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New fire rules decree 100 feet be weed-free

By KIMBERLY TRONE

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Fire officials say they hope to begin visually inspecting properties in fire-prone Riverside County next week to determine which owners must comply with new weed- and brush-abatement regulations adopted Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors.

County Fire Chief John Hawkins said the new regulations eliminate an outdated requirement to entirely clear unimproved parcels less than 5 acres and till larger undeveloped parcels in a crosshatch pattern.

Hawkins said too much clearing has adversely affected the environment and been too costly for taxpayers who pay the tab for owners who don't clear their land of fire hazards.

The new rules require at least 100 feet or more of clearance between unimproved property and homes or roads where inspectors determine lives or property could be imperiled by a fast-moving fire, Hawkins said.

They also give inspectors greater discretion over what steps property owners must take to maintain a fire-defensible space. In some cases that means more clearing might be required, he said.

"We feel this practically addresses life safety," Hawkins said.

Environmental groups this week protested the regulations, saying the county failed to sufficiently analyze their impacts on wildlife and critical habitat.

Jonathan Evans, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, which has an office in Joshua Tree, said the regulations could result in thousands of acres being cleared countywide and possibly conflict with the county's habitat-conservation plan.

"Our concern is this was rushed through," Evans said.

Dan Silver, executive director of the Endangered Habitats League, filed a letter with the board calling the new regulations a "major improvement over the existing ones."

The new rules were not adequately reviewed by the public and fire-prevention experts, and need more work, Silver said.

"We also reiterate our call to end the land-use policies which continue to place people and property at risk in high-fire hazard zones and which burden the taxpayer with the costs," Silver said.

Land-use policies and brush-abatement regulations have come under greater scrutiny in Riverside County since the Esperanza Fire near Cabazon claimed the lives of five U.S. Forest Service firefighters in October.

Raymond Lee Oyler, of Beaumont, has been charged with starting the blaze and with five counts of murder. He has pleaded not guilty.

Karin Watts-Bazan, deputy counsel for Riverside County, said the new brush-abatement regulations are exempt from the state's environmental-review process because the changes will not have an adverse effect on the environment.

Watts-Bazan said property owners would only be responsible for their parcel.

For example, if a home were 30 feet from its property line, the homeowner would be responsible for clearing up to the line. The owner of an adjacent unimproved lot would be required to clear 70 feet from his or her property line to maintain a 100-foot clearance from the neighbor's house, Watts-Bazan said.

Fire Chief Hawkins said the new rules could prevent fires like the one in the Anaheim Hills in Orange County on Sunday when a car fire ignited brush along a road.

As recently as Sunday a wildfire consumed more than 1,000 acres west of Lake Mathews, one of about 4,000 fires that Hawkins said will burn in Riverside County this year.

"Our fire season has become Jan. 1 to Dec. 31," Hawkins said.

Hawkins has asked state officials to declare an early fire season to get more resources sent to protect the tinder-dry region. Hawkins said Tuesday he was still awaiting the response.

Hawkins said notices about the changes likely will be mailed to property owners in April. Hillsides would be exempted to protect against erosion.

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