

Social Distancing and Fire Prevention: California Prepares for Wildfire Season

BY STACY BRISCOE



Cal Fire conducting advanced live fire training in Williams, California / Getty

California wine country has had a challenging year. The United States Department of Agriculture's 2019 crush report indicated yet another grape-glut while consumer interest in wine continued to dwindle and the coronavirus pandemic forced tasting room closures.

Now, while wineries struggle to keep consumers engaged in the digital sphere and prepare for the slow progression of reopening brick-and-mortar establishments, California is also in the midst of one of its most important annual stretches: fire prevention season.

In March, the USDA Forest Service suspended controlled burns on land it manages throughout the country. The agency controls 18 national forests in the Pacific Southwest Region, which includes more than 20 million acres across California, where thinning dry bushland is key in wildfire prevention. The suspension was intended to

prevent smoke from the burns from exacerbating respiratory difficulties of those infected with coronavirus, as well as reduce exposure to the virus for agency employees.

However, on May 1, the agency announced it will resume with prescribed burns. When asked what had changed in the weeks following the initial announcement, a USDA Forest Service spokesperson told *Wine Enthusiast* that the temporary suspension “afforded critical time to evaluate and obtain information on Covid-19 and begin to understand the associated risks to communities and firefighters.

“We will continue to prioritize the health and safety of communities and firefighters during this global and national emergency, and will work closely with local and state air and health organizations when considering prescribed fire operations in specific areas,” the spokesperson said.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) never ceased its fire prevention protocols, continuing with prescribed burns through the thick of the pandemic. “We are following all the CDC guidelines in terms of social distancing, but we’re still doing our burns. Preparations haven’t changed,” says Lynette Round, a Cal Fire information officer.

Cal Fire works closely with the California Air Resource Board, says Round, monitoring weather patterns, local wind conditions and field moisture. Cal Fire only burns when conditions are safe and runs smaller trial burns prior to full emissions.

With those preventative measures in place, the goal is that smoke will not invade populated areas.

Further to that effort, Cal Fire spokesman, Will Powers, said the agency is enhancing its chipping program, taking care of roadside vegetation and other fire hazards located within proximity of the public by chipping the debris instead of burning it.

Chris Godley, director of the Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management, said the county’s Covid-curve is starting to flatten and he is comfortable expanding fire safety efforts. However, he called the not-too-distant future a “concurrent hazard set,” in which Sonoma will experience fire season amid Pacific Gas and Electric-forced power outages while dealing with a possible resurgence of coronavirus. “We have to plan for the worst-case scenario,” he says.

One of Godley’s major concerns is coordinating fire evacuations in a socially distant environment. “We can’t pack people in a gym, and they can’t stay with friends or family,” he says.

The Department of Emergency Management is currently developing a revised emergency response plan, taking into consideration logistics for care and plausible options for shelters that can accommodate social distancing, including private sectors such as hotels. Godley hopes to have firm information available by August.

In the meantime, local fire authorities are doing their part to assist residents with their at-home fire prevention.

“Our intent right now is to start the inspection program using the safe social distancing and protocols in place,” says Sonoma County Fire Marshall James Williams. Most of this work is done outside and residents receive ample notice before being inspected.

Williams encourages residents whose property may be surrounded by open space and dry vegetative growth to take advantage of Cal Fire’s chipping program in order to create a border of defensible space around their homes and provide access routes for emergency vehicles in the event of a fire. Residents can [apply for the program online](#).

Whether at the national, state, county or city level, all fire authorities made a point in stating that the health of first responders, as well as the public, is the ultimate priority. Employees are meticulously following CDC-provided guidelines to keep themselves and their communities safe.



Comments

