



Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District

R-19-16
Meeting 19-03
February 13, 2019

AGENDA ITEM 8

AGENDA ITEM

Informational Update on the Development of the Prescribed Fire Program

GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATION

No action required.

SUMMARY

District staff from multiple departments have been developing a Prescribed Fire Program in consultation with consultants and CalFire. The development of a prescribed fire program is proceeding as scheduled. However, given the timing and the existing lineup of consultants under contract, there exists an opportunity for increasing the project scope to not only develop a Prescribed Fire Program, but also more fully address the Board's recently-approved Fiscal Year (FY) 2019-20 Strategic Plan Objectives. More specifically, the opportunity exists to address the strategic objective of working with fire agencies and surrounding communities to strengthen the prevention of, preparation for, and response to wildland fires. This informational presentation provides an update on the work completed to date on the Prescribed Fire Program and the opportunity for expanding the current project scope.

DISCUSSION

Prescribed Fire Program Development

In FY2017-18, staff formed an interdisciplinary team from the Natural Resources, Planning, Land and Facilities, Visitor Services, Information Systems and Technology, and Public Affairs Departments to create a framework for the new Prescribed Fire Program that includes the following objectives:

- *Public safety and education:* Provide opportunities to educate, facilitate discussions, and receive input from stakeholders and members of the public about wildfire.

Public Affairs is working cooperatively with Natural Resources staff and project consultants to include the prescribed fire program in the District's larger fire outreach efforts to proactively inform and engage District audiences, build trust and support, and promote fire prevention and preparedness actions.

- *Natural resources response to fire:* Lead and promote large-scale vegetation management to protect and restore the natural environment.

Many ecosystems and plant communities on District lands are fire dependent or fire adapted. Fire is an inevitable and natural component of maintaining healthy ecosystems.

In some natural landscapes, land managers can use fire to control invasive species, thereby increasing both biodiversity and climate change resiliency.

- *Wildfire response training:* Utilize prescribed fires to train staff on how to respond safely to a future wildfire event and as a means to enhance interagency coordination.

Minimum requirements to be a wildland firefighter include an initial 32-hour classroom and field based instruction along with an 8-hour annual refresher. Providing real world experience is invaluable for not only learning on-the-ground firefighting techniques, but also learning how to fight fire safely under a relatively controlled environment. In addition, during a wildfire event, multiple agencies work together under a Unified Command; prescribed fires provide practice under the same command structure.

- *Cultural resource enhancement:* Provide opportunities for Native American tribes to participate in the planning and implementation of cultural burns.

Native American tribes on the California central coast burned grasslands to increase grass and forb production, decrease pests in oak woodlands, and increase browsing for game species. The use of fire is a significant component of their cultural systems, practices, and heritage.

- *Agricultural use of land resources, including grazing lands:* Utilize prescribed fire to increase forage and biodiversity within rangelands.

Ranchers depend on grasses and forbs to feed their livestock, and grassland areas are a high priority area for prescribed fire. In the short-term, fire reduces the carrying capacity for livestock, but in the long-term, fire can increase forage production and diversity, resulting in potential increased livestock carrying capacity. Prescribed fire helps support healthier, diverse rangelands to support long-term, local, sustainable agriculture and improve native species within these ecosystems.

On June 27, 2018, the Board of Directors (Board) authorized a contract with Spatial Informatics Group, Inc., (SIG) (R-18-72), to provide expert advice and best management practices on fire ecology. Specifically, SIG is completing four tasks:

- Meet on a regular bases with the District's internal interdisciplinary team to inform Program Development;
- Review existing Resource Management policies and goals as they relate to fire activity;
- Develop the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Project Description; and
- Respond to public comments on the draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

On September 24 and 25, 2018, staff and SIG performed District-wide site visits to a subset of Preserves where the Program may be implemented, including areas of Bear Creek Redwoods, Los Trancos, Russian Ridge, Sierra Azul, and Windy Hill Open Space Preserves.

To comply with CEQA requirements, the District has separately contracted with Panorama Environmental, Inc. (Panorama) (R-18-120). Panorama's role is to analyze the Prescribed Fire Program and address CEQA requirements based on the project description developed by SIG. Panorama has begun this work early in the project to inform the Project Description and minimize potential environmental conflicts and challenges.

Development of the CEQA Project Description is ongoing; stakeholder meetings held at the end of November 2018 with entities such as CalFire and the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band are informing the Project Description. Staff are also planning three public meetings in the spring of 2019 to engage a wider audience in information sharing and discussion, to increase awareness of the Program goals, objectives, and public benefits, and to receive public input on the Project Description.

Recently, CalFire raised the difficulty in obtaining air quality permits from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) to conduct prescribed burns in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties due to the implementation of 2013 air quality rules. Recent catastrophic wildfires across the state have added increased urgency for implementing prescribed burn programs statewide. After consultation with the District's legislative consultant, Public Policy Associates, staff identified an engagement strategy with BAAQMD staff and their Board of Directors, which will take place throughout Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 of FY2018-19. BAAQMD permits will be required after the Board adopts the EIR and staff implement the Project. Early engagement with BAAQMD will allow time to resolve this issue.

Potential Change in Project Scope

At the December 12, 2018 Board retreat, the Board approved a new strategic objective to work with fire agencies and surrounding communities to strengthen the prevention of, preparation for, and response to wildland fires. The District's IPM Program and related EIR, under which fuels management work is permitted, currently limits specific fuel management activities on District lands (e.g. acres of brush removal and new fuel breaks).

To allow for greater land management flexibility that more effectively responds to the Board direction, staff is evaluating the possibility of leveraging current efforts underway related to the development of the Prescribed Fire Program. Increasing the scope of work and corresponding scope of services of the two consultants under contract, SIG and Panorama, may allow the District to develop a more robust, strategic, and comprehensive fire management plan. Staff recently sent a new potential scope of services to the consultants to determine budget and timeline ramifications. More specifically, the potential added scope includes the following elements that are akin to the National Park Service's fire program:

- *Fuels Management (non-fire)*
Over the last few months, multiple fire agencies have requested that the District increase its number and scale of its fuel management projects. Currently, all fuel management activities fall under the IPM Program's CEQA, which sets a limits on the total number of acres managed per year and restricts the creation of new major fuel breaks. Working in conjunction with partner fire agencies, the CEQA Project Description would address the requested fuels management projects beyond what the District is currently doing and allowed to take on per the IPM Program.
- *Wildland Fuels Monitoring*
The Consultant would include a fuels monitoring plan in the CEQA Project Description that establishes baseline conditions for post project analysis (including pre-project vegetation, soil, erosion, and water quality). The fuels monitoring plan would outline a process to assess the achievement of project objectives in reducing fuel loads and identify outcomes in a manner consistent with other land management agencies to allow for comparable analysis.

- *Wildland Fire Response Plans*

The consultant would prioritize and prepare wildland fire response plans for individual Preserve or groups of Preserves (when it makes tactical/logistical sense) that identify appropriate fire suppression activities for District lands in the event of a wildland fire. This effort would provide much needed capacity to expedite the work begun by Visitor Services.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no immediate fiscal impact for the informational update to the developing Prescribed Fire Program.

BOARD COMMITTEE REVIEW

Staff will be bringing related items to the Planning and Natural Resources Committee for review and guidance.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act. Public notice was also sent to 125 interested parties and tenants by US mail and/or electronic mail.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

This item is not a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act. Once SIG has drafted the CEQA Project Description described above, the District will begin drafting the Environmental Impact Report for CEQA compliance.

NEXT STEPS

If the timeline and costs proposed by the consultants for expanding the scope of work are acceptable, the General Manager will return to the Board for authorization to amend the contract agreements to increase the project scope. At such time, the District would rename the Prescribed Fire Program as the Wildland Fire Program, and an updated timeline would be prepared and provided to the Board.

As a reminder, the original Prescribed Fire Program timeline is provided below and includes multiple public, Planning and Natural Resources Committee, and full Board meetings. An increase in scope would hasten the development of fire response plans and fuels management plans but would likely delay the implementation of a prescribed fire program by as much as one year.

Table 1: Original Prescribed Fire Program Timeline¹

Meeting Type	Description	Expected Date
Community Informational Meetings	Engage the Community at 3 different locations within the District's Boundary	Q3 of FY2018-19
Planning and Natural Resources Committee	Review initial CEQA Project Description	Q3 of FY2018-19
Planning and Natural Resources Committee	Review refined CEQA Project Description	Q4 of FY2018-19
Planning and Natural Resources Committee	Review final refined CEQA Project Description	Q1 of FY2019-20
Full Board	CEQA Project Description Approval	Q2 of FY2019-20
Full Board	Draft EIR and Receipt of Public Comment	Q2 of FY2020-21
Full Board	Certification of first phase of Final EIR (FEIR)	Q2 of FY2021-22
Full Board	Certification of all component of FEIR	Q3 of FY2021-22

Responsible Department Head:
Kirk Lenington, Natural Resources

Prepared by:
Coty Sifuentes-Winter, Senior Resource Management Specialist, Natural Resources

¹ As described above, the current timeline does not take in to account the possible scope increase and is subject to change.