

# NEWS RELEASE

USDA Forest Service

San Bernardino National Forest



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Citations Issued in Blaisdell Fire

**San Bernardino, CA.....** Forest Service officials announced today that they have cited three men for starting the Blaisdell Fire, which has burned 5,198 acres near Palm Springs. The three were cited for "allowing a fire to escape," which is a Class B misdemeanor. They will also be billed for fire suppression costs, which currently total \$1,700,000, and continue to rise.

The three men hiked into Blaisdell Canyon Friday evening and built a fire in a flat, grassy area on top of a knoll. "It wasn't a very smart place to build a campfire in the best of circumstances," said Law Enforcement Officer Deborah Wutzke, "but when the fire engines arrived on scene, the three men approached the firefighters and told them what happened. They have been extremely cooperative from the beginning," she added. Wutzke interviewed the men Friday evening and cited them a short time later. She identified them as Brandon Smith, Philip Diperna, and Er Antolovic.

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Forest Service criminal investigator Ron Huxman said that investigators confirmed today that the fire originated on Bureau of Land Management property, a half mile from the National Forest. "That's important, because each jurisdiction has its own regulations," he added. "The charges are filed differently depending on whose jurisdiction the fire is in, or whose property is immediately threatened by the fire. We've been withholding the public announcement about the citations until we could confirm the jurisdiction." After evaluating the options, the agency determined that the escaped campfire posed an immediate threat to the Forest, and that the citation written by Wutzke under regulation 36 CFR 261.5(e) was therefore appropriate.

Huxman also confirmed that High Fire Restrictions are in effect on the National Forest and that campfires are only allowed in developed campsites. The Bureau of Land Management has similar restrictions in effect. Regardless of where the fire started, the men will be billed by the Forest Service for the growing suppression costs.

"Two of the men are just 19 years old, and the third is 28. Their lives will be changed by this forever," said Huxman. "The suppression costs will turn their lives upside down. It's a great reminder to the rest of us to think about what we are doing, to understand the risks, and to know and follow the posted fire restrictions."

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