



**CITY OF SANTA BARBARA**  
**PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT**

**AGENDA DATE:** June 24, 2015  
**TO:** Parks and Recreation Commission  
**FROM:** Parks Division, Parks and Recreation Department  
**SUBJECT:** Defensible Space and Vegetative Fuels Program

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Commission receive a presentation on the annual Defensible Space and Vegetative Fuels program in the City of Santa Barbara Open Space parks.

**DISCUSSION:**

Background

The Parks and Recreation Department manages a diverse park system that includes 360 acres of developed parkland and 1,183 acres of open space. Open space parks are protected and managed as a natural environment, although they are often bordered by urban development. Open space parks have limited development, and activities center around passive outdoor recreation.

The City of Santa Barbara Fire Department (SBFD) prepared a wildland fire hazard and risk assessment for the City and surrounding area in 2001. In 2004, results of the assessment were then developed into a City Wildland Fire Plan. The purpose of the Wildland Fire Plan and the Parks Vegetative Fuels Program is to reduce and mitigate the potential loss of life, property, and natural resources due to wild land fires.

The Parks Division follows specific management methods outlined in the Wildland Fire Plan for 16 parks, including the Douglas Family Preserve, Equestrian Circle, Franceschi, Hale, Hidden Valley, Hilda Ray, Honda Valley, Laurel Canyon, Loma Media, Mission Ruins, Oak, Orpet, Parma, Skofield, Stevens and Sylvan Parks, and one undeveloped parcel. The Wildland Fire Plan identifies two work components that are carried out by the Parks Division annually in these parks, including Defensible Space and Vegetative Fuels management. Defensive Space work consists of the clearance of flammable grass and brush and raising trees above the fire ladder (pruning low-lying limbs). This work is completed within park boundaries, 30' to 150' from adjacent property lines. The work distance varies depending on the designated Fire Hazard Zone, or varying fire hazard level, with a wider Defensible Space area required in a higher hazard

area. Vegetative Fuels management is targeted on the removal of flammable vegetation, as described in Defensible Space, except work is not limited to the area adjacent to property lines.

Within the past six years, two major fires have impacted City Parks. Skofield, Rattlesnake Canyon, and Parma Parks received fire damage in the 2008 Tea Fire, with Parma and Rattlesnake Canyon almost entirely burned. Laurel Canyon and Upper Stevens Park received fire damage in the 2009 Jesusita Fire. Parks Division Defensible Space and Vegetative Fuels work within parks not only promotes fire prevention, but also helps limit damage and the spread of fire once a fire starts. As an example, field mowing and selective tree pruning in upper Parma Park contributed to the safety of adjacent homes during the Tea Fire. Similarly, Vegetative Fuels work performed within Laurel Canyon Park and the road entrance was instrumental in helping fire fighters protect the Cater Water Treatment plant. These open areas provided a fuel break and a place for firefighters to defend property in and adjacent to open space parks.

### Methods

Work performed under the annual Defensible Space and Vegetative Fuels Program is completed by Parks staff or by landscape or tree contractors experienced with Vegetative Fuels work. Work typically begins in mid-April and must be completed by the first week of June, as required by the SBF, Municipal Code, and California Fire Code.

Work performed by Parks staff includes field mowing, weed whipping, and limited brush work and ground pruning. Staff also supplements contractors' work. The Parks Supervisor prepares contractor bid packets and manages field staff and contractor work. The Parks Natural Areas Planner provides natural resources support. Forestry staff provides assistance with tree expertise, as needed. Parks staff accounted for 300 staff hours of 2015 Vegetative Fuels work.

The Parks Division budget for contracted work for Fiscal Year 2015 was \$70,000, which accounted for 1,160 hours, plus the Parma Park Trust contributed \$12,000 (320 hours) for Parma Park. In addition to landscape maintenance companies, the Parks Division contracts with certified tree care companies and their specialized equipment, as needed. Exotic (non-native) species are removed where possible and disposed.

### Special Projects

The scope of the Vegetative Fuels work has changed, as a result of the drought, but the volume of work has not reduced. With the drought and several years of below average rainfall, more trees and shrubs have become stressed or dead. There also appears to be fewer annual weeds and grasses, but perennial weeds seem to thrive, and they present a fire hazard when dry. In Fiscal Year 2014, to respond to the increased need to address

potential fire hazards, the Department expended an additional \$50,000 for Vegetative Fuels. Additional work was completed in four parks including Skofield, Franceschi, Honda Valley, and Oak Park. Work included pruning damaged trees and reduction of deadwood, removal of dead trees, thinning of dense brush, reduction of leaf litter (especially from Eucalyptus trees), and selectively pruning and thinning oak trees. The extra Vegetative Fuels work helped to reduce the fuel load within these parks, which further protects resources in the park and adjacent properties.

#### Parks Division Stewardship in Open Space Parks

Open Space parks contain natural resources that include native habitats, creeks or special status plant or wildlife species. Defensible Space and Vegetative Fuels work protects property, but also has the potential to result in impacts to park natural resources. Examples of natural resources include, but are not limited to, monarch butterfly habitat, nesting birds, woodrats, creeks (wetlands), special status plants (i.e. Santa Barbara honeysuckle; needle grass) Coast Live Oak Woodland habitat and Coastal Zone habitats. These special status species and habitats are protected by City, state, and federal agencies. The Parks Division complies with environmental regulations and employs avoidance and minimization measures to help reduce impacts to biological resources. Measures may include avoidance of a sensitive resource or timing work outside of the season when sensitive wildlife species may be present. When timing is not possible or practical, the Department employs a contract biologist to assist in surveys for the presence of special status wildlife species. If discovered, the biologist provides a work prescription for the protection of those species.

While impacts to sensitive habitat may not be avoided, they can be minimized by limiting the amount and type of pruning allowed, or selectively pruning deadwood in a pattern that leaves mature stands of native vegetation. Staff and contractors also use Best Management Practices to avoid or minimize impacts to sensitive habitats, and the Department complies with the City's Integrative Pest Management Plan, which prohibits the use of most herbicides or pesticides in Open Space parks. Non-native invasive plant species growing in the park are often targeted and eradicated in the process of vegetative fuels work. This results in positive impacts and the preservation of special status species or habitats.

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