

HED - Fire Prevention builds on the lessons of 2017 to reduce wildfire risk for Sonoma County homes

TEASER - The Fire Prevention Division of Permit Sonoma continues to expand useful programs such as its Curbside Chipper Program as demand continues to soar. The lessons learned since 2017 for Fire Prevention have been manifold but still are dwarfed by the growth of awareness that the community now has around the risk of wildfire. This makes the job of Fire Prevention much simpler. Instead of trying to convince people of the risk, they can now focus on educating county residents on how to lessen it.

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Caerleon Safford at Permit Sonoma's Fire Prevention and Hazardous Materials Division spent a great deal of energy leading up to the 2017 fires trying to persuade people that major wildland fires in Sonoma County were a real risk.

"The perception of the risk in this county was low, unsurprisingly," Safford said. "Because, for all intents and purposes, we hadn't burned since the Hanly Fire in 1964. They would say, 'Oh, it burns in Southern California or in Lake County, not here.' While many fire officials and residents understood the risk, for some the fires of 2017 came as a surprise."

After the tragic 2017 fires, the horrific Camp Fire in Butte County in 2018, Kincadee in 2019 and the Walbridge and Glass fires in 2020, nobody needs persuading any more. Safford said the awareness has changed the nature of fire prevention work in the county.

"People believe," she said. "Everybody's got the picture. Now it's important that people focus on what we can do to best reduce risk to lives, to properties and catastrophic damage to our environmental assets."

Over the past several years, Fire Prevention has worked on a variety of programs and projects to help Sonoma County residents focus on those critical elements to reduce their risk of wildfire.

Wildfire Adapted

Fire Prevention's work now consists of, among other things, emphasizing to residents of Sonoma County the need to put in the work to protect their homes first. Leveraging funds from FEMA's hazard mitigation grant program, [Sonoma Wildfire Adapted](#) is a pilot program launching in 10 communities in the county, chosen based on their proximity to very high fire severity zones and potential home loss. Property owners in the pilot areas will receive free defensible space and may sign up for free structural hardening inspections. A later phase of the project is set to include cost-sharing incentives for structural hardening projects.

"We need to harden our homes so that we don't suffer significant home losses during fires," Safford said, adding that the environmental cost of losing houses in

wildfire events is staggering by itself. In addition to programs such as Wildfire Adapted, Safford said a next step would be to implement fuels management and fuels buffer zones between communities.

Permit Sonoma's Hazardous Fuels Reduction grant project does just that. In four project areas across the county, local agencies and the community will collaborate to identify priority locations for large-scale fuel breaks and landscape-scale vegetation management within the pre-selected project areas. The second phase of the project will provide funds to implement high priority projects.

Chipper Program

One way Sonoma County residents can reduce the risk to their homes and neighborhood is by signing up for the [Curbside Chipper Program](#).

The county's Chipper Program has seen robust growth, doubling its capacity in just the past three years, going from processing 113 jobs in 2019 to more than 275 already in 2022.

"Demand for the Chipper Program has gone up every year which is a really positive sign," Safford said. "People are doing the work to remove potentially hazardous vegetation from around the home."

Updating the Community Wildfire Protection Plan

Safford is currently working on updating the county's [Community Wildfire Protection Plan](#) or CWPP. When Safford had worked on putting together the 2016 CWPP, it was a struggle. CWPPs are, by design, supposed to be collaborative, reflecting the diverse viewpoints within the community they are written to help.

"I had to beg people to come to meetings in 2016," she said. "In contrast, the 12 meetings we've held for the 2022 update have all been well attended and people are more sophisticated about understanding the risk in terms of the fuels near their homes."

The CWPP is in the final stages of internal review. A round of public review is expected to take place in November and December, with finalization in February 2023.

Zone Zero

There are also some important changes coming to how defensible space is defined. Currently, state law under Public Resources Code breaks up defensible space into two zones. Zone 1 is the space between the outside of the house to 30 feet out. To make it defensible, the state recommends keeping it "lean, clean and green," while Zone 2 is from 30 out to 100 feet from the home. Proposed changes to Public Resource Code 4291 could soon see the inclusion of a Zone Zero to the existing zones. Zone Zero, which is already being touted as the most important for fire

prevention, would include the removal of all flammable objects out to five feet from the home.

“The most important thing people should do tonight when they go home is to work on their zero-to-five-foot zone. Five feet is easy to visualize,” Safford said. “This is going to be difficult for a lot of people, because most have a lot of vegetation, and many combustible items right up to the walls of the home.”

However, Safford said, it’s been a clear finding since 2017, and the other fires throughout the area, that 80 percent of home ignitions are caused by embers. If embers land on a combustible item or plant near the home, they can smolder long after the main fire has passed through, eventually bursting into flame. The closer to the house, the greater the risk, so removing things like flammable mulch from the five feet closest to house walls is critical to prevent those ignitions.

The team at the Fire Prevention and Hazardous Materials Division continues to adapt based on the lessons learned from every incident in the region, and stay current on scientific research about wildfire risk reduction in order to provide new tools and innovative programs to help Sonoma County residents to reduce the risks to their home from wildfire. For more information visit permitsonoma.org/divisions/firepreventionandhazmat.