

https://www.smdailyjournal.com/news/local/fire-season-prep-now-year-round-in-san-mateo-county/article_963fb188-283c-11ee-9dd6-677d481bf305.html

FEATURED

Fire season prep now year-round in San Mateo County

Cal Fire working hard to create better conditions

By Rachel McCrea Daily Journal Correspondent
Jul 22, 2023



Facebook Twitter WhatsApp Email Print Copy Bookmark LinkedIn

It's summer, which means beach traffic, sunscreen and a fast-approaching fire season, which means Cal Fire's San Mateo-Santa Cruz unit is preparing for what's to come.

Cal Fire, short for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, is a state agency contracted by San Mateo County to fight wildfires. As the height of fire season approaches, it is focusing on prescribed burns, putting “good fire” on the ground to clear out vegetation that could become fuel for future fires. On June 30, it performed burns at the Filoli Historic House and Garden and at the San Andreas Dam on the SFPUC Peninsula Watershed.

As of last week, the window for prescribed burns was still open, Jonathan Cox, deputy chief of the Cal Fire San Mateo division, said. Once the hot summer weather dries out vegetation, though, the unit will switch to full-on fire season mode. Throughout the height of fire season, it will focus on emergency response and firefighting.

“The summertime, I think, gets most of the attention because that’s when we’re out fighting fires ... but there’s an equal, if not greater, amount of work that goes on during the non-fire months,” Cox said.

After fire season ends in the fall, the unit will focus on prescribed burns like it does in the spring. Fire used to be a key part of California’s ecosystems and pre-settlement indigenous land management, and Cal Fire is trying to get “good fire” back on the ground after a long regime of fire suppression. The agency has been working to reintroduce fire to the landscape since the 1980s, Rich Sampson, Cal Fire San Mateo-Santa Cruz unit forester and division chief, said.

Smaller, controlled burns reduce the risk of huge, out-of-control fires by clearing out dry grass and plants, and can also be used to improve ecosystem biodiversity and manage invasive plant species.

“We need to make sure that good fire is reintroduced to that landscape, to make sure it comes back into balance,” Cox said.

During the winter, the unit will work on vegetation management projects like shaded fuel breaks, which act as a buffer in forested areas by clearing out understory plants. These fuel breaks can slow the progression of a wildfire and provide a “defensive line” for firefighters, Cox said.

In the early springtime, the unit will run defensible space inspections for homeowners before getting back to prescribed burns. Cal Fire encourages property owners to keep 100 feet of defensible space around their buildings by reducing potential fuels like long grass and dead plants. A more detailed guide for maintaining defensible space can be found on Cal Fire's website.

"We can't be successful if the property owners are not also doing their part," Cox said, adding that the unit sees solid compliance from homeowners.

"One silver lining of the last five years of large fire destruction is people are hyper aware now," he said.

Funding increase

Another silver lining is the amount of funding that has been poured into wildland firefighting over the past few years. Grants of \$50,000 used to be a good year for the CZU [San Mateo-Santa Cruz unit] unit, Sampson said. Today, Cal Fire has almost \$28 million with which to work.

"A lot of pieces have come together over the last few years," Cox said. "The investment in Cal Fire has been huge."

This money comes largely from grants, but a 2019 executive order from Gov. Gavin Newsom proclaimed a state of emergency and prioritized 35 projects across California. The order increased funding and reduced regulatory requirements for these projects, including two in San Mateo County.

Money from grants is used to build the unit's capacity for fire prevention, preparation and response. New equipment, more projects and an increase in staffing are all results of this influx of funding. A new fire crew facility will be opening in La Honda in 2024, Cox said, and fuels management projects are taking place across the county.

Collaboration and coordination

Of course, Cal Fire isn't doing this work alone. Wildfire prevention is a cooperative effort, and agencies often work together on projects. Cal Fire is contracted by the county for wildland firefighting, and does projects with other organizations like the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, State Parks and the San Mateo Resource Conservation District. The San Andreas Dam burn this June was an annual collaboration between the CZU unit and the SFPUC, which owns the land in the Peninsula Watershed. Cal Fire is also working with State Parks and the San Mateo RCD on a forest health project at Butano State Park. Fire Safe San Mateo is a nonprofit organization that brings together close to 20 entities including county fire departments, Cal Fire, the SFPUC, the RCD, county parks and more to work on vegetation management and fire prevention.

It's a "hugely important" council, Cox said.

Forecast

Fire season predictions are hard to make, and many past forecasts haven't been accurate, Samson said. However, the rainy winter may play a part in shaping this year's wildfires. It may have done wonders for the drought, but it also caused lots of new plant growth. Lots of fog during the long weeks of June gloom has kept plant moisture high, Sampson said, but this vegetation will be excellent fuel for wildfires once it dries out in the hot summer sun.

"We fully anticipate having an active fire year, and it really comes down to ... heat and wind," Cox said. The heavy rains also damaged fire roads, causing downed trees and washouts. Repairing these roads is "critical," Sampson said, because they allow engines to get close to fires and stop them before they get out of control.

Cal Fire works with landowning agencies like county and state parks when they need to repair fire roads. Crews are out removing downed trees, while the landowners are responsible for washouts and any engineering work that needs to be done. This may be a long-term process.

"The damage that we got from this winter," he said, "I don't know if we're going to have a full idea of the effects for another year or two."

Still, any predictions for this year?

“Ask me in December,” Sampson said.

