

S.B. Mountains' Miller Canyon target of major fire prevention project

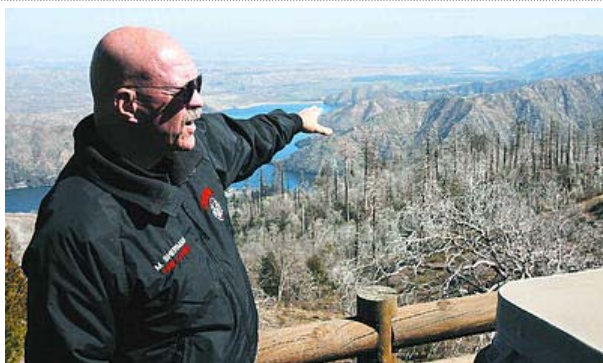
09:40 PM PDT on Sunday, March 15, 2009

By **RICHARD BROOKS**
The Press-Enterprise

Dave Kelly isn't trying to save the world, just the part of the San Bernardino National Forest that could go up in flames if a wildfire ignites near Lake Silverwood and flashes uphill into mountaintop towns between Crestline and Lake Arrowhead.

It isn't hard to imagine the scale of such a catastrophe.

Six years ago, the Old Fire attacked from the opposite side, destroying 940 homes and blackening 90,730 acres.



Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise
Fire Chief Michael Sherman, with the Crest Forest Fire Protection District, points out the area where the U.S. Forest Service is doing a major fuel-reduction-and-fuel break project in Miller Canyon to prevent an Old Fire-style catastrophe.

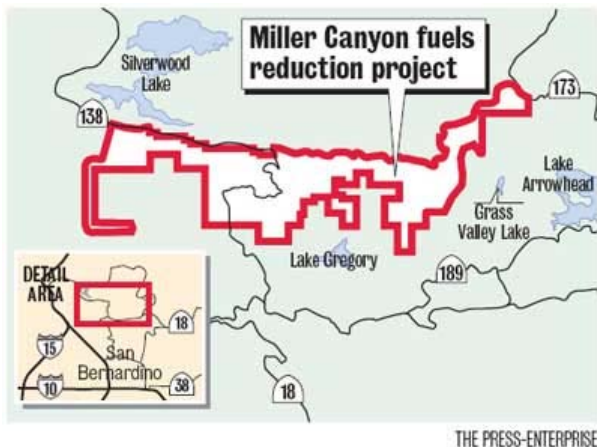
The forest is a jewel of nature because it hosts so many rare species, said Ileene Anderson, a biologist at the Center for Biological Diversity in Los Angeles. Fuel reduction projects in the forest are a mixed blessing, she said.

"It all comes down to tradeoffs: How much of the mountaintop do we want to destroy to protect human life and ... houses," she said. "The frustrating part of it, I know, is that people live there because they want to be surrounded by nature. But it's that very ... nature that threatens them.

"And humans trump everything else. That's what it comes down to. By building in fire-prone areas, you introduce the potential for catastrophic fires."

Miller Canyon

Preventing another catastrophic fire in the Crestline-Lake Gregory-Lake Arrowhead area, in Kelly's view, hinges on reducing the amount of flammable brush and trees in Miller Canyon, as well as building a ladder-shaped series of fuel breaks throughout the eight-mile-long project area that runs east to west along the desert side of the mountains, just north of the communities.



The area totals about 4,000 acres. The work would be done on about 1,800 acres.

"With luck, we'll finish next fall," said Kelly.

The project is hugely important because it could save entire towns, says Chief Michael Sherman, head of the Crest Forest Fire Protection District, which includes Crestline, Lake Gregory, Cedar Pines Park, Twin Peaks, Rimforest and Blue Jay.

"That's the (fire) that could be catastrophic -- worse than the Old Fire in terms of houses lost," Sherman emphasized. "You're transitioning from that dry brush out by Silverwood ... into oaks. And ... it's on the backside (of the mountains), where you're not going to see a fire when it starts."

Most of the work will be performed by three commercial firms, whose crews will cut and clear brush and trees.

Depending upon their size and condition, the trees will be hauled or helicoptered to the nearest road and trucked away, or pulverized with chippers.

To protect the environment, archeologists, botanists and biologists have walked the project area, identifying sensitive areas and helping to work out ways to protect them, said Big Bear-based forest service biologist Scott Eliason.

"This is heaven for a botanist," Eliason said. "The San Bernardino Mountains support about one-third of the entire plant list of the state ... in a little less than one percent of the land area of California."

Ten rare plant species are in Miller Canyon, alone, he said.



Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise

The homes above Houston Creek are part of an area that will be protected by a U.S. Forest Service fuel-reduction-and-fuel break project in Miller Canyon.

Some areas have been flagged to warn work crews, he said. Other areas are near streams and will be avoided for other reasons, ranging from the need to prevent soil erosion to protecting the water quality and wildlife.

Past Success

If successful, the Miller Canyon project will keep crown fires - flames jumping from one treetop to another - from roaring into a town and incinerating homes.

Instead, the idea is to rob a wildfire of heavy fuel, forcing it to the ground, ideally where the flames will be no higher than four feet tall.

Kelly wants to avoid a repeat of the Old Fire, when crown fires spawned 100-foot-flames roaring from the top of 100-foot-tall trees.

Fuel breaks will tend to follow ridgelines, roads and other easy to reach areas for fire crews.

"The point is, we're creating blocks of firefighter-friendly areas," he said. "It compartmentalizes the landscape. We may lose one compartment, but we're not going to lose an entire area."

He has seen it work before, he said, recalling the October 2007 Grass Valley Fire.

That 1,200-acre blaze started in grass and brush and spread quickly because of high winds that blew embers into Grass Valley, rapidly damaging or destroying 200 homes in Grass Valley.

But then the blaze hit a fuel break that limited the flame lengths to less than four feet, enabling fire crews to keep the flames from rampaging into the town of Twin Peaks.

And after the Miller Canyon project is completed, that's what Kelly hopes will happen if a fire threatens communities from the north.

"It's going to burn some place where we can deal with it," he predicts.

Reach Richard Brooks at 951-368-9463 or rbrooks@PE.com