

Fire Preparation Time

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By Kristen Munson (kmunson@gilroydispatch.com)

Gilroy - Rain is not on the radar screen anytime during the next week for what seems like the first time in months. Most of the area reservoirs are full and nearly spilling. But already the grass along the freeways and lowlands is starting to dry out and turn brown. So now is the time to prepare for the upcoming fire season, which fire officials expect to start later, but with a heavy fuel load.

"We will be starting our weed abatement program this month," said Gilroy Fire Department Operations Chief Ed Bozzo. "Since the rain lasted so long the grasses are a lot taller than they normally would be. Fire season will probably start later - the only thing we need to be concerned about is fuel height."

Fire season generally runs from mid-May to the last week of October, however, some fire officials estimate the season may start as late as mid-June and last into November. The official start is dependent upon the weather.

About 300 residents and land owners will open their mailboxes this week - dubbed Wildfire Awareness Week by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger - to find notices from the city, reminding them to abate their property and vacant lots of the overgrown weeds, low hanging tree branches, and other fire hazards.

Gilroy firefighters will visit vacant lots and hillsides checking for compliance. If the homeowner does not comply, the city will remove it for them and bill the homeowner for its services. Those charged last year were billed \$400 to \$600.

Additionally, individuals cited for fire hazards may be fined \$100 for each day they fail to comply with city standards.

"For the most part, every year we only end up with about 10 people who don't abate their own lots," Gilroy fire Marshal Jackie Bretschneider said. "The weeds really in and of themselves are not the hazard - it's if they burn."

In 2005, the law regarding clearance zones around hillside and hazardous fire area homes was changed. Current law now requires homes to maintain a 30-foot area of irrigated landscape around each building, as well as a 70-foot fuel reduction zone where grasses and weeds must be mowed four-inches or less and adequate spacing between plants.

Tree branches should be at least six feet off the ground and 10 feet from a chimney. Undeveloped lots in the hillside must be have a 15-foot firebreak mowed less than four-inches high around the perimeter of the property. Fire officials remind residents to remove needles, leaves and debris from rooftops and gutters.

Bretschneider recommends people use a common sense approach to preparing their property for fire season.

"If you've got an abundance of non-irrigated growth, trim it back," she said. "Prudent housekeeping is always best."

Fire officials remind residents not to mow grass mid-day under the hot sun. If the mower hits a rock and sparks, ignition of the grasses and weeds is possible.

About 400 homes in unincorporated Gilroy were inspected last year by South Santa Clara Fire District/California Department of Forestry officials.

CDF Fire Prevention Specialist Chris Morgan and volunteers will kick off the Croy Project Wednesday morning at Redwood Retreat Road educating residents along the areas affected by the 2002 Croy Road Fire, which charred about 3,200 acres of unincorporated Gilroy, destroyed 34 homes and cost \$8.8 million to extinguish.

"We're visiting the areas along the border as well as the areas within the fire (informing people) to assure that this is not going to happen again," he said.

Volunteers will be out all day beginning at 9am, talking fire prevention with residents.

"What we're going to be discussing are the clearance zones," Morgan said. "Because of the new law changes we're going to really start enforcing them."

According to Steve Espe, bureau chief of the CDF's South County division, the Croy Road Fire was "a classic case of getting a fire in decadent brush." The area had not burned for more than 50 years and was very dry, he said.

"You get into the east side of Santa Clara County, back in the San Antonio Valley - we've got brush back there that's that old - we just hope

we don't get any ignition," he said. "We're always at the mercy of dry lightening."

Seasonal CDF firefighters will return for refresher training courses May 15. Stations will then be staffed based upon need, Morgan said.

Stanislaus County will likely be staffed first, he said. "The east side of Highway 5 is already drying out, and within weeks fires may start. We're probably going to have a few more grass fires this year - and a little more intense fires."

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