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MOFD ramps up fire prevention efforts to allay rough fire season ahead

By Nick Marnell



District aide Patrick Carrillo with the new MOFD wood chipper Photo MOFD

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District solidified its commitment to increased fire prevention by upping Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein's position to full time and adding equipment, programs and personnel to fend off a potentially devastating fire season. The district commitment is in addition to the \$6 million state grant for creation of a shaded fuel break in north Orinda and along the Lafayette Ridge.

Rein, who retired as fire chief of the East Bay Regional Park District in 2006, has been with MOFD since 2011 on a part-time basis refining emergency operations plans and preparing emergency operations drills, plus working with local groups like the Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team. He will work his increased hours through December organizing and supporting district fire operations, including the North Orinda Fuel Break program.

"The extra hours are going to allow us to go to the next level," Rein said. "We are getting much more involved with the community right now."

The district will continue its pilot Fuels Mitigation Program, which includes a manager and four part-time personnel whose job is to reduce hazardous fuels in the community. In addition to outreach and education, a major component of the FMP is a community wood chipping program under which MOFD will chip vegetation that has been cut and stacked on the roadway.

Only vegetation can go through the chipper, trees must be less than 6 feet in diameter and the chipped vegetation will not be hauled away but repurposed on the property. The program is intended for neighborhoods, not individuals, and complete program details can be found on the MOFD website.

The board approved the purchase of two utility pickup trucks, one of which will be used in the chipping program and the other for out-of-county deployments by personnel who travel to wildland mutual aid incidents. Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said that through these deployments, district personnel gain invaluable experience on large-scale wildland incidents that is transferable to the local area.

MOFD further beefed up its apparatus fleet with the board-approved purchase of a new Type 6 fire engine, a small vehicle used to transport firefighters to the scene of hard-to-reach wildland fires, like those that could occur in district high fire hazard severity zones.

A major component of any fire prevention plan is the cooperation of district residents. Rein said that everyone needs to comply with the fire code and maintain a defensible space on their property, and observe the district June 15 weed abatement deadline. "We're all in this together and we're all part of the solution," Rein said. "We need the residents to do their part to prepare for a very rough fire season ahead."

MOFD open house May 4 offers exhibits on wildfire preparedness

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District hosts an open house May 4 at Fire Station 45 in Orinda, with the theme of community wildfire preparedness weaving through the exhibits, events and presentations. "It's going to be the most informative open house in years," Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard said. "We have received an enormous response from our sponsors. In all the time I've been here, I have not seen the level of interest and concern that I have seen this year."

Based on property owners' reactions at recent MOFD meetings, wildfire prevention is certainly top-of-mind for district residents, and staff from the Diablo Firesafe Council will explain how mini-grants are available for defending the home against wildfires. Representatives from Firewise USA will explain how neighborhoods can become Firewise communities - empowering neighbors to take action to prevent devastating wildfires. "The Firewise model gives neighborhoods an example of what they can do to protect themselves," Leonard said.

Hands-only CPR training and fire safety training will be offered by district personnel, and there will be fun events for families, too, including hanging out with the firefighters and checking out the fire apparatus. Plenty of entertainment is planned for the kids as well, with appearances by Smokey Bear and Sparky the Fire Dog. The firefighters will cook "firehouse hot dogs" for purchase, with proceeds going to the Muscular Dystrophy Association of the Greater Bay Area.

But make no mistake: community involvement for wildfire prevention is the driving force of this open house. "The recent tragedies show us that we must work collaboratively," Leonard said. "We don't want to see another Napa."

The open house runs from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. May 4 at Fire Station 45, 33 Orinda Way in Orinda Village.

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[back](#)

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