

Firefighters warn of critical fire peril

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This year's rains have been a welcome sight for drought-weary residents, but they've also contributed to a huge growth of weeds and brush, something firefighters are keeping in mind as fire season approaches.

"This is probably going to be — I don't want to say the worst (fire season) — but the amount of rain we've had is a lot more than we've had in a long time," said Aptos-La Selva Fire Marshall Gail McCloud.

The fire potential "is definitely there," Aromas Fire District Chief Ken French said. "The grass is real tall. There's some on the lot behind the fire station that's six feet tall."

French said the station is taking the precaution of sending two engines on all reported fires. Typically, he said, only one engine would go out on a "smoke check" call — one where smoke, but no flames, is seen. Two engines go out on those calls now, too.

In conjunction with the California Department of Forestry, the Aromas station is doing some prevention work by talking to local residents who have particularly weedy lots, providing them with information about how to keep the weeds or brush under control, and "urging them to do something about it."

"Everybody needs to be real careful," he said, "because somewhere in the state, they are not going to be careful and they are going to need our resources."

Sam Lobese, a firefighter with

the California Department of Forestry at Corralitos, said some of the station's newer firefighters were sent to Hunter Liggett for training exercise in fighting grass and brush fires last weekend. Another training session is planned for the coming weekend at Fort Ord, he said.

Lobese said fire season hasn't been officially declared for the area by CDF — the late rains may hold it back a little — but he cautioned that the potential for problem fires is still there.

Most fire stations around the county have already sent out their annual weed abatement notices to owners of lots where weeds are more than 6 inches tall, and some began enforcement today. Landowners who receive the notices have to mow their lots by a certain date, or pay for a contractor hired by their local fire station who will go in and do the work.

Some of the fire stations send lists of contractors who will do the work out with their letters; others have lists that can be obtained by calling the station.

Jim Dias, a battalion chief at the Freedom Fire District, said his list of lots that need abatement is a lot longer than usual.

Capt. Jim Norwood, at the Watsonville Fire Department, said the city's notices went out May 15. With the late rains, he said, property owners may have to mow twice during the season. He said his department will be keeping an eye out for a second growth and will send out a second round of notices, if needed.