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MOFD board adopts Community Wildfire Protection Plan, chipper program expansion

By Jennifer Wake



Photo provided

Following an incredibly dry winter, warnings of a devastating fire season ahead became all too real after the April 21 declaration of a drought emergency by Gov. Gavin Newsom for Sonoma and Mendocino counties. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District mitigation efforts are continuing to move forward. The MOFD board of directors adopted the Community Wildfire Protection Plan at its April 21 meeting, after holding three community meetings to gather public input - one in Orinda Jan. 21, in Canyon Jan. 28 and in Moraga Feb. 4 - as well as several others held with community stakeholders.

The 65-page CWPP will offer a roadmap and a useful tool for the current year and will make the district "more effective and efficient in our ongoing efforts to reduce the community's risk to loss from uncontrolled wildfire," said MOFD Fire Chief Dave Winnacker.

A portion of the mitigation efforts outlined in the CWPP involve the chipper program, in which MOFD schedules services for fuel mitigation, responds to citizen inquiries regarding the program, and trains and supervises a two-person crew. MOFD has offered to manage the addition of one two-person crew assigned to the city of Orinda, without any additional charge for overhead and supervision. According to a staff report, the city will reimburse the district for the direct costs associated with the Orinda assigned crew.

"Seems to me it's a no brainer," said Director Jon Jex. "You're doubling the chipping service that's desperately needed and demanded by the community at large, at no cost to the district other than coordinating, which basically eliminates the confusion . in how you explain which chipper is going where."

Staffing the chipper program has become challenging, according to Winnacker who said they were competing for labor with other entities that were perceived as more prestigious or offered a step up to being hired. "In November we had a robust list," said Winnacker, but staff have since left to pursue other employment opportunities. Given MOFD's challenge of hiring and maintaining fuel mitigation specialists, an option was presented to the board to contract with a third party vendor. "It will come at a cost," Winnacker said, "but the value to the community and avoiding two competing chipper programs . make that worthwhile."

In response to Treasurer Steven Danziger's question if existing staff can handle the workload involved, the chief said, "This is a good use of resources and the efficiency of running a single program that's currently established. It's hard to overstate the value of harnessing that efficiency and putting an additional chipper in service within the same system." The board unanimously approved the chipper program expansion.

In addition to the chipper program, the CWPP offers extensive guidance to reduce structure ignitability and fuel hazards as well as detailing strategies for reducing risk within the Wildland Urban Interface.

The Draft CWPP will now be presented to the County Board of Supervisors and CalFire SCU. Upon their adoption and approval, the CWPP will go into effect. According to Winnacker, "[District 2 Supervisor] Candace Andersen's office has been heavily involved in the process."

To view the entire CWPP, visit <https://www.mofd.org/our-district/fuels-mitigation-fire-prevention/community-wildfire-protection-plan-cwpp>. For other fire safety information, visit Fire Safe Council (www.firesafecouncil.org); California Fire Alliance (www.cafirealliance.org); or FireWise (www.firewisesa.org.za/index.php)

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