

New mudslide evacuation rules in place for foothill residents

Brenda Gazzar, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 10-7-10

ALHAMBRA - New more-flexible evacuation guidelines will be in place along the foothills of the San Gabriel Valley this winter, and county officials hope they'll result in better cooperation from residents.

Under the new tiered, color-coded system, residents who evacuate due to the risk of mud and debris flows are now allowed to return to their homes during non-critical times while an evacuation order is in place, provided they sign a liability waiver and show proof of residence.

The system includes an orange level, or third tier, under which residents who choose not to evacuate will be asked to sign a "Refusal to Evacuate Form," acknowledging their awareness of hazards and assuming all liability for their decision, officials said.

"The whole idea behind the protocols is to get people's cooperation, maximize the number of people willing to leave by allowing them during certain time periods...to come back in the middle of the evacuation order," said Division Chief Neal Tyler of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

The Foothill Incident Command, made up of command-level staff from the county sheriff's, fire and public works departments, developed the three-color warning system earlier this year for residents in their jurisdiction. The orange level was just added, officials said, and has yet to be tested.

Residents are not allowed to return to their homes during a red level alert - the highest warning stage - when mandatory evacuation orders are in place.

"We understand that it can be frustrating when we ask our residents to evacuate and nothing happens," said Mark Alexander, city manager of La Cañada Flintridge, who first approached sheriff's officials with the idea for a new system.

"When they are asked to do that repeatedly, it could have the effect that they don't take the evacuation request as seriously."

The new system should help ease the frustration that many La Cañada residents experienced last winter, when officials issued repeated evacuation orders. For example, residents would be allowed under an orange alert to return home to pick up medication, or to feed a pet, Alexander said.

La Cañada Flintridge resident Kristen Brakeman, who evacuated with her family at least three times last winter due to fear of mudslides, said the new guidelines seem like a good idea.

"Sometimes you do leave because you are worried about the storm, but sometimes the storm doesn't turn out to be quite as bad as you anticipated," she said. "If you do need to get back for whatever reason...I think it will be helpful."