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Fire Season is Flaming to Full Strength

By Nick Marnell

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman made a whirlwind tour of his district in early August, delivering a somber message to residents and officials about the dangers of the wildfire season.

From his commissioners meeting to his board of directors meeting to his speech at the Lafayette Rotary Club, the chief's message was on point: now is not the time to let down your guard.

"The longer we go without consistent precipitation, the drier the fuels get, which is why many of the most devastating fires are seen in the late summer and fall," the chief said.

"People think it's cooler, the fog is starting to come in, it's time to keep the windows open at night because fire season is coming to a close. I urge our residents not to be fooled into thinking fire danger is waning because the opposite is actually occurring," Carman said. "The fuels we see in Lafayette, Walnut Creek, Moraga and Orinda are heavier, and have been drying out all summer." The chief said he is always concerned about major devastation in Lafayette because the Lafayette area is most prone to those heavy fuel fires, and because of the amount of wildland area so close to the expensive homes.

"It takes longer to start those fires, but also longer to put them out," Carman said.

Carman said that the district is better prepared to handle wildfires this year because of two components added to district operations. ConFire uses the sheriff's department helicopter to dump water on wildfires in areas difficult to access with ground crews. Plus, the district staffs a bulldozer during the peak activity period, rather than calling in an operator to run the bulldozer when needed. "It cuts the line very quickly," the chief said. "It does what a team of firefighters can do cheaper and more quickly, so we can put the firefighters back into service."

This year's early fire season has been responsible for the destruction of several homes in the district, Carman said. He asks for the public's vigilance, because his crews have told him that they have seen more property loss this year than they can ever remember.

Surely that is a record the chief does not want to set in 2016.

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