

Published December 23rd, 2020

ConFire will no longer declare an end to fire season

By Nick Marnell



Ready for fire season in Lafayette Photo Nick Marnell

With fires increasing in intensity each year, and burning later and later throughout the calendar year, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Lewis Broschard said the district will no longer declare an official end to the fire season as it has done in past years.

"As it currently stands across the district, there are considerable dead annual grasses, dry brush and vegetation that all have very low fuel moisture and thereby represent an ongoing wildfire risk. In spite of lower temperatures and some rain, the danger of wildfires still remains a threat," Broschard said in his December fire chief's report to his advisory fire commission and his board of directors.

The district will continue to make operational and staffing adjustments throughout the year based on the expected degree of fire activity. For example, with the

arrival of light rain and cooler weather, ConFire lowered its response protocols to winter season levels. The initial response to grass fires will now be a single engine, unlike the five-engine response during the height of fire season.

The Fire Control Worker Program, which has been curtailed for the winter months, will possibly expand from four days a week to seven in 2021. Crew 12, which works alongside the suppression crews, does much of the post-incident cleanup, allowing the engine company to respond to another incident sooner. The crew also does prescribed fuel reduction work.

The chief outlined other strategies for the next fire season. "We will be looking at ordinances such as the one passed by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, prohibiting certain types of vegetation, like juniper bushes and other highly flammable vegetation," the chief said.

And the district plans to work with neighboring agencies to develop software to plan and execute a consistent evacuation effort throughout the county. "Our hope is to have something on board by July," Broschard said.

The chief noted that 2020 vegetation fires increased 38% over both 2018 and 2019, and 2020 exterior fires increased 40% over each of the same two years. He told the board that the district will explore increased staffing from June through October, and will continue to support pre-positioning of resources, of not only engine crews but also hand crews, dispatchers, bulldozers and aviation backup.

"We need to change our strategy quite a bit," Broschard said.

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[back](#)

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