

Investigation of Policies Regarding Fire Hazards in Environmentally Sensitive Areas

Introduction

The large plume of smoke from the Paradise Valley fire in 2002 provided Santa Cruz County residents a dramatic visual reminder that we live in fire country. Through interviews with local fire officials, the Grand Jury determined that ladder fuels, (see finding #4), were a major problem. The Grand Jury learned that there is a conflict between fire officials and environmental officials on how to clear ladder fuels in environmentally sensitive areas.

Scope

The Grand Jury investigated a threat of a large uncontrolled fire similar to the Oakland Hills and Lexington Reservoir Fires in the 1980s and early 90's. The investigation focused on the problem of ladder fuels in environmentally sensitive areas.

Fieldwork

1. Interviewed:
 - Aptos/La Selva Beach Fire Chief
 - Boulder Creek Fire Chief
 - California Department of Forestry Fire Chief and Educational Officer
 - Principal Planner for the Environmental Section of the Santa Cruz County Planning Dept
 - Director of Emergency Preparedness
2. Reviewed County Ordinances on Sensitive Habitat Protection – Chapter 16.32
3. Viewed various videos of Oakland Hills fire and other fires provided by Aptos/La Selva Fire Department
4. Read:
 - Santa Cruz Sentinel- article dated April 17th, 2003 volume 106
 - Scotts Valley Times- article dated May 2003.
 - Living With Fire in Santa Mateo County booklet

Findings

1. Santa Cruz County has not had a major, extended-day fire, since the 1948 Pine Mountain Fire. Fire officials report that the potential for a very large and damaging fire on the scale of the Oakland Hills and Lexington Reservoir fires in Santa Cruz County is high.

2. Lack of fire has contributed to an increase of ladder fuels.
3. Ladder fuels are combustible material, close to the ground such as grass or weeds merging with brush or vines, which climb into the trees creating a ladder for fire. The amount of ladder fuel is one of the factors that helps fires spread.
4. Ladder fuels are a problem throughout the county.
5. Vegetation is denser than it was in the 1960s due to increased landscaping and development that encroaches on rural areas.
6. Ladder fuels are a particular problem in environmentally sensitive areas, because clear-cutting and controlled burns are generally not allowed in these areas.
7. In Santa Cruz County there are numerous environmentally sensitive areas, which are habitats for endangered species (e.g. the Santa Cruz Tar Plant and the Mount Hermon June Beetle). Many of these habitats are located in high-risk fire areas.
8. Currently, county fire officials and the US Fish and Wildlife Service are developing a Habitat Conservation Project (HCP) plan that identifies where environmentally sensitive and high fire risk areas overlap. The HCP describes how to deal with brush in environmentally sensitive areas.
9. Local fire departments can issue citations to homeowners for not clearing brush, a violation of fire regulations.
10. Fines for violating fire regulations for not clearing brush range from \$100 to \$250. Fire officials report such low fines lead to a lack of compliance.
11. Conversely, the County Planning Department has the ability to red tag a homeowner for clearing brush in an environmentally sensitive area.
12. In the past, Santa Cruz County had a fire safety committee that included fire officials, environmental groups, and homeowners whose purpose was to have a community fire safety educational program. Internal conflicts and ineffectiveness caused the group to disband.
13. San Mateo County has created a fire safety committee organized by the fire chief's association. This fire safety program is considered by fire experts to be very successful.

Conclusions

1. A major fire in Santa Cruz County is a probable occurrence.
2. The completion of the Habitat Conservation Project is needed to establish fire safety guidelines and procedures for environmentally sensitive areas.

3. Because of an inherent difference in concerns between fire safety procedures and environmental regulations, homeowners receive conflicting brush clearance instructions.
4. The current fines for violating fire regulations are too low to ensure compliance.
5. A fire safety committee is needed. The fire safety committee should be modeled after the San Mateo County Fire Safety Committee.

Recommendations

1. The Santa Cruz County Fire Districts and the Office of Emergency Preparedness should complete the Habitat Conservation Project.
2. The Santa Cruz County Fire Districts, the Office of Emergency Preparedness, and the Environmental Section of the Planning Department should agree upon policy and create written instructions based upon the policy to be given to homeowners by all governmental agencies.
3. The Santa Cruz County Fire Districts should create stiffer penalties for homeowners who do not comply with fire clearance regulations.
4. The Santa Cruz County Fire Districts should reestablish a fire safety committee based on the San Mateo County model.

Response Required

Entity	Findings	Recommendations	Respond Within
Aptos/La Selva Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept. 2, 2003)
Aromas Tri-County Fire District	1-6,8-10 12,12	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Ben Lomond Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept. 2, 2003)
Boulder Creek Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Branciforte Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Cabrillo College Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Central Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Felton Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Pajaro Valley Fire District Station 2	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Santa Cruz County Fire Department	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Santa Cruz Fire Department	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Scotts Valley Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
UC at Santa Cruz Fire Department	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Watsonville Fire Department	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Zayante Fire Protection District	1-6, 8-10, 12, 13	1-4	60 Days (Sept.2, 2003)
Santa Cruz County Planning Department	7-9, 11, 13	2	60 Days (Sept. 2, 2003)
Board of Supervisors of the County of Santa Cruz	7, 8, 12, 13	1-2	60 Days (Sept. 2, 2003)