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Governor discusses urgent need for fuel reduction this wildfire season

By Nick Marnell



Gov. Newsom outlines North Orinda Fuel Break program. Photo Steven Danziger

Gov. Gavin Newsom traveled to the Moraga-Orinda Fire District April 23 to outline his major statewide fire prevention plan, encompassing 35 projects he approved for areas in California most vulnerable to a devastating wildfire.

When Newsom took office in January, he asked the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection for a list of state areas in urgent need of fuel reductions and other preventive measures to ward off wildfires. Cal Fire submitted a list of 35 statewide projects, including the North Orinda Fuel Break, a 14-mile shaded fuel break from near the top of Eagle's Nest Trail, down Wildcat Canyon Road to Bear Creek Road and along Lafayette Ridge to Pleasant Hill Road.

"This is one of the larger projects of the 35," Newsom said, speaking at a press conference in Tilden Park, about one mile from the site of the 1991 Oakland Hills fire and adjacent to the western terminus of the North Orinda Fuel Break project, and within MOFD jurisdiction. The 1,700-acre north Orinda project, No. 9 on the Cal Fire list, affects more than 500,000 people in 30 East Bay communities. "You are as vulnerable as Butte County," said Newsom, referring to the 2018 Camp Fire, which killed 85 and destroyed more than 13,000 homes.

The governor said that the 1991 Oakland Hills fire was seared into everyone's memory, and it has presented new standards and expectations. "We've been scattershot, but not as deliberate as we are today," Newsom said. "I signed a declaration of emergency in advance of an emergency."

Newsom acknowledged that transferring the money to the jurisdictions that are spearheading the projects has been a complex process. MOFD, which will partner with various public agencies to complete the north Orinda project, had not received a contract with grant terms from Cal Fire by the date of the press conference. But Cal Fire Director Thom Porter said that the agency is committed to having state workers and contractors on the job in north Orinda in early May. "We'll also see some National Guard that we've pulled off the border to do some real work," Newsom said, a dig at President Donald Trump.

Porter also said that the MOFD North Orinda Fuel Break grant has been increased to \$6 million. Once the contracts between Cal Fire and MOFD have been finalized, the grant will go to the fire district board for acceptance.

Newsom echoed what MOFD officials have been stressing now more than ever. "We can't do it alone," the governor said. "We need folks to work on defensible space. Nothing is more important than localism."

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