

Outsmart Fires With Science, Experts Say

Hillside Residents, Facing Season That May Be One of Worst, Told to Fight Back

By BOB POOL, *Times Staff Writer*

Hillsides above Encino, Tarzana and Woodland Hills—thick with tangles of truck-sized, 40-year-old chaparral that have grown untouched—pose the Valley's most serious brush-fire threat in a fire season that looms as one of the most dangerous ever.

That warning has been delivered by a Santa Monica-based mountain safety group that is advising homeowners to take steps to protect their houses and urging local fire departments to rethink their brush-fire-fighting philosophy.

Leaders of the year-old National Foundation for Environmental Safety Inc., said firefighting agencies should turn to science to outsmart brush fires and reduce property losses when dry Santa Ana winds whip wildfires out of control.

The recommendations, made at a wildland fire management seminar in Malibu, followed an unusual April brush-fire alert issued by the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Fire officials declared the brush-fire season open April 12, citing a lack of rain and off-season Santa Ana winds that they said have made this year to the third-driest in 40 years. The fire season traditionally runs from May 15 through Dec. 15.

The Santa Monica Mountains area south of Woodland Hills between Topanga Canyon Boulevard and the Encino Reservoir has not burned since 1944, according to county Fire Department records. Farther south, fires have not scorched other mountain areas since 1938, 1961 and 1973.

That offers the only potential this year for a high-intensity wildlands fire likely to burn from the Ventura Freeway area to the coast, according to the seminar's keynote speaker, Klaus Radtke, who spent 15 years as a county Fire Department deputy forester before going on inactive status.

Most other sections of the mountains have been burned over recently enough for reseeded chaparral to be young and fire-resistant, Radtke told about 60 representa-

tives of firefighting agencies and mountain-area homeowner groups.

Flammable fields of grass near Woodland Hills-area homes can ignite the tangles of old, dead branches in chaparral to feed intense flames that can be whipped into unstoppable firestorms by Santa Ana winds, he said.

But if such brush fires cannot be halted, man can reduce property damage easily enough by scientifically keeping tabs on vegetation growth and the location of structures, Radtke said.

Maps of previous brush fires' paths can show where surviving flammable vegetation is, and high-level spy-plane or satellite infrared photography can pinpoint vulnerable houses with wood shingle roofs and accumulations of dead brush, he said.

Easily obtainable are low-level aerial photographic slides of ridges and canyons that can be used to show firefighters what problems lie ahead of an advancing fire front, according to Radtke.

Up-to-date copies of both kinds of pictures should be distributed along with the maps to all Los Angeles-area fire battalion chiefs, Radtke said.

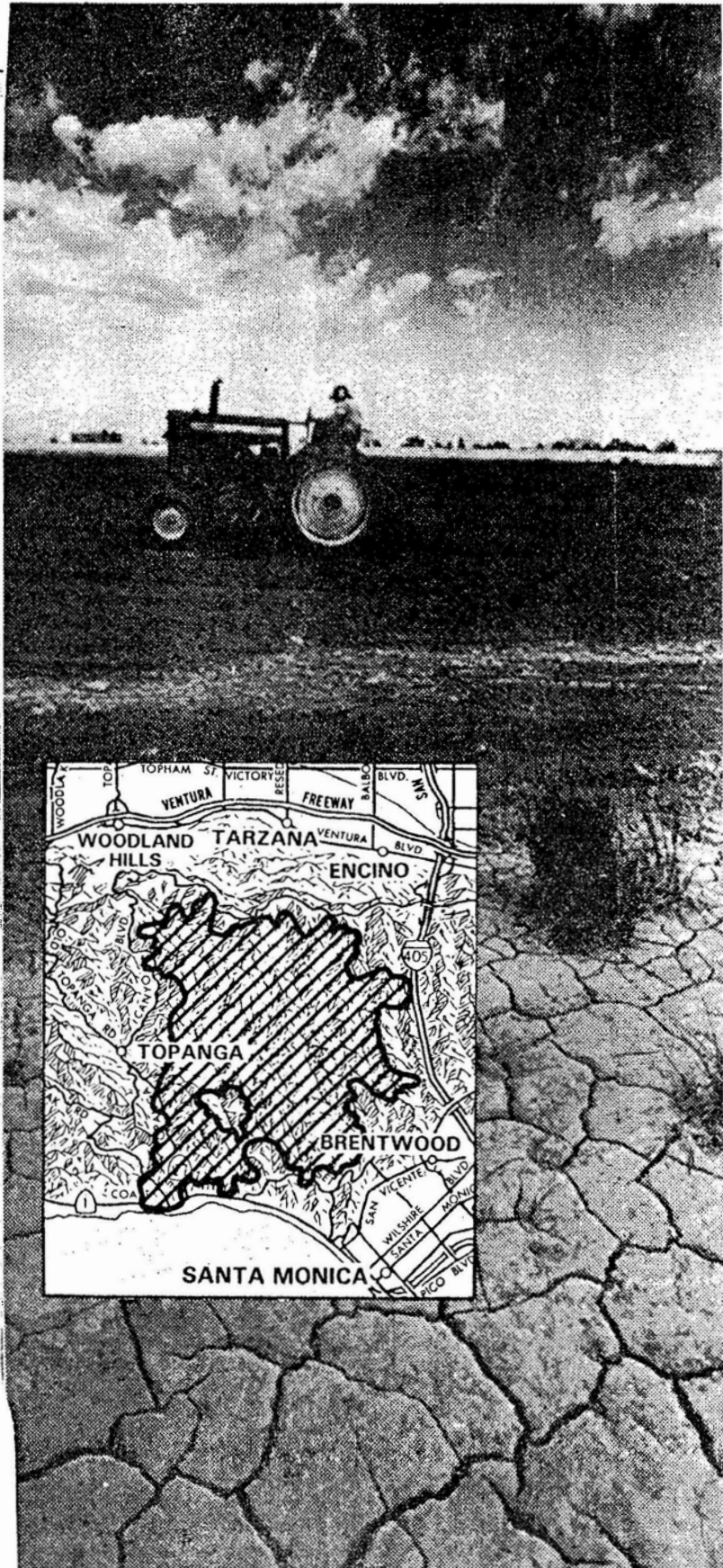
Each chief should also get a hand-held battery slide viewer for his car.

"Often the chief in charge of a fire is not the one who normally works in an area and knows the area," said Radtke. "A fire chief from L.A. doesn't know what Corral Canyon (in Malibu) looks like. These things are inexpensive and firemen would love to have them."

But Radtke admitted that firefighters are less likely to embrace other suggestions—such as a recommendation that vegetation experts, scientists and "perhaps non-firemen" be assembled as "wildland fire management teams" to accompany firefighting strike teams to the scene of major brush fires.

"This has not been done in the past because they haven't realized

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JOEL P. LUGAVERE / Los Angeles Times

an exceptionally dry year can mean trouble to both farmers, like this one in the Sepulveda Basin, and fire control officials. The line area in the map designates the region described by experts as the most vulnerable to threat of major (high-intensity) brush fires