

San Bruno 2010 – Restoring a Community
CCDEH – Excellence in Environmental Health
County of San Mateo

Executive Summary

At 6:09 p.m. on September 9, 2010 a natural gas transmission line explosion occurred in the Glenview neighborhood of San Bruno California destroying 35 homes, fatally wounding 8 residents, and sending numerous lives into disarray. Even before the flames had been extinguished it was evident that a highly coordinated effort would be needed in order to 1) mitigate any public health or environmental damage caused by the ash and debris from the destroyed properties, and 2) allow for recovery in as an timely and efficient manner as possible. San Mateo County Environmental Health established a multi agency team to include resources from CalRecycles, California EPA, California Department of Toxic Substance Control, California Air Resources Control Board, San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board, California Department of Fish and Game, and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. In addition to the normal declaration of emergency by the City of San Bruno and the County of San Mateo, the Health Officer issued a Public Health declaration due to concerns that mishandled debris may pose a public health and environmental threat. On September 11 household hazardous waste was collected from each of the 35 properties in order to reduce any immediate threat. Following the initial removal of hazardous waste from the properties the County established Right-of-Entry permits with each individual property owner. These permits gave the County full access to the properties in exchange for a commitment to return the property to the owner in state that “a three year old could walk on it”.

A Debris Removal Operation Center (DROC) was established and ran under incident command protocol. Prior to debris removal activities the division developed a Health and Safety protocol to safely allow residents and their insurance companies access to the area to document loss and be given the opportunity to salvage any personal items that may have survived the fire. This protocol included mental health support as well. Once debris removal began on September 20th milestone at each property were delineated as follows 1) Site Assessment, 2) Asbestos Survey, 3) Debris Removal, 4) Soil Sampling, 5) Erosion Control, and finally 6) County Approval.

Less than 4 weeks after debris removal began the DROC demobilized on October 19th with all 35 lots cleared and erosion control in place prior to the winter rainy season. 58% of the 7,891 tons of material removed was diverted from the landfill. The operation was successful in both bringing together a multi-agency team to address the recovery needs of the community, and showing that such an operation is scalable and could be used to address debris removal operations in a larger event such as an earthquake.