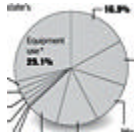


## Common sense touted as best way to prevent wildland fires Use of mechanical equipment on hot days is worst culprit

- Henry K. Lee, Chronicle Staff Writer  
Wednesday, July 12, 2006



California has a history of wildland fires with unusual causes. There was the deer hunter who got lost and started the state's largest blaze in recorded history, the firefighter-equipment dealer who started fires to boost sales, and the homeowner who insisted on mowing his lawn after being told it was unsafe.

Not much can be done when Mother Nature is the culprit and lightning hits or a squirrel sparks a power line. But preventing the human-caused fires is especially important this summer because of heavy spring rains that sprouted lush weeds and brush. Those plants are now tinder dry.

Whatever the cause, the end result is almost always the same: hundreds of acres of scorched earth, millions of dollars in damage, and injuries or deaths of residents and fire crews.

The No. 1 cause of wildland fires is use of equipment -- such as mowers and chain saws -- used to clear fire fuels like brush or dead trees, according to state statistics.

"Ironically, sometimes people clearing brush to reduce fire start fires in the same brush," said Matt Mathes, a Vallejo-based spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service.

Homeowners shouldn't mow lawns or trim bushes on a hot summer afternoon because the metal blades can hit rocks and create sparks. It's best to trim vegetation in the morning or, preferably, before the fire season begins.

William Rupp knew the dangers but insisted on mowing his Shasta County lawn in 106-degree weather. The August 2004 fire he caused destroyed 80 homes and left \$14 million in damage. A judge sentenced him this year to four years in prison.

Such fires also break out in urban areas. On Monday, a 2-acre grass fire broke out at a San Jose golf course after a spark from a tractor lawn mower ignited brush.

Vehicles -- from dirt bikes to overheated cars and large trucks -- also frequently ignite brush along Bay Area freeways.

"It's amazing how many fires are started by hot carbon that's thrown out of exhaust pipes of big trucks downshifting," Mathes said. "That alone is enough to start a fire on a lot of these hot, windy days."

Motorists with car trouble should call for help, especially when they can't tell the difference between steam and smoke, said Fire Marshal Richard Carpenter of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District.

It's widely known that the chemicals from methamphetamine labs can explode and cause fires. Frank Brady of Redwood Valley and Richard Mortensen of San Pablo were convicted of setting a fire in a pit near their Mendocino County lab in August 2001 that resulted in the deaths of two air-tanker pilots whose planes collided with each other.

Fire officials say it is an unfortunate reality that those who help fight fires are, at times, also responsible for the blazes. Firefighters have been blamed for prescribed burns that got out of control as well as arson.

In 1996, Jeffrey Alan Avila, who ran a business leasing firefighting equipment to the U.S. Forest Service, and accomplice Mark Mansfield started a fire in the Los Padres National Forest on the Central California coast to drum up sales. Avila was sentenced to five years in prison, Mansfield to 41 months.

And in 2004, Craig Underwood, a then-firefighter with the Forest Service, ignited three fires in the same forest. Authorities did not specify a motive for Underwood, who was sentenced Monday to four months in prison. U.S. District Judge James Ware ordered Underwood to pay \$2.4 million in restitution and not to seek employment as a firefighter.

"It never ceases to amaze me how people don't think about what could happen as a result of their actions," Carpenter said. "What they don't see are the houses two or three hills over that are in danger. You may have your family or your relatives who live there with young children."

In 2003, Sergio Martinez set a signal fire when he got lost in the Cleveland National Forest near San Diego. That quickly mushroomed into the Cedar Fire -- the state's largest wildland fire -- and killed 15 people and burned more than 273,000 acres. Martinez was indicted by a federal grand jury, but a judge, agreeing that Martinez didn't intend to hurt anyone, was sentenced to probation and no prison time.

Under California law, fire agencies can -- and have -- pursued restitution in civil court against those who start fires, even accidentally. A lost hunter who started a fire in 2003 in the Mendocino National Forest to keep warm was ordered to pay \$18 million to help cover the cost of fighting a fire.

The bottom line, experts say, is to use common sense.

"I would say that the message is 'Learn how to burn.' Don't fear fire, but respect and use it wisely," said Timothy Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology in Eugene, Ore.

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Only you can prevent forest fires

Smokey Bear had it right. The vast majority of forest fires are preventable. Here are some ways to make Smokey proud:

- Use only existing campsites and established fire rings when building a fire.
- When camping or visiting a park or forest, check with officials about fire restrictions.
- Don't park your vehicle on dry grass.
- Don't smoke in forests.
- At the first sign of a wildfire, leave area immediately via established trails or roads.
- Keep stoves, lanterns and heaters away from combustibles.
- Clear brush or mow grass during the morning in especially dry areas.
- Keep matches away from children.

Source: [www.smokeybear.com](http://www.smokeybear.com)

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What causes wildland fires

In 2006, equipment use in forests was the top cause of wildfires in California. But vehicles, arsonists and debris burning were also responsible for many of the state's fires. Here is a look at the percentage breakdown, by cause, of California wildland fires in 2006:

Equipment use*	29.1%
Undetermined	16.9%
Arson	13.2%
Miscellaneous	12.2%
Vehicle	11.8%
Debris burning	9%
Campfire	2%
Smoking	2%
Playing with fire	1.6%
Power line	1.6%
Railroad	0.4%
Lightning	0.3%

\* - Equipment use includes use of lawnmowers, chainsaws, weed eaters and

other mechanical tools that can spark dry brush.

Note: Figures do not total 100 because of rounding.

Source: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection