

NEWS



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Trail Blazing: Drew Merry, senior parks maintenance worker for Santa Clara County, flails grass that has overgrown along trails at Almaden Quicksilver Park as a precaution against wildfire. Fire officials are warning residents that this year's heavy rains could mean a potentially severe fire season.

Officials warn Almaden residents of potentially severe fire season

By Monica Heger

April showers bring May flowers and also fuel for wildland fires. While this year's extensive rainy season will more than likely delay the start of fire season, it has also enabled the growth of excess grass, brush and weeds--the fuel for wildland fires.

Santa Clara County fire officials are encouraging Almaden Valley residents in particular to begin mowing their lawns, trimming their bushes and clearing out excess debris. This week is wildfire awareness week, which officials say is critical for Almaden residents to take note of because many neighborhoods in the area are classified as wildland urban interface zones--meaning properties butt up against wildland and are especially susceptible to fires.

Chris Morgan, fire prevention specialist for the Santa Clara unit of the California Department of Forestry, said that aside from cutting and mowing 30 feet around homes, residents should do additional modifications to another 70 feet, such as removing dead logs and trees.

"We're not asking people to cut everything down," he said. "Just use good common sense and remove fuel."

The reason for the 100 feet, Morgan said, is because a fairly large buffer is needed between homes and wildlands.

"The Southern California fires showed us that 30 feet was not enough," he added.

The buffer serves to slow down the fire. It also helps with firefighter safety, so they have a space to get in and fight the fire.

Morgan said that for wildfire awareness week, the department will have roadside informational checkpoints, with brochures about the dangers of fire and information on how to prevent fires.

He said one of the most important things a resident can do is to start preparing by regularly mowing the lawn and removing fuel. He said the timing of when to mow the grass, especially in the summer, is important.

"When it starts getting hot out, you should stop mowing by 10 a.m.," Morgan said. "The moisture is gone and the likelihood of someone starting a fire by the equipment increases. There are a tremendous amount of fires started by equipment. They're started by people trying to do the right thing, but at the wrong time of day."

Montego is one neighborhood in Almaden that is considered a wildland urban interface area. Each year the residents do extensive work, preparing their neighborhood for fire season. Harlan Pester, from the Montego Homeowner's Association, said they've already begun doing work by clearing out dead trees and weeds.

"We've put a five-year plan in place [for fire prevention]," Pester said. "It's something we're dedicated to keeping up."

Last year and in previous years, the homeowner's association worked with the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council, a nonprofit organization that works to spread awareness of fire hazards and educate residents about prevention. The council helped the homeowner's association secure a \$10,000 grant from the federal government to clear grass, dry brush and dead trees 100 feet away from their homes.

Allan Thompson, treasurer of the council, said the council was recently awarded a grant from the Department of Homeland Security totaling nearly \$88,000, to be used to educate residents about the need to fire-safe their properties.

Thompson said preparing for fires was not only necessary for private homeowners, but also in public space, like Almaden Quicksilver Park.

"The public agencies are focusing on what needs to be done on public lands and encouraging residents to focus on their properties," Thompson said.

Signs of fire prevention can be seen taking place at Almaden Quicksilver, with maintenance crews cutting back the tall grass and brush, particularly around campsites, picnic areas and parking lots. Park rangers also work throughout the summer, educating and warning park users about the hazards of cigarettes, campfires and fireworks.

Park rangers also post signs on red flag days, which come from a combination of low humidity, high temperatures and high wind. On these days, no open flames, including cigarettes, are allowed.

Geoff Sewell, the Santa Clara County park ranger supervisor, said Almaden Quicksilver was unique in that it was a national park in close proximity to neighborhoods.

"Most national parks don't have neighborhoods right up against the park lands," Sewell said. "So we're unique in that we have the neighborhoods right up against the park. What goes on in our park has an immediate impact on our neighborhoods."

Adequate preparation and education has kept Quicksilver fire-free for a number of years. Sewell said the last fire in the park was in 2001, and was started accidentally by humans. It was larger than 10 acres, he said. Sewell said all the fires at Quicksilver have been caused by humans whether from fireworks, illegal ground fires or equipment use.

"I don't think we've ever had a natural fire," he added.

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