



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

helping people help the land

## EWP PROJECT PROFILE

*“When the fire started, we were able to anchor it there, hold it and save homes.”*

*- Deer Lodge Park Fire Chief George Corley*



### 2003 Southern California Wildfire Devastation

#### Total Damage Assessment:

- more than 750,000 acres burned
- nearly 3500 homes destroyed
- 22 total casualties
- total damage costs estimated at \$3 billion

In the fall of 2003, Southern California experienced catastrophic wildfires, burning more than 750,000 acres, destroying nearly 3,500 homes and contributing to the deaths of 22 residents. It was a fast-moving wildfire, which began as small brush fires due to excessive

drought and dry timber. It took weeks to fully contain the fire and the total damage was estimated at \$3 billion.



*A masticator is used to perform strategic mowing of shrubs and other fuels*

Due to abundant fuel load remaining in the foothills surrounding San Diego, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, Congress appropriated a one-time investment of \$150 million to remove dead and dying trees and other fuels considered at high risk to local populations. The funding provided the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) California State Office a unique opportunity to work with local governments and countless partners to treat more than 60,000 acres. More than 700,000 trees were removed and 190 miles of critical evacuation routes were treated to ensure that critical responders would have safe access routes in case of future fire.

In total, San Bernardino received \$70.5 million, San Diego received \$32 million and Riverside received \$22 million for logging, chipping and mowing to remove potential fuels. Multiple techniques were implemented to protect surrounding wildlife habitats and archeological sites, including using helicopters and cable-yarding systems to transport logs to milling machines.

When Southern California suffered wildfires again in 2007, local fire stations credited the fuel treatment work with ensuring that fire truck access routes were open and passable and a clear network of safe evacuation routes for rural residents escaping the fire. Furthermore,

on-the-ground firefighters now had open space to battle the flames and install fuel breaks where needed.

In the San Bernardino Mountains, the fuel removal work was credited with saving the community of Deer Lodge Park. Fire Chief George Corley was quoted by the Press Enterprise that, “When the fire started, we were able to anchor it there, hold it and save homes.” Numerous other accounts of wildfires in these areas, throughout this decade, have clearly demonstrated that the capital investment made has paid significant dividends in saving lives and property.

While the fuel removal work in these three counties has since concluded, NRCS California is still very aware of the continuing threat of wildfire. NRCS California remains a committed partner to the Regional Area Safety Taskforce, and the forest and mountain-specific taskforces, with all members and contributing partners working together.



**Above: A helicopter transports timber from a dead tree after it was cut down and attached to cabling for movement. This allowed for timber to be removed from remote locations.**

**Left: Recently cut timber are being transported up a steep hill by a cable-yarding system. This allows for timber to be transported quickly from locations with limited vehicle access.**