



Published May 27th, 2020

Lamorinda weed abatement deadlines fast approaching

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy ConFire
fuels mitigation manager.

Lamorinda fire agencies have ramped up their efforts to alert property owners to remove problem vegetation by the abatement deadlines before the weeds spark a community catastrophe. The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District deadline is May 31 and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District deadline is June 15.

While Contra Costa County residents were ordered to stay at home for much of this spring, Lamorinda weeds thrived and returned with a vengeance, especially after the dry winter. To avert a potential fire season disaster when overgrown vegetation dries out, county health officials clarified in April that landscaping and gardening were permissible outdoor activities.

"With so many people at home, we are fielding many more phone calls, with people asking questions and filing complaints on neighbors," said Gorden Graham, MOFD

The fire district explained its process for bringing property owners into fire code compliance.

On May 1, MOFD sent parcel owners a mailer reminding them of the upcoming fire season and the steps needed to create defensible space around their property. The receipt of that letter did not mean the property owner was in violation; it was a reminder to everyone.

"Starting June 15, we will perform an assessment on every property for violations of the fire code," Graham said. "Upon assessment, properties that are determined to need additional mitigation will be mailed the assessment letter advising of the additional steps needed on their property."

Thirty days after the district mails the assessment letter, the district reinspects the property. Properties that fail the reinspection will be mailed a Notice to Abate. Then, 15 days after that mailing, the district does one more reinspection. Parcels that fail the second reinspection will be mailed a notification that the vegetation will be abated by the district and the cost will be assessed through a lien on the property.

But the district stressed that it has no desire to punish residents. "We want to make this about education," Graham said. "It is our intention to educate the public and gain voluntary compliance to provide for a safer community." MOFD said that inspection of properties along evacuation routes was its No. 1 priority.

The window between the end of the rainy season and the beginning of fire season is a short one, and soon much of today's Lamorinda green will turn to yellow and brown. "As fire season is fast approaching I would like to remind citizens and property owners of the need to create defensible space and harden your home from wildfire," Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs said. "Working together, we can make our community safer and increase the survivability of homes during wildfire events."

ConFire follows similar inspection protocols as MOFD, with an important difference being the earlier deadline for Lafayette parcel owners to abate the weeds on their properties.

"Large portions of Lafayette are a concern, especially around the Happy Valley and Upper Happy Valley areas," said Capt. George Laing of the district's fire prevention bureau.

Lafayette residents likely need little incentive to remove problem vegetation, having experienced an historic blaze in October that destroyed a tennis club, caused a nine-alarm grassland fire and resulted in mass evacuations. ConFire Chief Lewis Broschard said that 2019 was one of the longest fire seasons on record, and fire officials said this year could be just as intense, heightening the concerns for Lafayette vegetation fires.

"It's good to have Station 16 open again," Laing said, referring to the northwest Lafayette fire station that reopened in September.

Ordinances, fuels reduction programs and other abatement guidelines can be found at the two district websites: mofd.org and cccfd.org

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[back](#)

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