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PRESS RELEASE

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COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH DECLARES LOCAL HEALTH EMERGENCY

(SANTA BARBARA, Calif.) -- In order to protect the public's health and facilitate safe cleanup of hazardous materials after the Thomas Fire, the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department issued a declaration of a local health emergency and Health Officer order for removal, transport and disposal of hazardous material and debris. This declaration, signed by the Public Health Department's Director Van Do-Reynoso and Health Officer Charity Dean, was ratified by the Board of Supervisors on Thursday, December 21, 2017.

"This declaration is similar to those issued by other California counties recently affected by wildfires, and is necessary to ensure that we have state and federal resources during our recovery process," stated Do-Reynoso.

The purpose of this declaration is to prevent toxic exposures and threats to the public's health and the environment that exist in the aftermath of a major wildfire disaster. Residential structure fires can result in toxic debris and ash that contain heavy metals, asbestos and other hazardous materials. Household waste such as gasoline, pesticides, paint, cleaning products and chemicals may have been stored in homes, sheds or garages and result in toxic substances after a fire. Exposure to these hazards can cause acute and chronic health effects. With winter rains and the potential for storms right around the corner, there is also a risk that these hazardous materials could enter critical watersheds or spread to other properties if not properly removed.

"Exposure to these hazards can cause acute and chronic health effects. With winter rains and the potential for storms right around the corner, there is also a risk that these hazardous materials could enter critical watersheds or spread to other properties if not properly removed," stated Dr. Dean.

The declaration enables the California Department of Toxic Substance Control or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to assess damaged properties and safely remove household hazardous wastes at no cost to the property owner. It also enables property owners to participate in a voluntary Fire Debris Clearance Program administered through the State Office of Emergency Services and CalRecycle.

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This program is voluntary and property owners can opt out if they choose. Those who choose to opt out will still need permission from Santa Barbara County Environmental Health Services before they begin to remove fire debris. This will ensure that removal, transport, and disposal are conducted in a manner that does not endanger the community.

The declaration provides the following guidance:

- No removal of fire debris from the Thomas Fire and concurrent fires in Santa Barbara County shall occur from properties without a hazardous materials inspection conducted either by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or California Department of Toxic Substances Control. The term "removal of fire debris" as used in this order includes all cleanup of fire debris, but it does not include the removal of personal property from residential sites.
- Pending the enactment of additional requirements to address the Thomas Fire disaster cleanup, no debris bins shall be provided to property owners for the purposes of the removal of fire debris without the authorization of the Santa Barbara County Environmental Health Division.
- Pending the enactment of additional requirements to address the Thomas Fire disaster clean up, property owners that opt out of the Fire Debris Clearance Program must register with and obtain the permission of the Santa Barbara County Environmental Health Services Division before beginning the removal of fire debris and conduct their private debris removal, transport and disposal in a manner that does not endanger the community.

The declaration applies to both incorporated and unincorporated areas of Santa Barbara County affected by the Thomas Fire.

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