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# Agencies take stock of fire risk on Coastside

Quarry Park, Pillar Point bluff among priorities

By August Howell

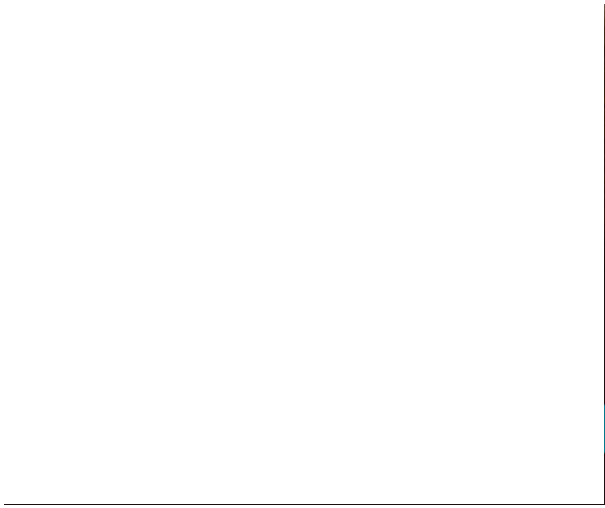
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Three public agencies responsible for fire mitigation on the Coastside held a public forum last week for residents to learn about forest resiliency and fuel reduction efforts in the region, some of which are happening in their own backyard.

Officials from Cal Fire, the San Mateo County Parks Department and the San Mateo Resource Conservation District each gave updates on their respective efforts to remove wildfire fuel and improve emergency access in high-risk areas on the coast. They also shared resources and tips with the nearly 50 people attending the meeting on Zoom.

A key theme among the agencies was that the CZU Lightning Complex fires in 2020 were a catalyst to revamp wildfire defenses across the region. San Mateo County Parks Assistant Director Hannah Ormshaw said that, after the fires, the county launched its wildfire fuel management program. It's a five-year plan spanning 32 projects designed to boost forest resiliency and reduce wildfire risk in the wildland urban interface, or in parks near private dwellings. In total, the plan covers 1,830 acres for an estimated cost of more than \$18 million.

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Eight of the county's projects are underway. Two involve expanding and improving shaded fuel breaks in Quarry Park. The other six are happening at Huddart and Wunderlich parks, San Bruno Mountain and San Pedro Valley Park in the foothills behind Pacifica. Ormshaw said 83 acres of shaded fuel breaks have been created since 2019, and 100 acres along key access routes will be built through 2023.

The county is also planning this year to create a 5-acre fuel break by removing all trees and nonnative vegetation within 200 feet near the southern entrance to Quarry Park along Columbus Street following the park boundary along Moro, Santiago, Magellan and Coronado avenues.

“The hope is that with these projects in the event of a fire, these shaded fuel breaks will enable containment and help compartmentalize it into discrete areas of the park,” she said.

The county also plans to work on 18 acres on the Pillar Point bluff and remove Monterey pine trees starting in 2023. Most of its maintenance work this year happened at Quarry Park, much of it by Cal Fire crews. On Thursday, Cal Fire Deputy Chief Jonathan Cox and Deputy Fire Marshal Tyler Sturm explained the state's efforts to curb fire risk on the Coastside are accomplished through a variety of services such as a weed and vegetation abatement programs that fall under the Coastside Fire Protection District's Vegetation Management Action Plan.

Sturm said the weed abatement program, which involves surveying undeveloped parcels and hiring contractors to remove weeds, has worked well, but the district needed to step up its vegetation efforts. Sturm said that last year the district worked on

15 lots, and in the fall the plan was updated to include more than 30 lots this year.

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Cox emphasized the importance of ongoing collaboration and technology to both firefighters and residents. He said the state was examining a pilot program for automated aircraft and drones to suppress and survey fire within the county.

“I don’t think technology is going to solve the problem, but it can certainly help us,” he said.

While Cal Fire and State Parks tend to be hands-on with wildfire efforts, Sheeda Shinu, a program manager with the RCD, explained that the role of the district primarily involves helping other agencies streamline environmental compliance and permitting for fuel reduction in environmentally sensitive areas. RCD works in partnerships, providing technical assistance, outreach and education to public and private landowners for natural resource management.

Sturm noted that the state is expected to deliver updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps for the Coastside within the next year. The topographic maps rank the fire risk in specific areas and tell Cal Fire where to emphasize defensible spaces and which neighborhoods will have stricter building codes. Sturm said the maps are supposed to be updated every five years, but the Coastside’s hasn’t been touched since 2007. Currently, the most high-risk areas include Quarry Park, the hills behind Frenchmans Creek Road and small pockets of Moss Beach and Montara. Those areas are likely going to remain high risk.

“I won’t lie that one of my biggest fears is a fire in the Montara and El Granada area of San Mateo County,” Cox said. “It’s up there with the Burlingame and Emerald Lake hills as highest concern, especially with offshore wind events. But I think we have an opportunity to take proactive action in the 95 percent of the time we’re not dealing with extreme weather conditions.”

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## August Howell

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