



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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IRC Contact:
Wida Karim 714-508-4760/ Cell: 949-309-9838

OCFA Contact:
Mike Blawn 714-357-7782

**Press Conference: Orange County Fire Authority & Irvine Ranch Conservancy
Mark Dangerous 2008 Fire Season, Announce Community Fire Watch
*A Year After Santiago Fires, Risk Remains High***

(Irvine, CA)—In October, 2007, the Santiago wildfire roared across the landscape, scorching 28,500 acres. A year has passed and the fire danger remains extreme. In an effort to help prevent future catastrophic wildfires, the Irvine Ranch Conservancy (IRC) in partnership with the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) and the Inter-Canyon League and Greater Laguna Fire Safe Councils, is implementing a major community Fire Watch Program. IRC and OCFA will host an official press conference on Tuesday, September 23rd at 10 a.m. to announce Fire Watch and deploy a fire watch drill.

The press conference will take place at the origin of last year's fire off of Santiago Canyon Road approximately 1.9 miles past the Irvine Lake entrance and ½ mile west of Silverado Canyon on the south side of the road (Thomas Bros. 801-H2/J2). Speakers include OCFA Chief Chip Prather, and Michael O'Connell, Executive Director of IRC.

As the events of last October demonstrated, fire is a severe hazard for the many human communities built close to nature in Orange County. Too-frequent fire is also the greatest long-term threat to the rare and globally-endangered ecosystems protected on the historic Irvine Ranch. Since 1900, more than 90% of the wildfires in the area have been human-caused. Communities must become involved in order to prevent future blazes.

“The partnership between OCFA, IRC and the Fire Safe Councils will address all aspects of wildland fire including prevention and public education,” says OCFA Fire Chief, Chip Prather. “Working together with partners and residents is among our best prevention tools. Through Fire Watch, we intend to identify suspicious circumstances or careless activities; detect and report fires earlier; educate the public about the risks and consequences of wildfires; and reduce the frequency of human-caused wildfires.”

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“After several major recent wildfires, it is obvious that the community can be the best eyes and ears in preventing fire,” says Michael O’Connell, Executive Director, IRC. “People must get involved for this to be successful. They are protecting their own lives and property in addition to helping conserve nature. Fire Watch provides a high level of visibility and deterrent during Santa Ana winds and Red Flag Warning days, and will help prevent future blazes on these special lands. We want ‘would-be’ arsonists to know that they will be seen.”

Unlike many other ecosystems, such as the forests that burned in Northern California in 2008, coastal shrublands do not have the massive buildup of old fuels that contributes to the scale and intensity of fires. Southern California’s habitats can burn at any time. Fully 40% of the acreage consumed in the region’s October 2007 firestorms had burned only four years previously. Fire prevention is essential to protect the lands and the human communities that surround them.

Nearly 40,000 acres of open space on the historic Irvine Ranch have been designated a Natural Landmark by both the State of California and the U.S. Department of Interior since 2006, in recognition of their importance to California and the nation.

Irvine Ranch Conservancy is a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-advocacy organization created to protect the wildlands and parks on the historic Irvine Ranch and enhance the public’s connection to them, while helping partners and landowners with all aspects of stewardship. It offers a variety of free, guided outdoor programs for all nature enthusiasts including hiking, mountain biking, horse-back riding and much more. For more information, visit www.irvineranchwildlands.org or call 714.508.4757.

OCFA is a regional fire service agency that serves 22 cities in Orange County and all unincorporated areas. OCFA protects over 1.3 million residents from its 61 fire stations located throughout Orange County. For more information, visit www.ocfa.org.

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