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AN "AIR ATTACK" HELICOPTER acted as traffic controller as units from El Dorado Hills Fire Department, CAL FIRE and Latrobe engine 291 responded to the fire at the Tong Ranch south of Highway 50 Thursday afternoon, July 19. The fire was contained before it jumped the freeway. *Mother Lode News photo by Pat Dollins*

Roadside blaze blackens 5 acres near next to Bass Lake Grade

By Mike Roberts, Village Life staff writer

[07.25.07] Commuters driving the Bass Lake Grade on Highway 50 in El Dorado Hills last Thursday and Friday got an acrid reminder that this year's fire season may turn out to be the worst "ever in the history of California," according to said Ruben Grijalva, Director of CAL FIRE.

Five acres of brush adjacent to the freeway burned on Thursday afternoon, July 19, and left the area looking and smelling like the inside of a chimney.

The fire worked downhill from the south side of the freeway east of Clarksville, giving firefighters just enough time to get it under control before it could cross a dry creek bed and shoot uphill toward homes on Pheasant Lane, Dove Tail Lane, and Screech Owl Road.

In testimony July 18 at the Capitol on on the state's readiness for the fire season, Grijaly warned legislators, "We are definitely seeing fuel conditions that we've never seen before...conditions are ripe for catastrophic fires."

Realizing that fighting fires is no longer enough, Grijala said CAL FIRE, formerly called the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, is concentrating on preventing fires and doing things ahead of time to contain their spread.

Newly-appointed State Fire Marshal Kate Dargan told the legislators that most damage comes from the one-half of one percent of fires that escalate out of control. In those situations, the speed of the fire spread is overwhelming the firefighting forces, she said.

Back in Clarksville, "those guys really hit the ground running," said resident Mike Lester, who lives near the burn area. "They rolled through here with those dozers idling on the trucks," he said.

In the current dry conditions, El Dorado Hills Battalion Chief Dave Roberts said that the only way to keep the upper hand on fires like this is to "dispatch the world."

Three EDH companies under Roberts' command were first on the scene at last weeks fire. Two trucks set up on the freeway and began hosing down the burning brush. One truck went down through old Clarksville onto the Tong ranch and attacked the blaze from the back.

Latrobe engine 291 set up on the freeway and laid a hose line down the left flank of the blaze.

The area is technically CDF's responsibility, and they responded in force with three engine companies, a shovel wielding hand crew from Growlersburg, a helicopter prepared to drop buckets water if needed and two air tankers full of fire retardant, all overseen by a traffic cop "air attack" helicopter circling overhead. The blaze was mostly extinguished by the three EDH engines.

"We're dropping the world on everything right now because the danger is so high," said Roberts. "It's a major team effort."

CDF is investigating the blaze. Roberts said that a hot carbon blown from an overheated exhaust system might have started the fire on the steep uphill stretch of Bass Lake Grade.

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