

COUNTY OF SAN MATEO
PARKS DEPARTMENT

DATE: August 1, 2019

To: Parks and Recreation Commission
From: Peggy Jensen, Interim Parks Director
Nicholas Calderon, Deputy Parks Director
Subject: Fire Fuel Reduction and Fire Preparedness Efforts within County Parks

RECOMMENDATION

Accept this staff report regarding fire fuel reduction and fire preparedness efforts within County parks. No action is required.

BACKGROUND

To mitigate fire risks within County parks, the Parks Department (“Department”) is reducing fuel loads and enhancing its fire preparedness. To achieve these efforts, the Department is focused on two strategies: maintaining accessibility and vegetation management.

Maintaining accessibility involves ensuring our parks have accessible, well-maintained, all-weather fire roads that provide access for first responders and that also serve as evacuation routes for the public in the case of an emergency. The Department currently maintains approximately 37.5 miles of fire roads within its system.

Vegetation management entails the strategic removal of highly combustible vegetation including flash fuels, ladder fuels, sheddings, shrubs, and hazardous trees. The Department’s vegetation management program is focused on creating fuel breaks and shaded fuel breaks. To create a fuel break, all vegetation, including large diameter trees located within 30 to 100 feet of a designated fire road, road, or structure are removed. In a shaded fuel break, ground-level vegetation and trees under 10 inches in diameter located within 30 to 200 feet of a designated fire road or road are removed. Both types of fuel breaks reduce the density of vegetation in a given area, which reduces the potential intensity of a wildfire, preserves first responders’ ability to respond to an incident in a park and maintains essential evacuation routes for the public.

The Department uses various methods to both maintain accessibility and manage vegetation, including collaborating with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention (“CAL FIRE”) to use California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (“CDCR”) work crews, using on-call contractors, and dedicating rangers’ core work days to fire fuel reduction and fire preparedness projects.

DISCUSSION

To assist in maintaining and expanding fuel breaks and shaded fuel breaks, the Department purchased a new tool and created a new fuel reduction training program. Earlier this year, the Department purchased a masticator (Exhibit A) to clear vegetation mechanically instead of only by hand, which reduces the time needed to complete projects by nearly half. The new training program will teach Ranger IIs how to safely and effectively use equipment to remove trees and vegetation. All new rangers will attend this program which will launch in the fall of 2019. The program will allow the Department to better manage fire fuels within the parks long-term and year-round.

Collaboration with CAL FIRE

Earlier this year, Governor Newsom directed CAL FIRE to compile a state-wide list of communities that are at the greatest risk of catastrophic wildfires. From this list, CAL FIRE identified 35 high-priority fire fuel reduction projects to be implemented immediately, including two projects within San Mateo County – Kings Mountain Road (#2 on the list) and Quarry Park (#16 on the list). The state has dedicated funding for these projects and both projects are anticipated to commence in mid-August. On Kings Mountain Road, CAL FIRE and the Department will create approximately 70 acres of shaded fuel breaks in Huddart Park. The project limits can be found on Exhibit B, which is attached. Contractors will remove all trees under 10 inches in diameter, larger dead and dying trees, and ground vegetation within 200 feet of each side of Kings Mountain Road. Thinning of understory vegetation, including the removal of ladder fuels and flash fuels, will greatly reduce existing fuel loads and, according to CAL FIRE, should allow Kings Mountain Road to act as a control line for emergency responders and evacuation route for residents during a wildfire.

At Quarry Park, CAL FIRE and the Department will create approximately 100 acres of shaded fuel breaks throughout the park. Contractors will remove all trees with a diameter under 10 inches, larger dead and dying trees, and ground vegetation within 100 feet of designated fire roads and roads. The project limits can be found on Exhibit C attached. The removal of ladder fuels and flash fuels will reduce existing fuel loads and segment the park into smaller, more manageable areas to suppress wildfire. By creating the shaded fuel breaks, first responders should be able to better access most areas in the park to provide a variety of services. Further, CAL FIRE believes that the shaded fuel breaks should prevent the rapid spread of any wildfire that may occur.

California Vegetation Treatment Program

The California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection has released its Program Environmental Impact Report (“PEIR”) for the California Vegetation Treatment Program. Should the PEIR be certified, CAL FIRE and local agencies who own and manage specified lands will be allowed to conduct certain fuel reduction and habitat restoration projects in an expedited manner. The Department is recommending to the Board of Supervisors that the Board submit a letter supporting the program’s PEIR.

FISCAL IMPACT

Over \$1.3 million will be included in the Department's Fiscal Year 2019-20 Adopted Budget for fire fuel reduction and fire preparedness efforts.

EXHIBIT A

Caterpillar 299D XHP Masticator



