



DTSC's Emergency Response team helps clean up hazardous waste in Northern Californian fire

California started 2015 with record dry conditions, adding to the existing three-year drought and sparking fires in Northern California. In Mono County, two rural towns were evacuated when a fire burned more than 7,000 acres in early February.

The Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) Emergency Response Unit was called to help clean up hazardous waste left in the debris of destroyed homes. Known as the Round Fire, the fire destroyed more than 40 homes near the towns of Paradise and Swall Meadows.

“The fire was fast moving and destroyed 40 homes in a short period of time,” said Adam Palmer, supervisor of the Emergency Response Unit. “Our primary focus was to find readily identifiable and easily accessible household hazardous waste and asbestos. It must all be removed and disposed of properly to prevent exposure to the public and environment.”

Environmental Scientists Ivan Rodriguez and Nancy McGee as well as hazardous waste/asbestos removal contractors hired by DTSC spent four days in late February coordinating the emergency removal action and assessing the materials found throughout the rubble.

Much of what was found were batteries, paints, e-waste, flammable liquids, asbestos and non-RCRA hazardous waste. When McGee and Rodriguez reached the site, they found that some of the ground was covered in snow, making it a challenge to assess the debris.

“We had to plan our assessment first by visiting the sites that had little snow so that we could conduct our removal action,” said Rodriguez. “Fortunately, the temperatures warmed as the week progressed, and we were able to access all the sites.”

Below: Tanks, considered hazardous waste, are marked for removal.

Right: Workers, clad in protective gear, prepare hazardous waste for transport.





Fire cleanup

The local fire department, the Mono County Health Department and the Mono County Public Works Department assisted DTSC with the cleanup.

“Our department lacks the expertise and resources to identify hazardous materials,” said Louis Molina, Environmental Health Director for Mono County Health Department. “It was important to have DTSC’s expertise in identifying hazardous materials as they are trained to handle such materials.”

The fire started near a highway on the border of Inyo and Mono counties. It took a turn for the worse when winds began blowing between 50 to 75 miles an hour, ripping through a wooded area near the towns of Paradise and Swall Meadows.

More than 200 fire personnel battled the four-day blaze with the more than a dozen other agencies.