

# Valley agencies gearing up for potentially ‘catastrophic’ fire season

By Rory Appleton  
rappleton@fresnobee.com

After several consecutive years of record-low rainfall and record-high heat, firefighters in the central San Joaquin Valley are preparing for the possibility of another disastrous fire season.

Most of the precautions center on the Sierra Nevada foothills, where the U.S. Forest Service will steward a landscape filled with dry brush and ravaged by hungry beetles.

“We’ve had nothing yet, but the conditions are all set,” says Daniel Tune, team leader for the newly formed Sierra National Forest Fire Prevention Team.

The Forest Service was fully staffed as of May 31, which means Tune’s team of 15 prevention technicians are combing through the hills alone with the 100 or so other forest firefighting personnel. The Forest Service’s two helicopter crews are in training and will return to active duty in the next few weeks.

Cal Fire is also at full staffing — a full six weeks earlier than normal — to combat the growing fire risks in and around Fresno County. Spokesman Ryan Michaels says staffing was at 240 as of Monday. The nine Cal Fire facilities are now fully manned with 13 engines.

“We never actually went down to what we normally do for winter,” Michaels says. Local staffing never dropped to the typical wintertime number of 140. “Most years some stations go unused in the winter, but this (year) is not the typical situation.”

The local fire conditions and the need for Fresno’s Cal Fire firefighters to respond to other disasters across the state led to increased year-round staffing, Michaels says.

Like the Forest Service, Cal Fire allocated additional resources to fire prevention this year. Michaels says that much of Fresno’s portion of the more than \$70 million in [additional funding](#) given to Cal Fire by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2015 went to hiring new fire inspectors.

“Our inspectors and crews would get so busy that we could never hit every house in a year,” Michaels says. “Now they can inspect (homes) and prepare a home escape plan with residents.”

## All it takes is a spark

Tune of the U.S. Forest Service says that human carelessness can create a tiny spark that — due to various environmental conditions — could cause major damage. The fire prevention team exists solely to stop this, but the Forest Service likely will issue burning restrictions for visitors once the foothills reach consistently high temperatures.

“People need to check our website ([www.fs.usda.gov](http://www.fs.usda.gov)) or visit one of our offices before they go into the woods,” Tune says. “They have to know where they can have fires and where they can’t, because the conditions for disaster will be there.”

And Tune has good reason to worry.

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Daniel Tune, team leader for the newly formed Sierra National Forest Fire Prevention Team

In September, the Courtney fire rampaged through the Bass Lake Heights neighborhood in Madera County. The blaze destroyed 30 homes and caused more than \$12 million in damage.

The Courtney fire is believed to have been started by Oscar Bustillos, 49, of Apple Valley, as he was burning a deer carcass in the forest. He is charged with felony arson.

In August, the Junction fire destroyed eight buildings, including Suburban Propane's Oakhurst office, and cost nearly \$5 million to fight. The official cause never was determined.

## **Natural concerns**

Tune says that mountain pine beetles are killing already dying trees at a much higher rate than normal.

Trees need water to produce the sap necessary to fight the insects, but there isn't any water for them to absorb. The bugs can sense this, Tune says, and they suck the remaining nutrients from the weakened trees before moving on to the next area.

The aftermath of this feeding frenzy is a lot of dry, dead trees that trigger both fuel and safety concerns. Tune says these trees will burn quickly, and their branches are more likely to fall and possibly injure someone.

Dead or dying grass also is a major fuel source for fire — especially in the foothills. Residents in these rural areas are asked to keep their homes clear of trash and debris to reduce the risk of damage to their homes.

## **City firefighters preparing for busy season, too**

Should either Cal Fire or the Forest Service need help battling a large fire, the Office of Emergency Services in Fresno County will call for additional help from local city departments. The office provides these departments with a free fire engine, provided they agree to staff it and send it to help in wildfire emergencies.

One such contracted group is the Fresno Fire Department, which is preparing for a separate set of problems raised by the four-year drought and blazing heat.

Spokesman Pete Martinez says that heat exhaustion is a major concern for the department. Each of the 70 firefighters spread across 23 stations in and around Fresno every day must be carefully monitored at all times.

"We had a fire in the 100-degree heat on Monday, and one of our firefighters had to go to the hospital with a heat-related illness," Martinez says. "He was only four hours into his shift, which means there was still 44 hours of work left."

During the summer, the department sets up cooling stations at every fire to try to limit these injuries.

The peak fire season occasionally will spread resources thin, Martinez says. If more than 50% of these resources are committed for more than 30 minutes, the department will stop responding to 911 calls for medical aid. If a major fire is expected to continue beyond 30 minutes, the battalion chief in charge may recall off-duty firefighters or extend the shifts of the on-duty ones until it's extinguished.

Martinez says city residents can help prevent fires by being careful during the busy barbecue season. Always make sure you keep barbecue areas clear of pets, debris and your home, and check to make sure your coals are fully out before throwing them away.

Clearing debris and mowing your grass also are important, Martinez says, as failure to do so could cost you: As of May 1, if fuel found on a vacant Fresno lot contributes to the growth of a fire, the property owner could be held liable

for the damages.

Rory Appleton: [\(559\) 441-6015](tel:(559)441-6015), [@RoryDoesPhonics](https://www.instagram.com/RoryDoesPhonics)

If you go

**What:** Meeting to discuss fire season dangers, evacuation plans and how to access emergency information, hosted by Fresno County Supervisor Debbie Poochigian and representatives from the Fresno County Sheriff's Office and Cal Fire

**When:** 6-7 p.m. June 18

**Where:** Bear Mountain Library in Squaw Valley