

SAN ANTONIO METROPOLITAN HEALTH DISTRICT



332 West Commerce
San Antonio, Texas 78205-2489
PHONE (210) 207-8780 FAX (210) 207-8999

MEDIA ADVISORY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BRUSH FIRE CONTINUES TO RAISE HEALTH CONCERNS

The brush and mulch fire located near Helotes continues to smolder. The San Antonio Metropolitan Health District issued a health advisory on December 28, 2006, stating that smoke and ash could create respiratory problems especially for those individuals with asthma, allergies, lung and heart problems and women who might be pregnant. It was recommended that people with these conditions reduce their likelihood of exposure by staying indoors if they live in the general area.

After a meeting on January 3, 2007 in Helotes with various City, County, and State representatives, it is apparent that, if left alone, the brush fire has the potential to continue to produce smoke for several months. Although it is difficult to assess the long-term health effects to the population, the recurrent risk of short-term exposures to sensitive populations still exists. Preliminary numbers from air monitors indicate elevated levels of particulate matter that could be considered unhealthy. These data do not imply direct causality, but do indicate the possibility of an association and therefore necessary continued caution by the public to limit exposure to smoke that may be generated from the fire.

Given the nearby locations of residential subdivisions, schools, and single family dwellings, it is possible that many people could exhibit the effects of smoke exposure, primarily in sensitive populations. Most healthy adults and children will recover quickly from smoke exposures and will not suffer long-term consequences. However, certain sensitive populations may experience more severe short-term and chronic symptoms from smoke exposure. Sensitive populations include: individuals with asthma, airway hyper-responsiveness, other respiratory diseases, and cardiovascular disease; the elderly; children; and pregnant women. Particles from smoke can also affect healthy people depending on the exposure level and sensitivity of the individual, causing respiratory symptoms, transient reductions in lung function, and lung inflammation.

Due to the unexpected nature of the fire, it is recommended that as long as smoke continues to be generated, those sensitive populations, particularly those in the close vicinity to the fire, should reduce their likelihood of exposure through several methods. These include: remaining indoors preferably a tightly closed building with air-ventilation systems that can be set to re-circulate air; reducing physical activity to lower the dose of inhaled air pollutants; and reducing sources of indoor air pollution such as burning cigarettes, gas, propane, wood burning stoves and furnaces.

The level and duration of exposure, age, individual susceptibility, including the presence or absence of pre-existing lung or heart disease, and other factors play significant roles in determining whether or not someone will experience smoke-related health problems.

The San Antonio Metropolitan Health District will continue to investigate and monitor the situation in conjunction with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Bexar County, and the City of Helotes and will offer further appropriate recommendations, if warranted.

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Contact Person: Joseph M. Callahan (207-8638)