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Protecting and Managing Parklands to Reduce Wildfire Risks

By Robert Doyle

The face of wildfire fuel management is shifting rapidly in the western United States. Unsettlingly described as the “new normal,” today’s wildfires are burning faster and hotter, are behaving more unpredictably than ever before and are often occurring year-round in the West. Large public landowners, such as park districts and forest agencies, play an important role in meeting this new challenge. By protecting fire-prone wildland areas from new development and carefully managing those public wildlands, park agencies can help protect lives, property and natural resources. So, what are the unique fire prevention challenges facing the East Bay Hills area of Northern California, and what are some of the parkland management tools being employed to successfully meet them?

Unique Fire Prevention Challenges

The East Bay Hills, a ridgeline on the east side of the San Francisco Bay that stretches from the city of Richmond to Castro Valley, Cal-

ifornia, includes 3,000 acres of wildland-urban interface that is owned and managed by the East Bay Regional Park District (Park District). The Park District is the largest regional park agency in the

East Bay Regional Park District parkland before forest management activities to reduce the risk of devastating wildfires.

country, managing a two-county regional park system that includes 121,391 acres of land and 73 parks on the eastern side of California’s San Francisco Bay Area. Its wildfire forest landscape is uniquely challenging, as the forest management area borders some of the most expensive real estate in the nation, occupied by a population of more than a million citizens.

Much of the area contains the habitats for several threatened and endangered species, including the California red-legged frog and Alameda whipsnake, and large swaths of vegetation that is not native to the state, most notably plantations of blue gum and red gum eucalypt-

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT

tus and non-native pine that, arguably, create severe wildfire risks if not managed. Resource agency permits for implementation of wildfire forest reduction activities include specific conditions for working in these habitats and around special-status species. The Park District's wildland forest reduction team coordinates with dozens of partners, including environmental consultants, contractors, regulatory agencies, academia from nearby U.C. Berkeley, utility companies with easements through parkland, community organizations and federal, state and local government agencies, in accordance with permitting and funding conditions.

Wildland Forest Management Tools

For decades, the Park District has performed various forms of forest management activities to reduce wildfire risks in ridgeline areas. These efforts have historically included maintenance of a 200-foot-wide fuel break between regional parklands and the urban border, goat grazing to control vegetation growth and manual removal of hazardous vegetation in fire-prone areas.

The catastrophic Oakland Hills Fire in 1991 significantly changed the scope and scale of fire-prevention efforts. The fire started in a residential backyard, adjacent to wildland managed by East Bay Regional Park District, in a canyon above a freeway tunnel where many fires had burned before. It

caught in dry grass and brush, but quickly exploded into the densely packed homes along the steep canyon and the 100-foot-tall eucalyptus plantations, becoming an immediate conflagration. At the time, the Oakland Hills fire was the most devastating fire California had ever seen, claiming 26 lives and nearly 3,000 structures. Unfortunately, only the 2018 Paradise, California, fire has eclipsed the Oakland fire in terms of loss of life and property. These fires are examples of the complex fire landscape that many land managers in the western United States grapple with: a combination of challenging terrain, roaring winds and a fuel mix of overgrown, fire-prone vegetation and dense housing.

In the aftermath of the Oakland Hills fire, wildfire prevention efforts began to be re-examined. The Park District worked with local

community leaders and government partners to better coordinate fire response and land-management actions to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. The current iteration of this fuel management program is governed by the Park District's Wildfire Hazard Reduction and Resource Management Plan (WHRRMP), a prescriptive action plan incorporating ecological assessment, fire behavior and fuel modeling. The plan makes recommendations for where initial fuel treatments should be focused and emphasizes the importance of repeated treatments over the long term to ensure undesirable vegetation does not grow back.

The effort to establish the current program reflects more than a decade of work, including plan development, coordination with scientific experts, negotiation with stakeholders and comprehensive public re-



East Bay Regional Park District parkland after forest management activities to reduce the risk of devastating wildfires.



A crew clears brush as a preventative measure against potential wildfires.

view. Today, the Park District's fire department, biologists and full-time ecologist manage a robust program in the East Bay Hills area to reduce wildland vegetation, minimize the risk of catastrophic wildfires and improve habitat conditions.

The key to successful wildland forest management lies in a diversity of means, methods and partnerships. The Park District employs a toolbox of seasonal treatment methods, allowing for a year-round commitment to sustainable fuel reduction. In the spring and early summer, goats graze much of the existing fuel break. Year-round, contractors complete large brush and tree-thinning projects and hand crews work to clear heavy brush. In addition to these treatments, the Park District is in the final stages

of developing a programmatic, prescriptive fire plan that will provide another fuel-reduction tool and improve habitat conditions. This commitment to year-round sustainable forest management is expensive and an ongoing cost, for which East Bay Regional Park District relies on voter-approved funding, state and federal grants, and partnerships.

The Importance of FEMA

The Park District's collaboration with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection has helped provide significant ongoing funding for its current forest management practices.

This FEMA- and CAL FIRE-funded work has enabled the Park District to significantly reduce hazardous wildland fuels and the potential for a catastrophic fire event. For example, a 2017 fire event near Grizzly Peak in Berkeley, California, burned into a managed forest on Park District prop-

erty, allowing crews to quickly put out the fire, avoiding any serious damage. They were able to do so largely because the vegetation had been thinned as part of the Park District's WHRRMP.

From 1923 to 1991, there have been several large, catastrophic fires occurring on the same area in the East Bay Hills, demonstrating the cyclic fire history pattern. This wildfire protection work is highly dependent on funding from FEMA and CAL FIRE. It is helping to protect lives and avoid another catastrophic event like the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire. The resources FEMA and CAL FIRE have for pre-disaster fire hazard reduction need to be protected and augmented. More resources are needed to address the evolving need statewide and throughout the West.

The immediacy of California's fire conundrum has made clear the need for change, as well as brought about some innovative new solutions. Land managers and park agencies, like the East Bay Regional Park District, play an increasingly important role in protecting fire-prone areas. But, perhaps most significantly, several devastating years of the "new normal" have inspired a vast consensus among land managers, lawmakers and the public that a new paradigm with increased funding is needed if the landscapes of the West are to be resilient to wildfire. 🌿

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