



DTSC performs crucial role during aftermath of wildfires

Emergency Response staff with the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) are anticipating a busy summer as the worst drought in recorded history continues its grip on the state.

The danger of wildfires is sky high this year and, “We want to make sure we have adequate coverage during the summer,” said Adam Palmer, supervisor of the Emergency Response Unit.

The effects of a wildfire are felt long after the flames are doused and the firefighters go home. Devastated property owners must clean up and rebuild – and DTSC is often called in to lend a hand.

Take the December 2013 fire in Big Sur as an example. The mid-month blaze destroyed 34 homes and other structures, and caused the evacuation of about 100 residents. Monterey County authorities asked DTSC to inspect the properties afterward, and to assess and help remove hazardous waste and asbestos found in the rubble.

That hazardous waste can range from paints, solvents and other chemicals that people typically store in garages to asbestos. It must be removed and properly disposed of to prevent exposure to public health and the environment.

DTSC Environmental Scientist Nancy McGee and contractors for the department spent six days in January probing through burned homes and buildings damaged in the Big Sur fire in an effort that cost DTSC \$52,000. “DTSC staff provided especially valuable assistance to the local community during the initial stage of recovery from this devastating fire,” John Ramirez, Director of the Environmental Health Bureau of Monterey County said in a [letter](#) thanking DTSC for its efforts.

DTSC has responded to some of the state’s largest fires in recent years, including the 2007 Angora fire in the Lake Tahoe area and last year’s massive Rim fire in Tuolumne County. Palmer estimates the total cost to DTSC since 2007 has been around \$1 million. DTSC can apply for reimbursement if the event is declared a federal disaster.

Those figures could increase as the effects of climate change take hold. A recent [state report](#) showed the number of acres burned by wildfires has been increasing since 1950, and that their size, severity and duration are greatly influenced by climate.



After the firefighters leave, DTSC’s Emergency Response Unit helps assess and remove hazardous waste and asbestos, easing the task of rebuilding.