

"Helping People Help the Land"



# California

## CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

### SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WILDFIRE RECOVERY

**SPECIAL  
EDITION**



SPRING  
2008



## Area 4 Honored For Fire Response Efforts

### Plus!



Goat Farmer Tells Her Story  
Damage Survey Assessments  
EWP Update  
USDA Video Shoot



# Special Edition

Welcome to this Special Edition of California Current Developments focused on NRCS's response to the 2007 Wildfires.

Fire is a common occurrence in Southern California. Every 3-4 years it reaches catastrophic levels of devastation; 2007 was one of those years. A total of 12 major fires burned more than 500,000 acres, destroying 1,500 homes.

Beginning the end of October through November, even the national news focused on the raging California wildfires. California NRCS staff throughout Area 4 scrambled to contact sponsors and prepare for the work to come; many in their own state of flux as they too were evacuated from their homes.

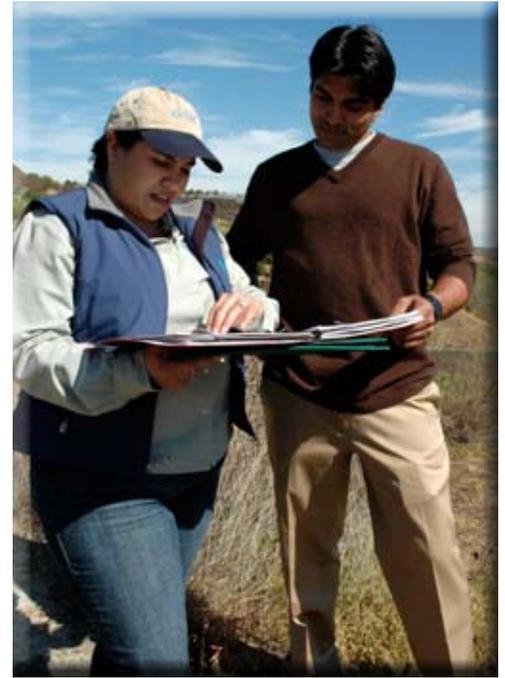
Area 4 employees answered the call, and others from within California and outside the state, joined our Team. Everyone stepped in, rolled up their sleeves, and did whatever was needed to get the job done—protecting lives and property and helping our producers help the land.

When the fires were contained, Damage Survey Assessment (DSA) Teams were out working with partners and sponsors and evaluating sites. Recovery work began almost immediately.

When State Conservationist Ed Burton decided to make EQIP funds available to help producers in the area prevent erosion and/or replace and upgrade their melted irrigation systems, teams were there going door-to-door and holding producer meetings. This resulted in more than 150 new USDA customers in San Diego County alone!

From Damage Surveys and sponsors, EQIP and producers, the fuel reduction project and fire districts, slope protection to prevent mudslides and homeowners; everyone has had great things to say about NRCS, the work we do, and our people. This Special Edition of Current Developments is dedicated to the work done by California NRCS in response to the 2007 wildfires.

*-Dave Heilig  
Assistant State Conservationist,  
Field Operations, Riverside*



Shailesh Trivedi (right) of Austrica Farms in Fallbrook was one of about 150 producers new to USDA programs. Trivedi signed an EQIP contract to replace his slow-drip irrigation system, among other erosion control practices. San Diego County District Conservationist Cori Calvert-Butler (left) worked with Trivedi.  
Photo: Jason Johnson

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## On the Cover

Staff from the Escondido Field Office and the Riverside Area Office were honored for their post-fire response efforts with a plaque from State Conservationist Ed Burton at an event at the Mission RCD office in Fallbrook, Calif.  
Photo: Jason Johnson

### **SPECIAL EDITION: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WILDFIRE RECOVERY**

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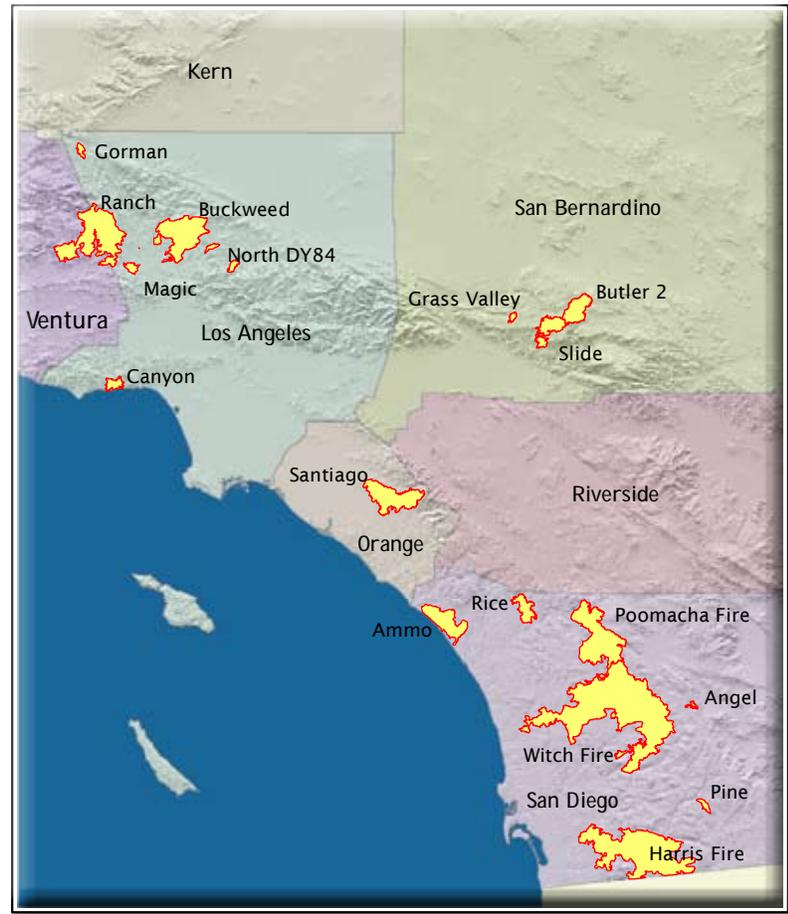
Past issues available on the Web at [www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov/news/currentdev/](http://www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov/news/currentdev/)

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## 2007 Wildfire Facts

Started:	Fires started October 20, 2007
Ended:	All fires fully contained 19 days later, on November 9, 2007
Destruction:	Approximately 1,500 homes were destroyed.
Size:	More than 500,000 acres burned from Santa Barbara to the Mexico border.
Casualties:	85 injuries, including 61 firefighters, and nine deaths were attributed to the fires.
Causes:	Primarily downed power lines from the 85 mph Santa Ana winds: one from a vehicle accident, one from a child playing with matches and one from arson that is scheduled for trial in April, and some are still under investigation.
Evacuations:	More than 500,000 people were evacuated from the fire areas.
NRCS Action:	Fallbrook, Running Springs and Escondido offices were closed for three days. Some NRCS employees were evacuated from their homes. As soon as offices opened, staff began contacting previous sponsors. A total of 12 assessment teams were organized, covering six counties.
DSRs:	Nine completed DSRs for \$2,150,000 as well as three pending for an additional \$1.9 million.



Wildfires in Southern California burned more than 500,000 acres.

## San Diego County Contracts \$4 Million in EQIP

California NRCS State Conservationist Ed Burton allocated \$4 million of the State's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to address the emergency needs of the agricultural community and help farmers in San Diego County recover from fire damages. The Program is helping farmers protect newly exposed soil from severe erosion and replace and improve certain types of agriculture infrastructure, such as irrigation systems that were destroyed in the recent wildfires.

Avocado and citrus groves, as well as nurseries, were especially hard hit by the 2007 fires. Farmers reported the loss of irrigation systems, mulch protecting the soil, cover crops, and the crops themselves. Many lost their entire crop. One avocado grower reported that the fire took not only his 2007 crop, but his crop for the next two years.

NRCS cost-share through EQIP will help these farmers get the most important conservation measures back on the land to save water and soil.

The program was announced at meetings, through the media, and through visits to producers who shared the information with their neighbors. The sign-up deadline was November 30, 2007 at local NRCS offices in Escondido, Lancaster, and Somis, and was intended to address resource concerns such as soil erosion, downstream water quality impairments, and water conservation. Eligible practices included adding protective mulches or vegetative cover on bare soil surfaces, installing grade stabilization structures or sediment collection basins, replacement of the melted above-ground irrigation pipelines and fittings, and replacing certain types of fencing. The program



A melted irrigation system following the fires in San Diego County. Photo: Jason Johnson

will reimburse farmers a significant portion of the costs of installing these practices. While the fire was devastating, it allows producers to re-establish irrigation systems that are more efficient and effective in reducing the amount of water lost through run-off.



with Ed Burton

State  
Conservationist

## **Our Mission, Our Purpose, Our Passion**

Not long after the October 2007 Southern California wildfires were extinguished, I toured areas of San Diego County as the Agency looked to see how we could assist with conservation needs as part of the recovery efforts. I saw first-hand the devastation that drought, Santa Ana winds, and ferocious fires had left in its wake for homeowners, agricultural producers, and communities. Hard hit were avocado and citrus groves and nurseries, among other production in San Diego County.

I stood there on the ground last fall and looked into the eyes and the hearts of folks that had their lives and livelihood destroyed by fire. I saw despair, hurt, and many families feeling helpless and hopeless: they had lost their homes, equipment, crops, and irrigation systems. Many understandably looked crushed, as if to ask, “Who can we turn to for help?”

Now, fast forward to March 7, 2008. Again I was in San Diego County, but this time to celebrate with landowners and producers post-fire conservation work, and the completion of conservation contracts with 150 farmers for \$4 million for resource protection and conservation throughout San Diego County.

This time, as I looked into many of the same eyes that I had seen months before, I now saw a smile, hope, perseverance, and resolve of the human spirit determined to come out of this disaster in a positive manner and to go forth and rebuild—to meet the future head-on.

I want to commend **District Conservationist Cori Calvert-Butler** and her staff for their extraordinary can-do, capable, and customer service-oriented

## **NRCS, Mission RCD Celebrate EQIP Contracts**

California NRCS and Mission RCD recognized the exemplary work of area staff and San Diego County producers at an event March 7 in Fallbrook.

NRCS conservationists worked with producers to develop plans and EQIP contracts to establish water conserving irrigation systems and erosion control measures on agricultural operations in San Diego County, obligating approximately \$4 million to 150 farmers, sharing the cost of these systems and measures with the producers.

The day’s events began with a return visit to Kendall Farms, one of the sites that California NRCS State Conservationist Ed Burton and other agricultural leaders visited on a post-fire tour last November. Kendall Farms now has a contract with NRCS and has begun work to establish water-efficient irrigation systems, prevent erosion and protect water quality. “We’re grateful for the help we’ve gotten from USDA to get the farm back up and running,” says co-owner Jason Kendall. “The USDA has really bent over backwards to get this done as quickly as possible.”

A reception for EQIP participants was hosted by the Mission RCD to recognize the hard work that is resulting in the finished contracts. Although the contracts are just being completed, the NRCS obtained special permission for producers to begin work before contracts were signed, so long as all technical standards were met. About half of the 150 contract holders have begun work on their irrigation and erosion control systems.



*Ed Burton with Kendall Farms' Jason Kendall (left) and Troy Conner (right) look over their EQIP contract.  
Photo: Jason Johnson*

efforts that got the job done for these producers. This is an amazing example of vision and leadership in the face of crisis. Their extreme dedication goes beyond the call of duty to help people on the land achieve their conservation objectives. I am so proud of all of you, as well as the other dedicated Area 4 staff and detailees that put in such long hours over the holiday season to help these people in need. I also compliment Rosa Singh and her staff from Farm Service Agency for their extraordinary support and partnership to help us get this done.

March 7 was an amazing day filled with stories from several producers of loss, hope, inspiration, and deep, heartfelt thanks and appreciation for NRCS. In my nearly 44 years with SCS and NRCS, I have never felt such intense, heartfelt appreciation and gratitude expressed for what we do as an Agency as I did that day. That experience ranks as one of my personal high points as a conservationist.

A San Diego County dairy goat farmer, Kira Ezis, told the group the most touching, emotional and moving personal story of her experience with the wildfires and her efforts to rebuild. Many in the room that day were moved to tears—including myself—it was that powerful. Mere words cannot adequately communicate what many in the room felt. [Read the Kira Ezis Landowner Profile on Page 4.] Other producers at the event echoed Kira’s story and appreciation for NRCS’ efforts.

It’s that human connection between the NRCS conservationist and the landowner that makes what we do so special and rewarding for me, and has in my career over these past four decades. That makes us who we are as an Agency and as individuals. And I never want anyone to forget that’s what we are about: Helping People Help the Land with conservation. That’s our mission, our purpose and our passion.

# NRCS Helps Keep Dairy Goat Farm Operating



Kira Ezis

NRCS is playing an integral role in assisting one of the few dairy goat operations in Southern California to be sustainable.

The slopes on Kira Ezis' hilly 64-acre property in northern San Diego County burned last fall after wildfires ravaged them, nearly wiping out her entire farm. Wildfires forced the evacuation of her 50 goats and eight horses to out-of-town farms, a major operational and financial inconvenience. But the aftereffects of the fires were equally devastating to her land, leaving slopes bare and the creek that runs through her property susceptible to erosion.

But thanks to cost-share funding through EQIP, Ezis' farm now has a future. NRCS allocated more than \$4 million to San Diego County agricultural producers to apply conservation practices on the land, focusing on erosion control, water quality, water conservation and wildlife habitat.

Ezis met Ed Burton, State Conservationist for NRCS California, at a meeting last November following the wildfires. "Ed

took my hands and said 'NRCS is all about soil erosion' and promised to help," said Ezis. "The NRCS saved my farm. Because I'm a livestock producer, which is unique in this county, I didn't fit into a lot of relief programs."

Ezis says trying to stop erosion on 64 acres has been expensive. "My bank account is zero; my overdraft protection is maxed out and the bank refused me a loan of \$25,000 to offset the costs," she said.

Burton's promise to help is what kept her going. "Since immediately following the fire, I have worked to control erosion nonstop," she said. "Knowing NRCS would help made all the difference in the world; it kept me going."

NRCS provided technical assistance to Ezis, as well. Officials surveyed her property and completed a conservation plan that will help protect her land from soil erosion and improve water quality in the creek.

Dry conditions since the fires have helped keep ash and sediment from running off, but Ezis said the bare soils have



Ezis' 50 goats and 8 horses were evacuated to other farms during the wildfires. Photo: Jason Johnson

hit a point of saturation where heavy rains could cause severe erosion. "Straw bales and fiber rolls helped control some erosion," she said, "but this last rain I saw sediment delivery to the creek."

Conservation Practices in Ezis' EQIP contract:

- Mulch was applied to 11 acres to protect the soil until more permanent vegetation is established. Mulch also conserves moisture and prevents surface compaction.
- Two acres of critical area planting will stabilize soils most susceptible to erosion, reduce damage from sediment and runoff to downstream areas, and improve wildlife habitat.
- 8,358 feet of access roads were established. Access roads provide a fixed route for resource activities involving the management of livestock and other adjacent natural resources.
- 52 water control structures, or culverts, will be installed to control the stage, discharge, distribution, delivery, or direction of flow of water in open channels or water use areas. They are also used for water quality control, such as sediment reduction or temperature regulation.

"I had never heard of NRCS before the wildfires last fall," said Ezis. "Now I don't know where I would be without them."



Like so many others, Ezis' slopes were left bare following the wildfires. Photo: Jason Johnson

## 2007 California Wildfires Damage Survey

When a natural disaster situation is stabilized, NRCS conservation planning professionals visit the area, with partners from state or local governments or other community or resource organizations, and assess damage to the land that may threaten life and property. These Damage Survey Assessments (DSA) also evaluate potential future risks that could occur as a result of changes that have taken place.

This is particularly relevant in the wildfire areas of Southern California. After fire has burned all plant life, the potential for severe flooding and landslide damage from rain must be averted where possible. DSA Teams evaluate the area for potential risks and recommend conservation practices to hold the soil in place and reduce the speed or direction of the water as it runs off the soil.

While hundreds of sites were evaluated following the 2007 California Wildfires, those with the greatest risk were identified and prioritized, practice benefits determined, sponsors stepped forward, and requests for federal funding were initiated to insure that work could take place to protect the community from further damage.

Sponsors are a crucial part of the EWP program, paying 25 percent of the project cost, either financially or through in-kind services. They assist in the process by obtaining the necessary permits and/or property access rights. The NRCS was able to protect communities throughout

Southern California because of the support of San Diego County Public Works, San Bernadino Flood Control, San Diego County, Orange County, Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, and the City of San Diego.

Working with these entities and other partners, NRCS identified and secured more than \$2.1 million to protect 10 areas in San Diego, San Bernadino, and Los Angeles Counties. Three additional areas are pending which will add an additional \$1.9 million to the funding total.

The practices used to protect communities varies according to the land and land uses within the area. The most common wildfire recovery practices include:

**Hydromulching** - Mulch, at times including native plant seeds, is mixed with a special adhesive-type ingredient which allows it to stick to the soil surface. Mild rain events are absorbed into the soil and run-off is reduced.

**Sand Bags** - Used to stabilize areas and control the flow of water. The energy in water that is channeled between two slopes is diffused when it hits a barrier of sandbags and forced to split and move around the barrier. The less energy in moving water, the less soil is moved.

**Channel Clearing** - Removing debris and boulders from stream or drainage channels reduces the risk of those items

The Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program is a program administered by NRCS to protect life and property in the wake of a natural resource disaster.

moving downstream in heavier water flows and forming blockages around bridges or roadways.

**K-rails** - Concrete barriers often used to identify traffic lanes during highway or roadway construction. They are used in much the same way that sandbags are used but are much sturdier.

**Fiber Rolls** - Fibrous material such as jute formed into long rolls and placed on hillsides to control runoff, allowing some absorption of the water, providing a material that will trap the sediment moving downstream, and ultimately disintegrating.

**Debris Barriers** - Often found at the bottom of rivines and waterways, just prior to a bridge, debris barriers capture the trash, tree limbs, fencing, and other trash that could come together and damage a roadway or bridge before it gets close enough to cause damage.

**Rip Rap** - Large, rough-edged rocks that may be grouted together to stabilize a slope or run-off area. They are often used around bridges or utility pipes.

*Hydromulching on a severe slope near Fallbrook after the Rice Fire.  
Photo: Pedro Torres*



# EWP Watershed Recovery Project Proved Successful in 2007 Wildfires

Started as a 2004 project for removing dead and diseased trees in fire-prone areas of San Bernadino, Riverside, and San Diego Counties, the EWP Watershed Recovery Project additionally removed ladder and ground fuels, which allowed firefighters to more easily control the 2007 wildfires, which devastated the three counties in Southern California.

With a special Congressional appropriation of \$126 million, NRCS worked with city and county planners, fire safe councils, city and county fire and police departments, and other interested parties to prioritize areas of importance for fuel reduction. Priorities included areas of defensible space around communities, roads that were critical for evacuation as well as bringing in emergency equipment, critical community service areas, and other agreed upon at-risk sites.

NRCS foresters worked with City, County, State and utility personnel to mark trees for removal. Trees killed by

the 2003 wildfires or the bark beetle were cut down. When additional fuel was targeted, foresters also removed trees less than 10 inches in diameter and cut off the lower limbs of larger trees. Sponsors obtained land access rights and homeowners were given the option of using the dead trees for firewood or they were chipped for mulch. In some instances, operators who won bids to cut down the trees sold mulch or waste to other businesses for additional uses such as building pallets, cogeneration materials, and some dimension lumber.

“There is no way to eliminate fire up here in the mountains,” says George Corley, a San Bernardino County Fire division chief in Lake Arrowhead. “You are trying to change the fire behavior.” (The Press Enterprise, Mountain Edition, 12/9/07, Duane W. Gang, ‘SB County Taking New Tack in Protecting Mountain Homes from Wildfires’)

The article recognized the efforts of NRCS and contained several quotes

from others lauding the pilot project and the success shown in several of the fire areas. Corley spoke about the Grass Valley Fire that destroyed 170 homes, but said the damage would have been much worse without the fuel reduction work taking place. “We lost hundreds, but we probably saved thousands,” he is quoted as saying.

Supervisor Dennis Hansberger of the Lake Arrowhead area was also quoted from remarks he presented to the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee’s Interior subcommittee in November—“In the area burned by the Grass Valley Fire...damage is estimated at almost \$90 million. Our assessor’s office estimates the value of property saved in this fire to be more than \$330 million.”

After meeting to re-prioritize based on the 2007 fires, work is continuing with the remaining funds to be used in this fiscal year.

## EWP Brush Removal Successes



*Before and After: Brush reduction in Big Bear to reduce fire hazard, fuel load, and potential fuel continuity.*



*Before and After: Deer Trail Road near Lake Arrowhead. Tree and brush removal creates 200 ft. wide fuel break and reduces ladder fuels.*



## USDA Produces Video News Release of Post-Fire Response

With strong visual images of NRCS helping communities and producers, the USDA sent a videographer to document post-fire, the practices and results of NRCS work for a national broadcast video news release.

Bob Stobaugh, former USDA Office of Communications videographer and current Florida NRCS State Public Affairs Specialist, arrived in January to begin shooting a video news release. Filming was conducted Tuesday, January 22 through Thursday, January 24, primarily in San Bernardino and San Diego Counties.

Stobaugh interviewed Dave Heilig, assistant state conservationist for field operations, Riverside, along with Tom Schott, former Area 4 EWP coordinator and foresters Evan Smith with NRCS and Elliott Graham, retired U.S. Forest Service ranger, currently with San Diego County.

Acting U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Chuck Connor was also interviewed at the Forest Service Air Tanker Base at the San Bernardino International Airport, discussing the partnership efforts involved in the watershed recovery project for fuel reduction in fire-prone, mountainous communities.



*Videographer Bob Stobaugh, NRCS Florida, interviews NRCS Forester Danielle Hirsch. Photo: Stacy Mitchell*

Additional interviews and footage were taken further south in the Fallbrook/Valley Center/Escondido area. Maddock Nursery, near Fallbrook, was highlighted as a grower of avocados and citrus fruits affected by the wildfires. About half of their nursery was burned.

Danielle Hirsch, forester in San Diego County was also interviewed. And Video was taken of burned areas within the San Diego city limits, with interviews of NRCS Biologist Shea O'Keefe and San

Diego County District Conservationist Cori Calvert-Butler. On the final day of shooting, Cid Tesoro, emergency coordinator for San Diego County and the sponsor representative for much of the work in that County, was interviewed about protective measures on the ground in that area.

To view the completed video news release, go to <http://www.usda.gov/agency/oc/bmtc/vidnews.htm>.

### Congratulations on Fire Response Efforts!

When Southern California is affected by wildfires, the results are often devastating. But for NRCS it can provide training for response teams with partnerships already in place. People have worked together, comfortable with each other's level of expertise—it means people know what to do.

That's exactly what happened when wildfires started in Southern California in October 2007. Of course, no one

expected the fires to last so long or be so expansive, but that happens, too, about every three or four years. Sponsors were ready and so were our NRCS Teams. They jumped to action and began work. We are thankful for those who were willing to take time away from their own work and families to serve on a detail and help Area 4 field staff and project sponsors.

Landowners and producers were very pleased with the NRCS employees who visited their property or spoke with them on the phone. Sponsors have praised our staff for taking care of business and providing information.

The cooperative work that took place between sponsors and our teams shows the strength of our partnerships and the trust we place in each other. Congratulations on work well done!