

AFTERMATH OF WILDFIRES

Blaze may help rare trees

SANTA CRUZ CYPRESS THRIVES AFTER FIRES

By Jennifer Squires
Santa Cruz Sentinel

The Martin fire in Bonny Doon burned a portion of the largest remaining grove of a rare tree that grows only in the Santa Cruz Mountains, but the fire damage may actually help the Santa Cruz cypress regenerate.

"It's a very special tree," said Brett Hall, president of the Santa Cruz Chapter of the Native Plant Society and the director of the Living Collections and the Native Plant Program at the University of California-Santa Cruz.

According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service inventory 10 years ago, there were about 5,100 of the cypress trees remaining in five groves. About 3,000 of the trees were in Bonny Doon.

It's unclear how many were damaged or killed by the Martin fire that raged last week in Santa Cruz County.

A large grove of Santa Cruz cypress grew behind the Ben Lomond firehouse on Martin Road. Fire crews protected the building as flames whipped treetop-to-treetop, but several cypress were blackened by the blaze. After the fire, several cypress tree trunks were felled for safety reasons, and at least one had split from the heat and crashed to the now-barren and ashy forest.

The Santa Cruz cypress is found only in sandhills habitat, a unique sandy-bottom forest and scrub that was once ocean floor and is now home to seven plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. The Bonny Doon Ecological Reserve, where the 540-acre fire ignited Wednesday afternoon, is predominantly sandhills.

Hall said the cypress and several of the other rare species found in the sandhills, including the silver-leaf manzanita and the Ben Lomond wall flower, should fare well after the fire.

The wall flower stores its seeds underground, and the trees are both fire-adapted. That means the blaze might actually spur more growth because it cleared underbrush. The chemicals in the smoke and ash leech out during the first rains, making the soil more fertile for germinating seeds and possibly enhancing the rate of seedling growth.

Also, the heat from the fire can help the cypress' closed cones open and spread seed, Hall said.

The Santa Cruz cypress represents a type of vegetation that was likely widespread during glacial times, but is now confined to sites scattered along a 15-mile swath of mountains just outside of the fog line in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. It is on the federal Endangered Species registry.

"They're not teetering on extinction, but it's a very special tree ... because of their rarity. They only occur in a very limited distribution," Hall said.

The Santa Cruz cypress was discovered in the late 19th century. The coniferous, densely branched tree grows in sandstone outcroppings in chaparral and closed-cone pine forests. It's usually about 30 to 40 feet tall, but can reach heights of 90 feet in rare occasions.



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Although Santa Cruz cypress trees burned in the Martin fire, above, the heat can help the trees' cones open and spread seed in soil enriched by chemicals in the smoke and ash.

Summit fire: Homeowners failed to clear dry brush

By Kurtis Alexander
Santa Cruz Sentinel

Nearly 90 percent of the structures destroyed by last month's Summit fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains did not have flammable brush cleared from the property as required by state law, according to Cal Fire officials.

It's unclear whether removing the grasses and trees near buildings would have spared any of the more than 60 homes that burned in the 4,270-acre blaze, but fire officials say it would have likely reduced the losses.

"I would think that there would be less damage, but it's tough to say," said Cal Fire Battalion Chief Kay Price, who works out of Felton in Santa Cruz County. "Bottom line is that homes that have defensible space stand a much better chance in a wildland fire than homes that don't."

According to the state's final damage assessment report released this week, 87 percent of the structures that burned in the Summit Fire had "poor defensible space quality," while only 3 percent had "good defensible space."

State and county officials pin the low numbers on a combination of factors, from property owners not taking the fire risk seriously to some preferring to keep their homes hidden. Still others were concerned they might

harm the natural landscape, perhaps killing a threatened species if they clear brush.

Regardless, in forested areas, California law requires vegetation to be removed within 30 feet of a structure and vegetation reduced within 100 feet. Also, trees must be kept away from chimneys, and roofs must be cleared of leaves.

Cal Fire earlier this year mailed out 2,500 notices to residents in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, notifying them of the state law. Hundreds of follow-up inspections have been done, though evaluations haven't been finalized.

Cal Fire officials acknowledge they can reach only a small fraction of the region's property owners, given their time and staffing.

Last year, about 1,500 properties in Santa Cruz County — some in the Martin fire area in Bonny Doon but none in the Summit Fire area — were inspected. Of those, about 70 percent had adequate brush removal, according to Cal Fire officials. Cal Fire worked with the remaining property owners to try to bring their lands into compliance, and no citations were issued, officials said.

Infractions for not properly clearing brush carry a \$150 penalty, although under county code, violations are considered a misdemeanor and can result in a \$500 fine.