



# County of San Mateo

## Inter-Departmental Correspondence

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**Department:** PARKS

**File #:** 22-124

Board Meeting Date: 2/22/2022

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**Special Notice / Hearing:** None

**Vote Required:** None

**To:** Honorable Board of Supervisors

**From:** Nicholas J. Calderon, Parks Director

**Subject:** Update regarding the San Mateo County Parks Department's Wildfire Fuel Management Program

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Informational update regarding the San Mateo County Parks Department's Wildfire Fuel Management Program.

**BACKGROUND:**

In response to the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, the San Mateo County Parks Department ("Department") developed its 5-year Wildfire Fuel Management Program ("Program"). Using best-available data and industry standards for mitigating the threat of wildfire, the Program identified 32 priority wildfire fuel reduction and public safety enhancement projects that could be feasibly implemented and/or maintained within the Program's 5-year term (2021 to 2026). These projects reduce hazardous fire fuels and enhance and maintain critical emergency response capabilities and evacuation routes. These projects total approximately 1,830 acres of land, and although the included projects do not represent the entirety of wildfire fuel management projects required within the County park system, they were identified as the most critical to complete and/or maintain within the Program's 5-year timeframe. The Board approved the Program at its February 23, 2021 meeting.

The Department-which manages 24 parks, recreation areas, and historic sites that comprise over 16,000 acres of land, mostly located within or in proximity to the wildland-urban interface-designed the Program to: (1) serve as a planning and decision-making tool to help the Department appropriate resources toward implementation and maintenance of Program projects within a 5-year period; (2) serve as an assessment process for ensuring that all projects are considered based on the same suite of criteria; and (3) serve as a way to monitor project progress and adapt maintenance strategies as needed.

Fuel reduction treatment approaches leveraged in the Program include, but are not limited to, understory vegetation thinning and small diameter tree removal, masticating or mowing scrub and small trees, felling mature trees, applying herbicides to control invasive species, spreading mulch, and removing dead or dying vegetation. Project benefits include: (1) improving firefighters' ability to

respond to a wildfire and conduct critical fire containment and suppression activities; (2) reducing understory vegetation and small diameter trees that contribute to the rate at which fire spreads; (3) reducing ladder fuels that can contribute to a ground fire becoming a canopy fire; (4) reducing the number of trees that contribute to canopy density; and (5) enhancing residents' ability to evacuate should a fire occur.

While complete removal of vegetation can be an effective strategy, it is often cost prohibitive. For example, to remove a single acre of eucalyptus trees is estimated to cost between \$90,000 to \$400,000, depending on tree density and topography. For the Department to effectively treat as many acres as possible and mitigate the threat of wildfire to communities adjacent to county parks, complete removal should not be the intended goal at this time. In addition, while the current Program is a 5-year vision, any fuel reduction project implemented will need to be maintained in perpetuity. If not, the vegetation will regrow, and the wildfire threat will return.

### **DISCUSSION:**

Since February 2021, eight of the 32 Program projects have commenced and are in progress. These projects include implementation of 93 acres of understory vegetation thinning and forest restoration at Wunderlich Park and Huddart Park; 89 acres of new or re-treated shaded fuel breaks at Quarry Park; 16 acres of eucalyptus removal at San Pedro Valley, San Bruno Mountain, and Junipero Serra County parks; and 13 acres of invasive scrub management at San Bruno Mountain State and County Park. This totals 211 acres of fuel management efforts to date. In 2021, the Department also procured an excavator with a masticator head in order to expand its internal ability to treat and maintain fuel reduction project areas.

A notable benefit of the Program to date has been a streamlined process by which the Department can pursue grant opportunities as they arise because the Program defines a project list that can be readily aligned with eligibility criteria for various grant programs. In partnership with the San Mateo Resource Conservation District, \$2,348,000 in grant funds have been awarded for projects in the Program, and there are currently 5 grant applications pending.

Throughout 2022 and the beginning of 2023 the Department plans to implement an estimated 485 additional acres of fuel reduction and forest health treatments. This includes up to 5 new projects, as well as expansion and maintenance of the 8 projects discussed above. These treatments would occur in Huddart, Wunderlich, Edgewood, San Bruno Mountain, San Pedro Valley, Quarry, Memorial, and Junipero Serra County parks. The Department is positioned to treat more acres of fire fuels in Fiscal Year 2021-22 than in any year prior.

Not all projects within the Program are considered "shovel-ready," as they need to be reviewed for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA"). Efforts to advance CEQA review or obtain any other necessary permits and approvals for various projects will also be proceeding in 2022 and 2023.

For all projects included in the 5-year Program, as well as for new projects planned in the future to mitigate wildfire risk within County parks, the Department will continue to plan for and design projects that prioritize environmental resiliency and ecosystem health. While the wildfire risk reduction benefits are substantial, overall project benefits should be multi-factor and promote long-term climate resiliency, promote healthier and more diverse forest stands, encourage landscape-scale benefits, improve habitat for native wildlife including threatened or endangered species, and incorporate principles of restoration and ecosystem functions. A healthy forest or park ecosystem also is inherently more resilient to wildfire and other disturbances.

In 2023, the Department will conduct a mid-cycle update to the Program to reflect projects that have been completed, new priorities that have been identified, and new data that has been collected and made available to the Department.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There has been \$975,775 in expenditures for Program projects so far in FY 2021-22, with an estimated \$900,000 in additional expenditures anticipated for the remainder of this fiscal year. Program projects are funded by grant and Measure K funding. Current funding is sufficient to meet these targets. There is no Net County Cost associated with this informational item.