CALIFORNIA CHAPARRAL INSTITUTE
...the voice of the chaparral

P.O. Box 545
Escondido, CA 92033

For Immediate Release, August 12, 2013

Contact: Richard W. Halsey, Director, (760) 822-0029
Dylan M. Tweed, Conservation Analyst, (760) 213-3991

Silver Fire Defies Popular Beliefs About Wildfire by Burning Within the Deadly 2006 Esperanza Fire Scar

According to conventional wisdom, the seven-year-old vegetation was not supposed to burn

SAN DIEGO, *Calif*. – Defying the fundamental assumption underlying Cal Fire's new vegetation treatment proposal (that older "overgrown" vegetation is the cause of large wildfires), the devastating Silver Fire near Banning, California, burned through invasive weeds and young, desert chaparral recovering from the deadly 2006 Esperanza Fire (see map below). Such high fire frequency will lead to the spread of more weeds and the loss of native chaparral.

Proponents of backcountry vegetation treatments have maintained that the cause of large wildfires is unnatural "fuel" build up due to past fire suppression efforts. Younger fuels, they maintain, will not carry a fire. For example, in commenting on the July 2013 Mountain Fire near Idyllwild, UC Riverside geographer, Dr. Richard Minnich, maintained that allowing fires to consume as many acres as possible would increase the protection of nearby communities for fifty years (Press Enterprise 7/18/13). The loss of 26 homes and the burning of young vegetation by the Silver Fire contradicts Dr. Minnich's contention that much of southern California is in pretty good shape because older vegetation burned off during a spate of wildfires over the past decade (KPCC 8/10/13).

While sounding intuitively correct, such fuel-focused perspectives are not supported by the most recent scientific research. With a rapidly drying climate and an increasing population causing more ignitions, whether the fuel be weedy grasses, young or old native shrubs, or trees, southern California wildfires will likely continue to be large and intense.

Like earthquakes, large wildland fires in southern California are inevitable. Instead of trying to prevent them by clearing large areas of backcountry habitat, we need to use strategies that have been proven to be the most effective in protecting lives, property, and the natural environment from wildland fire. Namely, create communities that are firesafe through hazard relevant zoning, fire resistant construction and retrofits, appropriate defensible space, and strategic fuel breaks (within 1,000 feet of homes) in conjunction with firefighter safety zones. For those communities in indefensible locations, evacuate the residents, then focus firefighting resources on communities that *are defensible*. Such an approach needs to be incorporated into Cal Fire's proposed Vegetation Treatment Plan.

Additional information regarding the most recent science on fire is available on our website: http://www.californiachaparral.org/fire/firescience.html