all residents. Approximately 80,000 residents evacuated during this time of high anxiety and perilous conditions. Despite the conditions and limited evacuation routes, the people negotiated this evacuation from homes and businesses in exemplary fashion. Regarding the massive evacuation, San Bernardino County Sheriff Gary Penrod, in an opinion page article in the Sun-San Bernardino newspaper, stated, "As chaotic as it was, it worked. As far as we know, no one was trapped and injured in the Old Fire. There were no serious traffic collisions." Sheriff Penrod credited the successful evacuation in large part due to "…the planning and public education that took place in [the] mountains because of the extreme fire danger posed by the bark beetle infestation." Congressman Jerry Lewis, along with other representatives, praised the evacuation and stated that the "efforts to fight the fire and evacuate residents out of the mountains was a model for efficiency and success."

Instrumental in fire and disaster preparedness of the residents in the greater Lake Arrowhead communities is the work and partnerships of the Fire Safe Councils. Arrowhead Communities Fire Safe Council, Mountain Rim Fire Safe Council and the Big Bear Fire Safe Council worked directly with agencies of the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) to develop strategic evacuation pre-fire planning. Utilizing "town-hall meetings" with educational pamphlets, maps and news releases, these volunteer groups helped properly prepare residents well in advance of the 2003 wildfire siege.

It was brought to the attention of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission, that the preparedness level of the mountain communities was a major contributor to the overall success of disaster activities in the Lake Arrowhead region. Moreover, the pre-fire activities of the area helped to improve the ability of the people and homes to survive. These pre-fire activities are what Fire Safe Councils are all about. The Fire Safe Council program is one of the active partnerships by local communities with public agencies for the purpose of community education and fire safety practices. Major partners include the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), San Bernardino County Fire Department, US Forest Service, Cal Trans, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, Southern California Edison, the California Conservation Corps and several local fire districts. Together their focus is on reducing fire hazards in the mountain top communities and pre-fire action measures.

According to Bruce Turbeville, Chairman of the California Fire Alliance Group, the mission of the Fire Safe Council organization is to utilize the combined expertise, resources and distribution channels of its members. The Fire Safe Council fulfills its mission to preserve California's natural and manmade resources by mobilizing all Californians to make their homes, neighborhoods and communities fire safe. Since its formation in April 1993, the Council has united its diverse membership to speak with one voice about fire safety. The Council has distributed fire prevention education materials to industry leaders and their constituents, evaluated legislation pertaining to fire safety and empowered grassroots organizations to spearhead fire safety programs. More information on the Fire Safe Council can be found at www.firesafecouncil.org.

The Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) is comprised of government agencies, private companies and volunteer organizations concerned with public safety in the mountain areas of their respective jurisdictions. The primary focus of MAST is to reduce the risk of a major fire and to minimize the impacts on the mountain communities.

Together with the Riverside County MAST, both organizations have coordinated their response to the bark beetle infestation emergency while continuing to enhance and strengthen community emergency planning and response.

For Immediate Release

Date: February 3, 2003

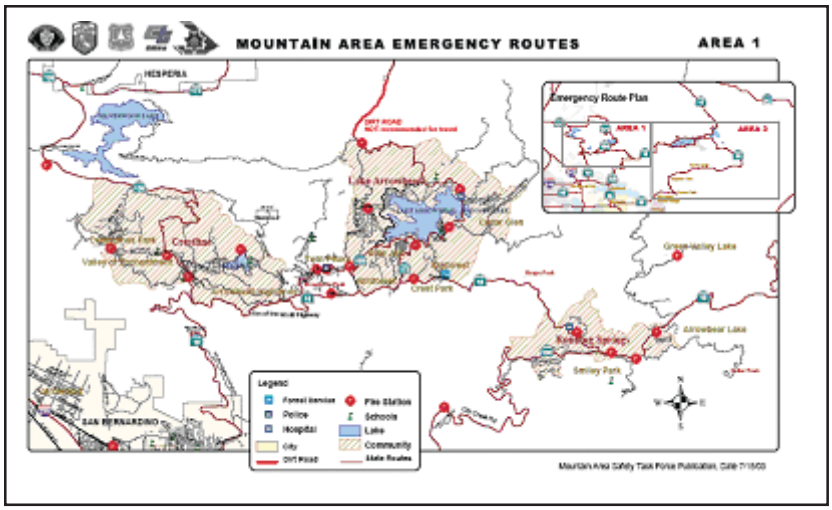
EVACUATION PLANNING

The Mountain Area Safety Task Force is working on emergency procedures to evacuate mountain residents and visitors in the event of a major fire in the San Bernardino Mountains.

A five-point action plan has been initiated by the two County MAST organizations as follows:

- Assure public safety. Critical elements to this action include developing evacuation plans, clearing potential hazard trees from routes into and out of the mountains, and providing emergency planning and hazard mitigation information to the public.
- Obtain funds. Work with local, state and federal legislators to obtain funds to combat the problem.
- Reduce fuel and create fuel breaks. This means planning and organizing the removal of dead standing trees, the reduction of fuel on the ground, and the creation of defensible space around developed areas and homes.
- Develop commercial use or disposal options for waste wood products.
- Identify and develop plans for ensuring long-term forest sustainability.

More information about the MAST program can be found at www.calmast.org.



The Fire Safe Council and MAST programs are community-based programs that should be identified as “model programs” demonstrating best practices. They have proven to be an extremely beneficial partnership between the community residents, business owners and responsible governmental agencies.

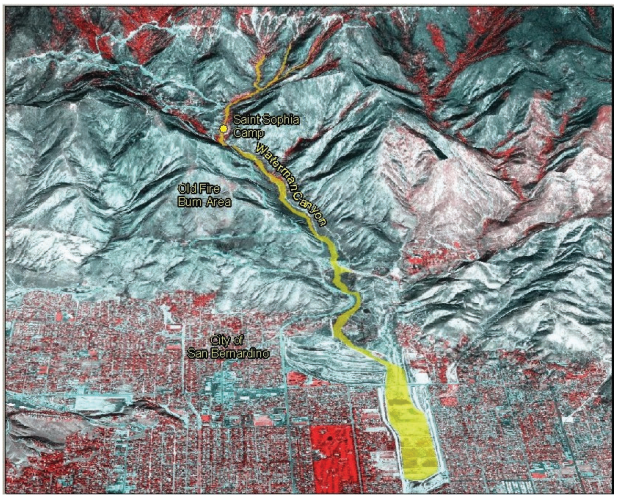
2003 Fire Siege
The Tragedy Continues

2003 Fire Siege — The Tragedy Continues

In the aftermath of the devastating fires that struck southern California there was tremendous concern about the barren landscape left behind by the wildland fires and the potential for erosion and major landslides. Tragedy struck on December 25, 2003 when a Pacific storm produced heavy rain over most of the mountains and foothills of San Bernardino County causing flash flooding and a mudflow to occur in Waterman and Cable Canyon killing 16 people. Over eight inches of rain fell at rates of up to one inch per hour in this area.

San Bernardino Fire Capt. Vince Gates works his way toward an unidentified man trapped under mud, boulders, tree trunks and other debris as a mudslide swept through a campground in Waterman Canyon. Photo Source: William Wilson Lewis III/Press-Enterprise

The map below presents the local terrain and mud and debris flow as it moved down from its origin as depicted on the map. A 12-15 foot high wall of water (with rocks, mud and other debris) was reported in Waterman Canyon. 14 people lost their lives in Waterman Canyon. The victims were gathered together for a Christmas Day celebration at the St. Sophia Camp. The denuded hillsides 5 miles to the west near Devore, saturated by fast flowing water, produced a mudslide that wiped out camper trailers, carried away vehicles and took the lives of two people at a KOA campground in Cable Canyon.



Due to the perilous conditions left behind by the fires and the fatal incident as discussed above, San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors issued a "Proclamation of Existence Of A Local Emergency." A subsequent request for official disaster recognition was successfully made to the Governor and President.

The successful pre-fire management strategies of the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) stimulated creation of the newly formed Flood Area Safety Taskforce (FAST). Comprised of officials from various agencies, FAST is working to form strategic pre-flood planning and response measures. FAST is engaged in the application of lessons learned from the Christmas Day flood disaster, in order to assist residents in "at risk flood zones" to increase awareness of flood signs, heed warnings to evacuate, and understand the limited safety of pre-flood barrier efforts.

While the primary focus of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission was to examine wildland fire prevention and response measures, there was much deliberation and recognition of the potential for follow-on problems and disasters caused by major wildland fires.

The members of the Commission express their heart-felt sympathy to the families of those that lost their loved ones in this unfortunate disaster.