



DTSC'S Emergency Response Unit to Help Clean Up After Devastating Wildfire

Emergency response staff from the [Department of Toxic Substances Control](#) will help families in Kern County recover from a devastating wildfire that destroyed more than 48,000 acres and at least 285 structures, including many homes.

On June 28, the Office of Emergency Services asked for DTSC's assistance in helping cleanup the aftermath of what's being called the most destructive fire in Kern County history.

The Department's primary focus will be to evaluate and remove remaining household hazardous waste debris, such as asbestos, paints, batteries, computers and solar panels. The items must be properly disposed of to prevent further exposure to the public and to the environment, said Ivan Rodriguez, a senior environmental scientist and emergency response team member for DTSC

Rodriguez is part of a four-member team that responds to emergencies such as wildfires. "We walk the footprint of the burn, looking for hazardous waste that wasn't consumed," said Rodriguez, who worked on the cleanup of a scorching blaze that consumed more than 75,000 acres in Lake and Colusa counties in August 2015.

Rodriguez spent months working on the aftermath of that fire that destroyed nearly 2,000 structures, including almost 1,300 homes.

Also last summer, DTSC environmental scientist Nancy McGee led a team that helped clean up the remains of up to 900 homes and other structures in Calaveras and Amador counties.

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Left: Tanks collected in the aftermath of the Boles Fire, which burned in Weed in 2014, are prepared for transport.

Right: Contractors sift through debris after the Rocky Fire, which consumed parts of Lake, Yolo and Colusa counties in 2015.





Fire Season (continued)

Contract companies assist the small DTSC staff, but the two devastating fires in the summer 2015 severely strained the Department's resources. The federal Environmental Protection Agency brought in valuable help during that period. CalRecycle sent in crews after the hazardous waste was removed to take away ash and other debris, and perform erosion control and other duties.

Wildfires are so intense that household waste such as used oil and paint sometimes doesn't survive the blaze – and it can be hard to determine even where they were stored. Garages, bathroom cabinets and sheds are often destroyed.

"They burn so hot that everything will go," Rodriguez said. "It doesn't matter what it is. Even safes that are billed as fire proof can burn up and whatever is inside is consumed."

Still, hazardous debris often remains. In Lake County, Rodriguez and contractor crews recovered items as small as batteries from television remotes to drums of used oil and heating fuel from storage tanks. One property had so many solar panels and related batteries that crews spent a day and a half removing them. Asbestos is so plentiful that a special contractor often accompanies the crews.

These events are devastating for property owners, so the cleanup crews like to go through as quickly as possible. The quicker the cleanup, the sooner the families can start to rebuild their lives.

That recovery, though, can be delayed if counties don't declare a local health emergency. Such a declaration allows DTSC and its contractors onto properties without owner consent. Without a public health declaration, the Department can't go in until property owners sign access agreements.

Kern County hasn't announced whether it will declare a public health declaration.

If the Kern County wildfire is any indication, DTSC emergency response is gearing up for another busy summer season. "This summer is getting off to an early and wild start," Rodriguez said.

For information on managing hazardous waste during fires, please visit this page on the DTSC web site: <https://dtsc.ca.gov/SiteCleanup/ERP/Fire2015.cfm>