



December 22, 2018

Santa Barbara County Responds to Debris Basin Maintenance Concerns

Prior to January 9, 2018, the County removed all debris that was present in 11 debris basins. Unlike debris basins that are concrete lined, the County's basins are dirt and rock pits. Thus, even when the County's basins are empty, there is still dirt and rocks at the bottom of the basin. The County of Santa Barbara's Debris Basin Maintenance Plan prescribes that a basin be cleaned when it is 25% full. It also prescribes that after a fire, they are cleaned out regardless of how much is in the basin. We strictly follow this policy.

We repeat, the basins are never full except immediately after a substantial debris flow (which are immediately cleared). Per our basin maintenance plan, the basins are not allowed to exceed 25% observed capacity. In the event of a fire in the watershed no matter the amount of debris or when they reach 25% capacity, they are cleared.

The County communicated with Army Corps of Engineers many times in December 2017 when the Thomas Fire was burning, as did our state and federal legislators. It was concluded that the quickest way to clean the basins beginning in December 2017 while the fire was still burning was for the County to lead the work with assistance from local contractors. The Corps issued the necessary permits to the County to conduct the work. Between December 18, 2017 and January 5, 2018, all 11 basins were cleared; five contracted to Granite and six by County staff using a combination of County-owned equipment and contract equipment. All 11 debris basins were cleared by January 5, 2018, not only five as has been reported.

All 11 basins in question were cleared of debris and silt consistent with our basin maintenance plan. A key point of clarification is that we emptied the basins of debris and vegetation prior to the 1/9 debris flow. Following the 1/9 debris flow, we engaged Army Corps to do the massive cleanout of the 11 basins clearing hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of debris.

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No aspects of fire or storm preparation or response, including emergency basin and channel clean outs, were restricted by budgetary or personnel constraints. We have been in constant response, preparedness and recovery since December 6, 2017. Protecting life, property and infrastructure is our first priority. If necessary, emergency reserves would be released to cover the cost of this critical work.

The County closed non-essential offices for four days between December 26-29, 2017, however critical staff and emergency or maintenance personnel were required to work or be on-call. For example, staff, contractors and mutual aid from Public Works, Office of Emergency Management, Planning & Development, Sheriff's Office, County Fire, County Executive Office, and others continued to work between Christmas and New Year's.

Various scientists are trying to estimate the total volume of material brought down during the Debris Flow. Some estimates are as high as 1-2 million cubic yards of debris.

As mentioned earlier, the County of Santa Barbara's Debris Basin Maintenance Plan prescribes that a basin be cleaned when it is 25% full. It also prescribes that after a fire, they are cleaned out regardless of how full. We strictly follow this policy. In addition, the Corps is studying the area to determine options to increase creek and basin capacities, including the construction of additional basins.

Next Steps

The County has applied for several Hazard Mitigation grants to improve three of the basins: Cold Springs, San Ysidro and Romero; and also to add another basin on San Ysidro Creek. These grants are still pending.

VIDEO: [Santa Barbara County Responds to Debris Basin Maintenance Concerns](#)

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