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Wildfire prevention work to begin along Pacifica’s Highway 1 corridor

Caltrans and the San Mateo Resource Conservation District will remove hazardous vegetation along a critical evacuation route and the Pedro Point Headlands this fall

By Kathryn Wheeler
Sep 15, 2026

						
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Photo courtesy of Getty Images

A joint project involving several local land agencies to manage vegetation along one of the Coastsides most critical wildfire evacuation routes will kick off this fall.

The San Mateo Resource Conservation District will cull flammable vegetation in Pedro Point Headlands abutting the Highway 1 corridor, where Caltrans will work to do the same along just under a mile of the surrounding roadsides north of the Tom Lantos Tunnels.

The State Coastal Conservancy, the City of Pacifica and Pacifica Land Trust are also collaborators on the project that aims to “protect life, infrastructure, and natural resources,” according to Caltrans.



The work will extend 0.8 miles along and abutting Highway 1, and south of the Pedro Point neighborhood.

Map courtesy of San Mateo RCD

Caltrans will clear vegetation within 10 feet of the roadway, thin and remove understory near the highway and cut limbs that are low to the ground. Workers will also spray herbicide onto eucalyptus stumps to prevent regrowth and preserve stumps that help stabilize the steep hillside, preventing erosion.

Along the eastern part of Pedro Point Headlands, the RCD will cut down invasive eucalyptus and other hazardous trees, and remove “ladder fuels”, or plants that help fire climb into trees. The State Coastal Conservancy awarded \$4.6 million for the RCD's project.

Planning began more than three years ago and has been aided by \$25,000 in county Measure K funds and \$25,000 from the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program through the California Department of Conservation. Caltrans has not publicly released the cost of their portion of the effort.

The two groups said the effort is critical in order to maintain one of few major evacuation routes that could easily be blocked from the downed trees that flank the road. The area already faces high fire risk due to the dense, invasive vegetation.

The flammable vegetation also poses a threat to the Pedro Point neighborhood that abuts the headlands, said the RCD. “These conditions create a potential pathway for wildfire to spread from open space into the adjacent neighborhood, where it could threaten homes, infrastructure, evacuation, and public safety if left untreated.”

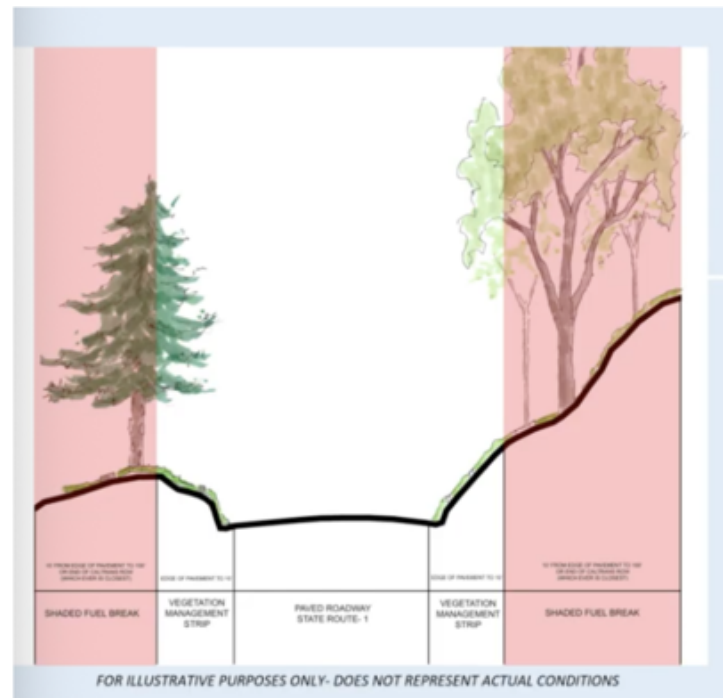
Teresa Kennedy, a Caltrans vegetation management program lead, told Pacifica City Council in early September that “the goal isn’t clear cutting or total removal.” Clear cutting has been a concern to residents who have advocated for years for the preservation of local forests and conservation areas. Rather, Kennedy said, the work intends to “maintain the character of a vegetated roadway, improve sightlines and improve fire resilience.”

Erin Andrew, a conservation project manager at the RCD, said that the work will help improve forest health by reducing the numerous invasives that have spread rapidly within the headlands. It will help to “enhance and encourage habitat for fire-resilient native plant species, and improve coastal prairie and coastal scrub habitat conditions,” according to the RCD project webpage. Andrew said that any remaining funds could go to preserving the headland’s grassland, “which is a very unique habitat type in California that is being lost.”

According to new maps drawn by Cal Fire in 2025, Pacifica and much of the Coastsides is increasingly vulnerable to fire as climate patterns shift due to climate change. Much of Pacifica is now classified as facing moderate or high fire severity, including the area along the Highway 1 corridor.

A study published in June also revealed that there are few ways out for Coastsiders in the event of a natural disaster. Highway 1 is the primary exit route, and in areas where it is surrounded by trees—most notably the one-mile stretch running along the Pedro Point Headlands—it is especially vulnerable to traffic caused by down trees or high-severity wildfires.

At the Sept. 8 city council meeting, where the RCD and Caltrans presented the project, council members emphasized the importance of clear information channels for residents to understand why the groups are cutting trees and applying chemicals. Historical efforts to manage forest in this way have received backlash from residents and city leadership concerned over environmental degradation.



Caltrans will cut a 10-foot vegetation barrier on each side of Highway 1.

Graphic courtesy of CalFire

There is “a fear that there’d be clear cutting and there will be erosion issues,” said Councilmember Sue Beckmeyer, who supported the work but advocated for a strong information campaign.

The two projects will begin this fall and are likely to occur simultaneously, although an exact start date has not been announced. Residents can expect closures to the Coastal Trail in the headlands, and lane closures from Monday through Friday along Highway 1 for a period of several weeks.

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Kathryn has reported for newspapers on both coasts, including The Red Hook Daily Catch, The Seattle Times, The Salish Current, and The Journal of the San Juan Islands. She has worked as a staff writer, freelancer, and photographer. She graduated from Wesleyan University, majoring in "Science in Society". She has also been a teacher and communications director.