

Forest officials move to cut fire losses

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FELTON — The state Department of Forestry is about to implement a 10-year master plan calling for fewer deaths and dollar losses in fires, which in the most rural areas of the county are twice the national average.

The plan, approved in June by the county Board of Supervisors, pertains to rural areas of the county such as Day Valley Road and Redwood and Cathedral drives, which lie beyond city limits but between organized fire districts.

Since 1948, the county has contracted with the department to provide structure fire protection in those areas. The department, in turn, has organized nine volunteer fire companies for many of those areas, including Bonny Doon, Corralitos and Burrell at the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains, to supplement response by its own crews.

In the past 15 or so years, much of the county's residential growth has occurred there, and their population has risen to almost 15,000.

With that growth, fire and medical aid calls have risen dramatically, as have deaths and dollar losses.

The county's death rate is now 8 per 100,000 people. Most of the deaths have been young and

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older people.

The average dollar loss, now \$24,000, reflects a changing county. In 1948 most structures in remote areas were cabins, top value \$10,000. Today, \$300,000 homes are common. Total assessed evaluation for the areas is \$69 million.

The death and loss figures prompted the county and the Department of Forestry three years ago to study more closely fire protection in those areas.

The new master plan is the result of that study. The major thrust is to lower fire-related deaths and injuries to the national rate or below.

To do that, according to Jeff Malmin, fire prevention officer for CDF, many factors must be combined, including access, water supply, training, engine staffing, inspection, enforcement, sprinklers, planning and development.

To reduce the dollar loss rate, officials plan to put 80 percent of the assessed value at risk within a 10-minute response time.

Usually, the first 10 minutes are most critical in a fire. After that, windows break or fire goes through the roof and burns freely, Malmin says.

Response times in the larger geographic areas, Malmin says, are 15 to 20 minutes. "By the time we get there everything is already said and done," he said.

The Department of Forestry hopes to fill some of the gaps with new volunteer teams in the Zayante/Summit Road and Day Valley/Redwood/Cathedral Drive areas.

Additionally, the plan calls for better fire inspection and prevention measures, including smoke detectors and, in the future, residential fire sprinkler systems.

It will be an all-encompassing program, Malmin said.

Rural residents will pay an annual fee to support the improved services. The schedule calls for a basic charge of \$8.94 per year on undeveloped land. A single-family dwelling will be charged \$17.88. The largest occupancies will be charged the maximum of \$53.64 per year.

The fees will be collected with property taxes and are expected to generate about \$72,000.

Residents of those rural areas will start seeing the first steps of the new plan shortly after the first of the year, Malmin said.