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November 23, 2007
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Recovery News

FIREFIGHTING GRANTS SUPPORT WILDFIRE FIGHT

FEMA funding in California helps save property and lives

PASADENA, Calif. — Chief Frank Twohy and his firefighters helped hold back the recent Coronado Hills fire before it could jump into San Elijo Hills. But they weren't so fortunate several years ago.

After the Harmony Fire claimed 13 square miles and 100 homes near San Diego in 1996, Chief Twohy of the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove Volunteer Fire Department looked outside his district for guidance to avoid a repeat of that disaster. He found it close to home—and halfway around the world.

Part of his help came in a grant from FEMA to design and build a demonstration fire-resistant garden. The Federal Emergency Management Agency funds fire management assistance, firefighter assistance, fire prevention and safety, and staffing for adequate fire and emergency response.

The rest of Twohy's help came from a creative duo—landscape designers Greg Rubin of California and Yvette Anderson, who grew up in South Africa.

Twohy knew that educating the public about fire-resistant zones around buildings could save as many homes as a legion of firefighters with brand new equipment. "I had a hunch that a fire-resistant, acre-and-a-half demonstration garden near our fire station might do the trick," said Twohy. "You know—if you build it, they will come—so we did build it, and they came."

With FEMA financing, Rubin and Anderson did the heavy lifting; Rubin designed and Anderson maintains the fire-resistant landscape at the fire station. Their San Diego based landscape design firm has installed more than 400 landscapes featuring native California grasses, shrubs and trees. According to Anderson, who learned landscape principles early from her mom and grandmother, native plants can best handle drought and create a buffer to keep fire away from homes.

"In Jamul, the Witch fire burnt an area 360 degrees around our client's house...but stopped in all directions at the garden," said Anderson. "Our goal is to protect the homes first. Although many of our clients' homes are exposed to fire, none has ever burnt."

FEMA fire prevention grants have funded educational projects that have made a difference for other communities as well. Not far from Elfin Forest, the San Miguel Consolidated Fire Protection District covers 41 square miles in the eastern portion of urban San Diego County, serving the communities of Casa de Oro, Grossmont-Mt. Helix, La Presa, Rancho San Diego, Spring Valley, and unincorporated areas of El Cajon and La Mesa. San Miguel's 98 full-time employees provide suppression, prevention and emergency medical services to approximately 110,000 residents.

"Our district is named for Mt. Miguel, which is dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel—he beat the devil in the battle of heaven in the Bible," said Gary Croucher, administrative division chief of the

San Miguel fire protection district. “We beat the recent wildfires and escaped without property damage because we have worked hard to educate our residents about firewise buffers around homes and businesses.”

With help from a FEMA grant after the deadly Cedar fire of 2003, the district studied its high hazard areas and put together plans and packages that enabled strike teams fighting the recent wildfires to quickly reach hazard areas and locate hydrants.

Another FEMA grant in 2005 helped the district install a firewise landscape exhibit and conduct a community awareness campaign to emphasize clearances around buildings. More than 20,000 visitors have viewed the exhibit’s fire-resistant building and planting materials installed at the Water Conservation Garden. An educational campaign by the fire district is providing brochures and advertising materials to all residents to create awareness of fire prevention techniques.

Croucher says that recent fires would have claimed several homes if the district had not conducted its research and education campaigns. Not one home was damaged during the October wildfires that came through the district. No residents were harmed.

Prevention programs like these show how Southern Californians can use plants that provide safety from fires, require low maintenance, little irrigation, and blend in with the natural environment.

Visitors to the demonstration landscapes learn that a typical fire resistant buffer has three zones:

- Zone 1. Well-irrigated area extending at least 50 feet from structures, providing a defensible space. Trees and shrubs should be planted no closer than 15 feet from a building, with spreading branches at least 10 feet away from roofs or chimneys, spaced at least 30 feet apart at maturity, and pruned to remove all limbs within six feet of the ground. Shrubs should be less than 18 inches high. Limit plants to fire-resistant species. Examples of vegetation: Day lilies, Santa Barbara daisy, sea pink, star jasmine;
- Zone 2. Minimum 50 - 100 feet from structures. Plants should be low-growing, fire-resistant and irrigated. Trees and shrubs should be spaced at least 10 feet apart. Prune trees as for Zone 1. Examples of vegetation: Aeonium, agave, aloe, ice plant, jade plant, wild strawberries, mousehole tree, rockrose, coyote brush, beard-tongue, yarrow, California poppy;
- Zone 3. More than 100 feet from structures. This is a slightly modified natural area. Examples: coastal live oak, sycamore, California lilac.

FEMA grants for firefighting assistance, firefighter safety, fire prevention and public education are available to states, local governments and tribal councils. After the October 2003 Southern California wildfire siege, FEMA provided almost \$60 million to reimburse state and local government firefighting costs. From 2004 through 2006, FEMA’s fire management assistance grants in California provided almost \$100 million to reimburse state and local firefighting and emergency response costs to fight 35 wildfires.

Applications for the next round of prevention grants are open until November 30, 2007. For more information about fire prevention and safety grants for firefighters, visit

www.usfa.dhs.gov/fireservice/grants and www.fema.gov/government/grant/fmagp/index.shtm

To learn more about the two demonstration gardens and to download a free brochure, visit

www.elfinforestfire.org and www.TheGarden.org/FirewiseExhibit.html.

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