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Fire protection plan emphasizes high-risk zones

By By Rose Marie Scott-Blair, SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

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ESCONDIDO — The Escondido Fire Department is creating a Community Wildfire Protection Plan that will offer specific recommendations to minimize the risk of fires in neighborhoods that border undeveloped areas.

“This is where we lose homes — in the wildland-urban interface areas,” Fire Chief Mike Lowry said at a public meeting last month to discuss the plan.

The department has contracted with Anchor Point Group, a fire management company in Boulder, Colo., to draft the plan, which will be refined by local contributions. It will offer “real world, affordable solutions based on science and tempered with

experience,” said Rod Moraga, chief operations officer for the company.

Anchor Point staff members recently spent a week in Escondido studying the landscape.

“I drove them on pretty much every street in town, used four tanks of gas, so they could see what the topography is like,” said Pete Montgomery, Escondido fire division chief. “Then we spent a half-day in a CalFire helicopter so they could get an overall picture of the area and the vegetation.”

Anchor Point has produced a preliminary map that gives “hazard ratings” to various communities, based on road width, turnaround space for fire trucks, vegetation, physical hazards, water supply and other factors.

The ratings, subject to change before the plan is finalized, rank the danger in the Lake Hodges, Lomas Serenas and Kit Carson Park communities as “very high” while Emerald Heights and Lake Wohlford are classified as “high.” A “moderate” rating went to the Country Club, Hidden Trails and Rancho San Pasqual areas around the perimeter of town.

“In truth, the vegetation in Southern California makes it the most flammable place in the world,” Moraga said. “The eucalyptus, chaparral and palm trees make for a very difficult battle.”

Recognizing the danger of palms, the Fire Department has just added a new requirement to its vegetation clearance standards. Homeowners can now be cited if dead palm fronds are more than 10 feet deep.

The change means that palms will need trimming every decade, said Jason Roach, a weed abatement officer with the department.

“Rancho Santa Fe requires that palms be trimmed every year,” Roach said. “But we think this is unrealistic for us because of the cost involved.”

The next step in developing the Community Wildfire Protection Plan will be to survey individual homes that have been designated by the Fire Department. The assessments will be done by senior Fire Department volunteers who will be trained by Anchor Point.

Homeowners will be notified that they have been selected and will be mailed recommendations for reducing their fire danger.

A draft of the protection plan should be ready by September, Moraga said. When it is finalized after local comments, it will be distributed by fire safe councils and fire agencies and will be available online at the Fire Department’s website.

“The CWPP can’t force anybody to do anything, but what you do around your own home is 100 times more critical than any firebreak because of high winds and embers,” Moraga told residents at the public meeting.

Rose Marie Scott-Blair is a freelance writer from Escondido.

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