DTSC's Emergency Response Unit Helps Cleanup Hazardous Waste From Boles Fire in Weed

The three year drought in California has added fuel to the fire season this year with thousands of acres burned and continuing to burn throughout the state. And each year, the Department of Toxic Substances Control's Emergency Response Unit is ready to help clean up hazardous waste left in the rubble of the burned homes destroyed as a result of the wildfires.

For five days in mid-September, firefighters fought to contain a fire near the City of Weed that burned 479 acres. Known as the Boles Fire, it destroyed more than 150 homes and commercial buildings leaving behind debris that can be hazardous waste, ranging from asbestos to paints, solvents and other chemicals stored in garages.

"DTSC's primary focus is assessing and removing the household hazardous waste including asbestos from the homes destroyed in the fire," said Adam Palmer, supervisor of the Emergency Response Unit. "It must be removed and properly disposed of to prevent exposure to public health and the environment."

Environmental Scientists Ivan Rodriguez and Nancy McGee along with the DTSC's hazardous waste/asbestos removal contractors spent six days onsite assessing and coordinating the emergency removal action. Many of the burned homes contained asbestos in vinyl flooring and

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Left: Contractors search for hazardous material among the ruins of a building.

Below: Collected gas cylinders will to be removed and disposed of by contractors.

Boles Fire

< PREVIOUS tiles, cement tile siding and pipe insulation found in older homes. DTSC and its contractors removed the asbestos that could be segregated from the debris at 26 of the 143 homes. The remainder of the homes will be cleared of asbestos during the debris removal phase of the cleanup conducted by CalRecycle.

The majority of the household hazardous waste removed was compressed gas cylinders, heating fuel, waste paint and solvents. More than 50 percent of the destroyed homes had heating fuel tanks containing kerosene.

Because some the homes were built in the 1930s and 1940s, the ER Unit ran into a unique hazard they weren't expecting. In the backyards of some homes, crews found old, exposed water wells that they had to be careful not to fall into.

The cleanup was a cooperative effort between Siskiyou County Environmental Health, the City of Weed, and DTSC.

"Part of our mission is to help protect people and the environment from the dangers posed by hazardous wastes," said Palmer. "We worked together with these agencies to help restore their community so that the people affected by this tragedy can begin rebuilding their homes."