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Tuesday, March 2, 2004
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Slow pace of fire cleanup prompts ads

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ---- County officials said this week that cleanup from the October firestorms is moving slower than they had hoped, so they will take out advertisements this week to remind fire victims of debris-removal services.

Chandra Waller, assistant director of the county's department of public works, said the ads will be designed to prod two separate groups of fire victims into action ---- those who don't know the services exist and those who may be thinking of abandoning their properties without cleaning.

County environmental health officials said in November that it was important to quickly clean the debris from the fires because it was a public health risk.

Tons of soot, ash and the melted remains of car batteries, pesticides, paints and other household materials were poisonous to humans in the environment, officials said.

Public works officials predicted the cleanup could be completed within six months, Waller said last week. But nearly four months after the blazes, less than one-third of the cleanup is done.

Waller said the county government's advertisements would be placed in small, community newspapers in Julian, Valley Center, Borrego Springs and Alpine this week to remind fire victims of two debris-removal programs that county supervisors approved to help them.

The first program allows fire victims to ask the county to deliver and collect huge trash bins that fire victims can fill themselves. The second program, which requires fire victims' to sign waivers permitting access to their land, allows county-

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coordinated teams of volunteers to clear away debris.

Waller said county officials know that many fire victims may still be in shock from their losses, and that for them, the advertisements were meant as a reminder that the services exist.

"Not being a firestorm victim myself, I felt like we could hit the ground running," Waller said. "But what we've found is that a lot of people just needed time to just recover from being overwhelmed."

Richard Dare, who manages the Ramona Landfill and trash bin sites in Julian, said Monday that he also thought cleanup was moving slowly.

However, Dare said many landfill customers have told him the county has been slow to deliver and pick up the garbage bins they're offering. County officials weren't available Monday to comment.

On Friday, Waller said the county advertisements would also serve as a first warning to property owners who are thinking of abandoning their land.

"We know ... that there are some people who have walked away," she said. "You've got a lot of people in the Julian-Cuyamaca area where this was a second home, and a lot of times uninsured. So it's not a high priority for them to start cleaning and rebuilding. Those are the type of people we want to give a heads up to."

She said the county could eventually label those properties a public nuisance and place liens on the property under code enforcement procedures.

Waller said county officials plan to start contacting fire victims near the end of the month to find out what their debris-removal plans were.

"We know that there is debris out there that doesn't need to sit on the ground," she said. "We don't want it in the watershed and in the drinking water supply."

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Thursday, March 18, 2004

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County says fire cleanup half done

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

County officials said last week that the cleanup of fire-ravaged homes in the backcountry is going faster than they first thought, with about half of the homeowners finished with removing fire debris from their properties.

However, those officials also said that fire victims seem to be turning up their noses at the county's offer to come onto their property and remove the debris for them, and instead are doing it on their own.

County offcials said the remaining half of fire victims who haven't removed their debris could soon find themselves cited for failing to do so.

John Rollin, a program manager with the county Department of Public Works, said the owners of only about 50 of the 2,078 homes destroyed in the October wildfires have accepted the county's offer to clean away debris on their land at no charge to the landowner.

The county officials say they could start citing fire victims for creating a public nuisance by March 15. Such a move could lead to the county's forcibly cleaning away debris on those properties and fining the landowner for the trouble.

"I'm surprised," Rollin said. "These (free) programs are available to them."

Chandra Wallar, the department's assistant director, said in the free program, landowners must sign waivers allowing county-coordinated crews onto their properties. The county would then seek reimbursement from the property owner's insurer.

Three weeks ago, the county announced it would advertise in community newspapers to prod fire victims into speeding up debris removal, because it believed that less than a third of the overall cleanup had been done.

But Wallar said last week that a "house-by-house" review of the destroyed properties indicates that despite the lack of interest in the county's program, the fire cleanup is about 50 percent done, suggesting that those homeowners are doing the cleanup on their own.

County environmental health officials say it's important to conduct a quick cleanup because the debris represents a public health risk.

Tons of soot, ash and the melted remains of car batteries, pesticides, paints and other household materials would be poisonous to humans in the environment, and the debris could be swept by winter rains into streams and watersheds.

Officials from the San Diego Quality Regional Water Quality Control Board said Friday that despite recent heavy rains, they do not think there has been any significant runoff problems created by debris.

Wallar said county leaders still hope the cleanup can be finished by April, about six months after the fires.

She said the advertisements the county ran reminding fire victims of the county's debris-removal programs were meant to motivate two separate groups into quicker action ---- victims who were unaware of the programs and victims who might be thinking of abandoning their properties without cleaning.

Wallar said the county sent letters to fire victims, in addition to the ads.

"We did send out letters that were cordial, reminding them of the need to clean," Wallar said. "But they also said by March 15 we need to hear from you, or we'll assume that you don't have plans to clean."

If fire victims don't clean, the county could eventually label the properties a public nuisance, conduct cleanups and charge the owners for the expenses by putting a lien on their land.

County officials, using estimates provided by the Federal Emergency Management Administration, figured that the destroyed homes would generate up to 72,730 tons of debris.

Rollin said that by the end of last week, 42,641 tons of fire debris from the homes and properties in the unincorporated county had been taken to landfills.

He added that the county had cleaned 1,700 tons of debris off the land of the 50 property owners that took advantage of the county's removal program. Five hundred tons of that debris was recycled, he said.

County residents had put an additional 1,400 tons of debris into county-coordinated bins. Of that, 1,000 tons were recycled.

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