



Coastside Fire Protection District

STAFF REPORT

TO: Honorable Board of Directors

FROM: Jonathan Cox, Deputy Fire Chief

DATE: January 27, 2020

SUBJECT: VEGETATION MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff Recommendation

Consider the following vegetation management-related recommended actions to reduce the risk of damaging wildfires throughout the District. Broadly speaking, these recommendations can be categorized as either education, awareness, mitigation, advocacy, preparedness and policy.

Specifically, we recommend you consider:

1. Updating the District website with information and links (including Fire Safe San Mateo, ReadyForWildfire.org and Zonehaven evacuation management platform).
2. Produce and send an informational mailer about living with wildfire, defensible space and evacuation plans to all addresses in District.
3. Host two virtual community wildfire safety town hall meetings.
4. Produce a "Coastside Vegetation Management" flyer explaining vegetation management responsibly and requirements.
5. Strategically install fire safety signs in several locations and update the messages periodically.
6. Install a fire danger rating sign in the El Granada community and keep it updated based on the daily fire danger locally.
7. Work cooperatively with CAL FIRE and large landowners to identify areas for large-scale fuel breaks.
8. Work collaboratively with San Mateo County Fire Safe Council and the Resource Conservation District to assist in the expansion of the community curbside chipping program in the District.
9. Ensure the Coastside Board of Directors author and send a letter of support to the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors for their current efforts to streamline fuel reduction, including streamlining the process for eucalyptus removal.
10. Establish a consultation program that allows residents to contact the District to request on-site consultations on ways they can reduce their fire risk.
11. Expand the current defensible space inspection program from 100 inspections per year to 150 inspections annually, focusing on the very high fire severity areas of the District.
12. Consider updating the District's Defensible Space Ordinance to include roadside defensible space and changes to unimproved parcel requirements.

Background

Devastating fire disasters that have plagued California over the past several years appear to be increasing in severity, frequency, and destructiveness. Fifteen of the 20 most destructive fires in the state's history have occurred since 2000; ten of the most destructive fires have occurred since 2015 and the largest fire occurred in 2020. The past two years have seen some of the deadliest, costliest and most destructive fires in California's history. Last year, over 4.5 million acres of land have burned across the state, the most ever.

Several common denominators have emerged from these recent fires, including: 1) these fires were driven by high winds (many times during "Red Flag" conditions), 2) firefighting was not effective, even at the earliest stages of the incidents due to the rate of fire spread, 3) these fires quickly turned into large rescue and evacuation incidents requiring temporary evacuation areas, 4) effective, timely and accurate evacuation notification warnings were imperative to getting people out of harm's way, 5) evacuation routes quickly became clogged and blocked due to the number of cars evacuating simultaneously, 6) vulnerable populations (elderly and/or disabled) were overwhelmingly most likely to be seriously hurt or killed.

Due to the changing climate, mountainous topography and vegetation-types, many areas of San Mateo County are now highly vulnerable to these-type of large wildfires, especially in less developed areas with large lot home sites with extensive areas of un-irrigated vegetation. This wildfire problem is exacerbated by the development in the wildland urban interface (WUI) areas of the county, including areas such as El Granada, rated a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet to quickly and completely reduce the wildfire risk. Efforts must be made at all levels (Federal, State and Local) to minimize the impacts of fire. Unfortunately, the causes of this increased wildfire threat are complex, so are the measures needed to tackle the problem. The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy identifies opportunities to address four major challenges, they are: 1) vegetation and fuels management, 2) homes, communities, and values at risk management, 3) human-caused ignitions, and 4) effective and efficient wildfire response. In practice this requires additional resources to focus on expanding fire prevention activity, making communities more resilient and investing in additional suppression and response capabilities. Without implementing additional preparedness, prevention and response measures we can expect to see more homeowners losing fire insurance and an increased chance of a devastating fire impacting the area. While we cannot eliminate the fire threat, we can take immediate steps to reduce the potential losses.

There are several plans already in place related to vegetation management and wildfire risk reduction. They include the San Mateo County Local Hazard Mitigation plan (LHMP), a multi-jurisdictional document that covers 29 planning partner organizations throughout the area. The plan developed pursuant to the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, covers a five-year period with long-term and short-term policies, programs and projects and other activities to alleviate the death, injury, and property damage that can result from a disaster. The plan complies with requirements to maintain eligibility for funding under Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant programs. Wildfires are one of the hazard focus areas addressed in the LHMP.

The plan is currently being updated, and CAL FIRE representatives are participating as representatives for Coastside Fire District.

An additional wildfire-related plan which covers all of San Mateo County is the San Mateo/Santa Cruz County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The San Mateo/Santa Cruz County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is a guide regarding wildfire hazards and provides strategies to mitigate risk. The plan is periodically updated, with public input, and was most recently updated in April 2018 by CAL FIRE and local resource conservation districts, with input from local stakeholders. The CWPP is used as the guiding document for identifying, expediting, preparing and implementing hazardous fuel reduction projects within the wildland urban interface (WUI).

The CWPP is an adopted documentation intended to reduce the risk to people, property and the environment. The plan also identifies recommendations aimed at preventing and reducing both infrastructure and ecosystem damage associated with wildland fires. Fuel reduction projects identified in the approved CWPP receive priority state and federal grant funding. This plan identifies hazards, assets at risk, and high priority areas in need of fuel reduction. The CWPP is not a legal document and does not satisfy regulatory permitting processes. It is intended to be used as a planning tool.

The CWPP identifies “high priority” areas where fuel reduction projects should take precedence:

- Reduction of fuel in the roadside right of way
- Strategically placed fuel breaks (including shaded fuel breaks)
- Roadside fuel breaks

The CWPP also discusses methods to create fuel breaks, as well as recommendations regarding disposal of removed vegetation.

A third wildfire-related plan is the CAL FIRE San Mateo-Santa Cruz Unit (CZU) Strategic Fire Plan identifies and prioritizes pre-fire and post-fire management strategies and tactics meant to reduce risks to lives and property within CZU. The plan identifies communities at risk within San Mateo County and Santa Cruz Counties, as well as identifying firefighting capabilities and preparedness within CZU. This plan is developed and maintained with input from Federal, State, City, and County agencies, as well as other interested parties, within the San Mateo-Santa Cruz Unit. It is intended for use as a planning and assessment tool only.

Pre-Fire management strategies for San Mateo County and Coastside Fire District currently include:

- Services of the San Mateo County and Coastside Fire Marshal’s Office.
- Pre-fire plans (conducted by fire station personnel) for fire operations are completed for commercial occupancies, schools, and larger residential facilities.
- Vegetation management program consultation
- Perform structural clearance inspections (LE-100) as needed.
- Assist in the identification of fuel breaks and proposed fuel reduction projects
- Identifying road data.
- Participation in community outreach programs:

- Smokey Bear school presentations
- Station tours for local schools
- Disaster Preparedness Day
- Career Day at the San Mateo County Receiving Facility

In summary, conditions in the District’s wildlands are changing, construction of residential structures in the wildland urban interface (WUI) continues while fires become more dangerous. The landscape is suffering due to climate change, which includes drought, pest infestations, and timber diseases. Weather events are more extreme, winds blow with more intensity for longer durations, and humidity levels are lower for longer periods of time. Conditions historically observed in Southern California vegetation are now being observed here locally in Northern California. Thus, locally, Coastside landowners are faced with the following challenges:

- A complicated and expensive process to remove eucalyptus trees.
- Several large landowners bordering the district with a variety of vegetation management.
- Limited evacuation routes in high fire hazard areas, such as El Granada.
- An aging and vulnerable population living in high fire hazard areas.
- Varying levels of vegetation management and long-term vegetation maintenance.
- Heightened public concern about overgrown vegetation in neighborhoods.
- Completing project requests to minimize the risk of fire.
- Adapting to Public Safety Power Shutoff’s during extreme fire weather conditions.

Fiscal Impact

Vegetation Management Recommendations		
Actions	FTE Positions	Estimated Cost
Updating the District website with information and links (to Fire Safe San Mateo, ReadyForWildfire.org and Zonehaven evacuation management platform).	None	\$200
Produce and send an informational mailer about living with wildfire, defensible space and evacuation plans.	None	\$2,500
Host two virtual community wildfire safety town hall meetings.	None	\$500

Produce a “Coastside Vegetation Management” flyer explaining vegetation management responsibly and requirements.	None	\$2,000
Strategically install fire safety signs in several locations and update the messages periodically.	None	\$10,000
Install a fire danger rating sign in the El Granada community and keep it updated based on the daily fire danger locally.	None	\$3,000
Work cooperatively with CAL FIRE and large landowners to identify areas for large-scale fuel breaks.	None	Staff Time
Work collaboratively with San Mateo County Fire Safe Council and the Resource Conservation District to assist in the expansion of the community curbside chipping program in the District.	None	Staff Time
Ensure the Coastside Board of Directors author and send a letter of support to the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors for their current efforts to streamline fuel reduction, including streamlining the process for eucalyptus removal.	None	Postage
Establish a consultation program that allows residents to contact the District to request on-site consultations on ways they can reduce their fire risk.	None	Staff Time
Expand the current defensible space inspection program from 100 inspections per year to 150 inspections annually, focusing on the very high fire severity areas of the District.	None	Staff Time
Consider updating the District’s Defensible Space Ordinance to include roadside defensible space and changes to unimproved parcel requirements.	None	Staff Time