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District spearheads new fire prevention permit process

Plan would fast-track vegetation management

By Sarah Wright

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The San Mateo Resource Conservation District has found a simpler, cheaper way to get started on vegetation management projects that could be critical in slowing the spread of catastrophic wildfires. A statewide program that covers the whole Coastal Zone could soon follow in its footsteps.

At its board meeting last week, the special district approved a first-of-its-kind Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan that would fast-track projects aimed at cutting back flammable materials in fire-vulnerable areas like the Coastside. A fuel management effort in Butano would be the first project to go through the process if the plan is certified by the California Coastal Commission at its hearing in early July. If certified, work on the Butano and other similar fuel reduction projects that normally may take more than a year to get off the ground could begin after just 30 days.

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“There is a shared understanding that there is an immediate, urgent need to do this kind of work,” RCD Executive Director Kellyx Nelson said. “(The Coastal Commission was) seeking solutions as much as we were.”

Normally, a project like creating a fuel break or cutting down highly flammable eucalyptus trees anywhere near the coast requires a Coastal Development Permit from a local city or county by proving the project lines up with the Local Coastal Program, already approved by the Coastal Commission. The typical environmental review process, tailored to each individual project, can take years and be prohibitively expensive.

This new process doesn't eliminate the need for permits or an environmental review. Rather it provides a new way to comply with the Coastal Act by sending the project straight to the Coastal Commission for approval so long as it is consistent with the preapproved Public Works Plan. That eliminates the fees associated with obtaining a Coastal Development Permit and shortens the public comment period to just 30 days. Nelson said sending a high-priority fuel management project through this new process could make it more competitive for state and federal funding that requires all the project's permitting pieces to be already in place.

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The plan, also approved in neighboring Santa Cruz County last week, was developed alongside the Coastal Commission to ensure it stands on legal ground, Nelson said.

“(The Public Works Plan) simplifies, streamlines, shortens the time, reduces the costs and makes it easier overall to accomplish fuel load reduction at the pace and scale needed to address the threats we're facing,” Nelson said.

And it's especially important now, as historic fire conditions threaten communities across the state. Climate change and decades of fire suppression have made the once-humid Coastsides fire-prone and vulnerable to out-of-control blazes. Removing the barriers of the traditional permitting process means fuel management projects that have the potential to reduce the intensity and slow the spread of fire may actually get done before the next huge blaze.

“The CZU fire revealed we need to increase the pace and scale of vegetation management in the Coastal Zone,” said Sheena Sidhu, program manager for the San Mateo RCD’s Forest Health and Fire Resiliency Program.

San Mateo and Santa Cruz county plans are groundbreaking, but state leaders say a Public Works Plan might not be the best solution all across the state. While the San Mateo and Santa Cruz RCDs have ample resources, time and money to create and execute on their plans, that may not be the case for other districts up and down the coast, said Matt Dias, executive officer of the California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection.

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Dias said he supports all of the projects that the plan could fast-track, including the Butano project, but said he worries that other RCDs may not have the bandwidth to replicate it. He’d rather see a blanket program for the entire Coastal Zone, like the one used by the State Water Resources Control Board to issue permits for projects that affect water quality.

“I support the projects being covered, but it’s happening in a localized way,” Dias said. “RCDs elsewhere might not even be aware that this is something they might have to undergo.”

Coastal Program Manager Madeline Cavalieri said the Coastal Commission is in talks with Cal Fire to begin developing such a statewide program, and would take a wider look at what projects would be eligible and how best to navigate the legal framework of the Coastal Act. If Cal Fire were to propose a streamlined vegetation management permitting route for the whole California coast, Cavalieri said the Coastal Commission is likely to support it.

“I think now working on a statewide program will be much simpler, much more straightforward because the RCD is invested in this program,” Cavalieri said.

As remnants of the CZU fire smolder and record-dry vegetation levels already recorded this summer mean another historic fire season could be looming, state leaders say getting fuel management done faster is a necessity.

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“The Santa Cruz Mountains, in and of itself, is a clear picture of where the problem exists,” Dias said. “... The need has never been higher.”

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