

Cities prepare for next wildfire

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Four years into the deepening drought and less than a week after fire consumed 3 acres of brush in Palos Verdes Estates, Peninsula residents are bracing for the region's next big wildfire.

Police Chief Jeff Kepley credited firefighters with a swift response that quickly extinguished the Saturday afternoon fire in the Malaga Dunes alongside the Palos Verdes Golf Club, but he said things could have been worse had it been windy.

"In the type of community we live in — with our topography, canyons, parkland and so forth — fire danger is always on our mind," Kepley said.

The chief said two Super Scoopers filled with seawater assisted in the firefighting effort. It was fortunate, he said, that the planes happened to arrive two weeks early this year from Quebec, Canada.

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History of risk

State officials consider the entire Palos Verdes Peninsula at high risk for fires because of its miles of nature preserve and canyons filled with dry brush. The Los Angeles County Fire Department requires homeowners to clear dry brush and overgrown landscaping within 100 feet of their properties and conducts annual inspections to make sure they comply.

The last major wildfire on the Palos Verdes Peninsula burned 230 acres in the Portuguese Bend area in August 2009, damaging six homes and forcing hundreds of evacuations. Four years before that, more than 200 acres were scorched near Del Cerro Park.

The most destructive conflagration in the South Bay's history burned 925 acres in the rustic, gated community of Rolling Hills during a dry year in 1973, destroying 12 homes and damaging at least 10 more. However, there were no serious injuries.

Several smaller brush fires have erupted in the past few years, but officials are preparing for the worst this season because of the dry conditions.

Rolling Hills recently reformed its fire hazard committee, which is working on the first update in eight years to the city's hazard mitigation plan.

The group also is working on a mailer with fire safety tips and collaborating with the Fire Department to create a Community Wildfire Protection Action Plan, a tool used by government agencies across the country to secure funding priority for fire fuel-reduction projects.

Earlier this year, the City Council decided against one strategy of declaring all dead trees in Rolling Hills a public nuisance, though residents can still complain about individual trees and the city can order their removal if they pose a fire risk.

Andrea Vona, executive director of the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, said the drought has caused worry about brush fires on the Hill, but that there's always concern.

"It's incredibly important

for people to be really diligent and to follow all the rules and not engage in smoking in the preserves or anything along those lines," Vona said. "I think even though our habitat types are often described as 'fire adapted' — they grow slowly and maintain high levels of moisture in their leaves and stems — it's important to note that it is very difficult for the plants to recover if burns are frequent."

Most of the burn area in the last major fire six years ago was in the Portuguese Bend Reserve.

Water restrictions

Some homeowners on the Palos Verdes Peninsula have raised objections about state-mandated water restrictions placing them in the highest reduction target of 36 percent. Cutting back watering so significantly, they say, could make their properties even more vulnerable to brush fires.

The region conserved 31.8 percent in June and 32.5 percent in July, according to California Water Service Co.

"People have asked how it will affect their ability to maintain a decent fire

break on their properties," said Doug Prichard, city manager of Rolling Hills Estates. "With the drought already causing a lot of the native vegetation to turn brown earlier than usual, of course everybody's on heightened alert."

Prichard said he was assured that regulators will look into their concerns.

Los Angeles County Fire Inspector Randall Wright said water cutbacks are not a major concern.

"Anything can burn," he said. "With higher water content, it just won't burn as fast."

Wright said conserving water will actually help firefighters by making more of it available to them in reservoirs.

In June, Cal Water limited the number of days residents can water their yards to three days a week.

That's enough to keep landscaping irrigated without posing a fire risk, according to Gerald Simon, former chief of the Oakland Fire Department, who now works as Cal Water's director of safety and emergency services.

"It's not really a factor of watering. It's a matter

of having enough material cleared away from your property. It's all the dry components — the twigs and leaves — on the ground level. That's number one," Simon said.

Fire safety tips

Wright said residents should be prepared, and he encouraged them to read the department's Ready, Set, Go! Wildfire Action Plan.

"We want a 100-foot radius of defensible space and cleared vegetation around your home. A tree hanging over on top of a house, for example, is a big issue," he said.

Having a game plan in the event of a wildfire is also key, he said.

"Ask yourself, 'Do I have someone's house to stay at? Do I have an exit strategy?' You want to get set, have all your valuables in one area — documents, photos, credit cards — and put copies of all your important files on a thumb drive," Wright said. "Have a checklist of what you need to take and when an evacuation order does come, we want people to go early because the roads become clogged."