



County of San Mateo

Inter-Departmental Correspondence

Department: PUBLIC SAFETY
COMMUNICATIONS
File #: 20-500

Board Meeting Date: 7/7/2020

Special Notice / Hearing: None
Vote Required: Majority

To: Honorable Board of Supervisors
From: Daniel T. Belville, Director, Office of Public Safety Communications
Jonathan Cox, Deputy Fire Chief, San Mateo County Fire / CAL FIRE
Subject: Report on Fire Prevention in San Mateo County - Update

RECOMMENDATION:

Accept the report on current fire prevention efforts in San Mateo County.

BACKGROUND:

Beginning in 2018, the Board directed the County Manager to study and make recommendations on how to best prevent and manage wildfires in the County of San Mateo using a collaborative multi-agency approach. This included stakeholders from a variety of organizations (Public Safety Communications, San Mateo County Fire Department / CAL FIRE, Office of Sustainability, Building and Planning, as well as numerous other local and state agencies). Since then numerous significant strides have been made throughout the County to mitigate, prepare and respond to the threat of large and damaging wildfires.

DISCUSSION:

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 wildfires in the state's history have occurred since 2000; ten of the most destructive fire have occurred since 2015. The past three years have seen some of the deadliest, costliest and most destructive fires in California's history. In 2018, the Camp Fire killed 85 people, destroyed over 20,000 structures, scorched more than 1.9 million acres of land, cost over \$120 million to control and became the most destructive fire in California history. This is alarming as only one year earlier the Tubbs Fire in Sonoma County had the title of most destructive fire in California's history, destroying over 5,000 homes in the Santa Rosa area. Since 2015, approximately 34,300 structures have been destroyed and over 4.6 million acres have burned by wildfire in California. The Insurance Commissioner estimates that the insured losses from the November 2018 wildfires is more than \$11 billion. These types of fires in California are now referred to as the "new normal".

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, 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.

Recent climate change reports have concluded that the wildfire problem is likely to get worse across the western United States. 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; areas that were traditionally rural summer cabins, located on winding, narrow roads, are now home to year-round residences with increased structure density but pre-existing (and in many cases, insufficient) roads and infrastructure.

San Mateo County is home to 39 square miles of wildland urban interface area (WUI), with 33% of it having homes. As outlined in the 2016 San Mateo County Hazard Mitigation Plan (SMCHMP) there are a combined 6,656 buildings in the fire hazard zones (very high, high and moderate) in the unincorporated areas of the county. Additionally, there are over 21,000 people and 50 critical facilities within these wildfire severity zones. The total exposed value (both buildings and contents) in these zones is over \$12 billion.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet to quickly and completely reduce the complex wildfire threat, it takes efforts at the federal, state and local level to minimize the impacts of fire. 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 San Mateo County this has resulted in additional resources focused on expanded fire prevention activity (mitigation and preparedness), making communities more resilient, along with additional suppression and response capabilities (response).

There are 14 identified wildfire-related activities taking place across the county. These interconnected activities include: Vegetation Management, Fire Prevention Grants, Defensible Space Requirements, Fire Safe Council, WUI Building Codes, Mapping, Evacuation Planning, Community Education and Collaboration, Land Use Planning, Infrastructure Improvements and Maintenance, Fire Verification Cameras, Emergency Alerting, 911 System Upgrades, and Increased Response Capacity.



Over the past two years there have been several large notable accomplishments in preparing for wildfires. They include the development (using discretionary Measure K funds) of a standardized evacuation planning and management platform, several large-scale vegetation management projects, increased awareness and outreach as well as increased response capabilities. Other equally important actions have been taken to address wildfire risk, including: the planned installation of fire verification cameras, vegetation clearance, grant management, community outreach and upgrades to the 911 system. Each of these actions are a piece of an overall approach to address the risk of wildfire and will be presented today.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no Net County Cost for this report.