

The News UpFront (TOP STORY) as of Thursday, 25 October 2007

The Justice Department said Thursday it is keeping a keen eye on those who engage in fraud schemes and will investigate and prosecute them. Local authorities said at least 14 deaths were fire-related.

WARNING FROM THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

Authorities Keep an Eye on Fraud, Scam Artists

By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ

SAN DIEGO - The Justice Department on Thursday said it will "vigorously prosecute" those who might take advantage of the current disaster in San Diego and elsewhere in Southern California to perpetrate fraud schemes and other scams.

The warning came from Washington and released through the US Attorney's Office just as the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) disclosed that "many Filipino American families may be in harm's way and are in need of immediate assistance and relief".

Except for some areas, county officials have allowed evacuees to repopulate communities earlier under mandatory and voluntary evacuation.

At least 14 deaths have been linked with the wildfires, according to latest official figures.

Health authorities, meanwhile, said the air quality in San Diego "remains unhealthy, specially in Oceanside and Chula Vista" due to particulate pollution.

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Written by Romeo P. Marquez
Thursday, 25 October 2007 15:47 -

“Tomorrow's forecast is for slightly better air quality in the more populated parts of the County, but smoke-impacted areas will continue to be unhealthy for everyone and the fire-damaged areas will be unhealthy for the sensitive populations,” an official told the Philippine Village Voice.

Dr. Wilma Wooten, County of San Diego Public Health Officer, advises people to take special precautions when cleaning their homes, business and neighborhoods. She also recommends limiting prolonged exertion outdoors until the weekend.

The Justice Department said unscrupulous individuals out to further victimize fire victims “will be targeted for criminal prosecution, not matter how small the fraud perpetrated.”

Karen P. Hewitt, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of California (which serves San Diego and Imperial counties), said the wildfires has affected all of San Diego County and federal aid needs to be made available quickly so people can begin to rebuild their lives

“When any person intentionally submits a false claim for federal relief, it impedes the ability of federal disaster relief officials to ensure that prompt financial aid be given to the people who qualify for it,” he said in a statement to the Philippine Village Voice.

“If we learn of any false federal claims for aid as a result of the California wildfires, the United States Attorney’s Office in San Diego will vigorously prosecute those people who illegally attempt to profit from this disaster,” he stressed.

Examples of recent types of fraud related to relief efforts include:

§ Fraudulent Charities: Cases in which individuals falsely hold themselves out as agents of a legitimate charities, or create “charities” that are in fact shams;

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§ Identity Theft: Cases in which the identities of innocent victims are "stolen" and assumed by criminals who convert the assets of, or otherwise defraud, the victims;

§ Insurance Fraud: Cases in which false or inflated insurance claims are filed; and

§ Government Benefit Fraud: Cases in which individuals file false applications seeking benefits to which they are not entitled.

PHILIPPINE VILLAGE VOICE - Redefining Community News
BREAKING NEWS - Alert
Issue No. 83 / News Without Fear or Favor /

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