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TOP STORY

Ventura Fire Chief warns of winds this fire season

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Ventura County Sun photos by Grant Phillips

Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner at the CAL FIRE Wildfire Preparedness Week, held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

A series of fires in Simi Valley, Piru, Kern County and across Southern California over the last month are a fearful reminder that fire season normally starts in April in Southern California.

But according to Los Angeles County Fire Department Chief Deputy Jon O'Brien, fire season is now year-round in California.



Chief Deputy of Los Angeles County Fire Department Jon O'Brien at the CAL FIRE Wildfire Preparedness Week, held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

"Catastrophic wildfires are no longer seasonal, they are a year-round threat," O'Brien said during the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Wildfire Preparedness Week conference held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

Joining O'Brien was CAL FIRE Director and Fire Chief Joe Tyler, who shared that this year, there have been more than a thousand wild land fires in California already, burning nearly 15,000 acres.



CAL FIRE Director and Fire Chief Joe Tyler at the CAL FIRE Wildfire Preparedness Week, held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

This includes the Tower Fire in Kern County, the Crown Fire south of Palmdale, and the Springs Fire in Riverside.

“Since 2017, we’ve experienced over 50,000 wild land fires in the state of California that have damaged or destroyed over 60,000 homes,” Tyler said, warning that this year low snowpack and insignificant precipitation created consistently dry conditions across California.

“These conditions are leading to a longer, more active, and potentially more intense fire year across California,” Tyler said, adding CAL FIRE will support counties like Ventura with its more than 14,000 employees staffing 356 engines, along with 60 bulldozers, more than 100 hand crews, 17 Firehawk helicopters and 23 S2 air tankers.



Crews from Los Angeles County Fire Department and CAL FIRE stand in front of an engine and helicopter at the Wildfire Preparedness Week on May 4 in Calabasas.

Tyler shared that controlled burns can also help to reduce risk and clear up dried vegetation and other combustible materials.

On May 20, the Ventura County Prescribed Burn Association will conduct a 35-acre broadcast burn at the Ventura River Steelhead Preserve near Santa Ana Road. On June 1, VCPBA will conduct another three-day, 100-acre broadcast burn in Upper Ojai at Besant Hill School of Happy Valley. Both burns are intended to reduce yellow star thistle in the area, which can turn into dry, continuous fuel.



Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner at the CAL FIRE Wildfire Preparedness Week, held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner said that while fuel levels are normal in Ventura County, it's the winds that are of concern.

“In Ventura County, we watch the wind,” Gardner said. “We can see embers traveling one-and-a-half, two miles from the edge of the fire into neighborhoods, into communities.”

According to CAL FIRE, embers, not flames, are the leading cause of home loss in wind-driven wildfires.



Ventura County Fire's Austin Macias, Ryan Eaton and Keith Leonard in front of the VCFD Type 3 Engine 330 at the Wildfire Preparedness Week in Calabasas on May 4.

Gardner said fires are already burning in the county, including the Library Fire that caused an evacuation order for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley on April 27, which burned 8.6 acres.

“Ojai, the way it sits, tends to dry out a little later in the year than Simi Valley, which is our first to dry, then the whole Santa Clara Valley,” Gardner said.



Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner at the CAL FIRE Wildfire Preparedness Week, held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

Gardner also spoke about Zone Zero regulations, or the recent state law followed by executive action that is being written by the Board of Forestry to enforce a defensible 0-5 foot space around homes. Rules, regulations and enforcement are still being finalized at the state level, according to Gardner.

“We’re waiting, just like everyone else in the state, to see what the final legislation looks like and final rules look like,” Gardner said.



Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner speaks at the CAL FIRE Wildfire Preparedness Week, held at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

He shared that the number of lots in the fire hazard severity zone maps in Ventura County needing enforcement or inspection will likely increase by between 40,000 and 60,000, depending on the final map selected. The concern is the staff required to inspect these sites.

“Right now, it’s an unfunded liability that we don’t have funding for,” Gardner said. “Who the enforcement agencies will be, what the enforcement mechanisms will be, that’s all to be determined.”



The Ventura County Fire team during the Wildfire Preparedness Week launch event held in Calabasas at King Gillette Ranch on May 4.

Gardner added the concept of Zone 0 defensible space, like tree and vegetation modification, can make a major difference during wildfires.

“Zone 0 is creating a more than 70% increase in your survivability,” Gardner said. “It’s a lot of work, but in the end, it’s going to be worth it.”

Gardner also discussed sharing resources with other agencies when it comes to firefighting, while maintaining staff at home.

During the Eaton and Palisades fires in January 2025, Ventura County Fire deployed 50% of its resources to Los Angeles County to fight the blaze. To balance the support, Gardner said that Ventura County did a full recall of all firefighters, meaning all the firefighters in Ventura County worked for almost 20 straight days to staff local fire stations while helping out with the fires in Los Angeles County.

“It’s always a balance,” Gardner said. “We need to send resources because we want our partners to send us resources, because just the year before, it was us with the Mountain Fire asking for resources, so we all help each other out the best we can.”

More tips on defensible space and creating an evacuation plan is available at: tinyurl.com/mvds7vre



One of the Los Angeles County Fire Department dozers featured at Wildfire Preparedness Week at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.



One of the CAL FIRE helicopters displayed during the Wildfire Preparedness Week launch event at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on May 4.

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Reporter