



Local Coastal Program
Permit Sonoma

Sonoma County Local Coastal Plan Update

Policy Option: Fire Fuel Management

Fire Fuel Management Policy Recommendation:

The following revision is recommended for Open Space and Resource Conservation Element Implementation Program C-OSRC-7:

Existing Implementation Program:

“Program C-OSRC-7: In cooperation with the Coastal Commission, State Parks, and Cal Fire Board of Forestry, develop forestry guidelines including best practices to improve habitat health and reduce the risk of wildland fire without restricting public access to the coast. Establish a coastal permit exemption, other exemption process, or master plan for forestry maintenance activities consistent with such guidelines”

Revised Implementation Program:

“Program C-OSRC-7: Develop a Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan that will improve health of commercial and non-commercial forest lands, reduce wildfire hazards, and create vegetation management plans that will adapt to increased climate change-induced wildfire risk. Fire prevention projects in developed areas that cannot be designed to directly improve or restore ecosystems or ecosystem processes will be limited to projects that are required to protect existing structures and/or infrastructure, and will provide indirect ecosystem benefits by reducing the intensity, rate of spread, and extent of catastrophic wildfire on adjacent habitats and ecosystems.

Approved projects covered under the Public Works Plan will be designed to:

1. Restore forest health, improve ecosystem resiliency, and conserve forests by restoring native vegetation types and improving habitat for rare, threatened, and endangered plant and animal species.
2. Protect water supply and quality with restoration projects across priority coastal watersheds.
3. Increase the long-term storage of carbon in forest and woodland trees and soils through the reduction of dense understory thus promoting larger healthier stands of mature trees.
4. Minimize the loss of forest-sequestered carbon from large, intense wildfires, through reduction of ladder fuels and brush resulting from years of fire suppression which would reduce fire severity.



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5. Promote public safety, health, and welfare and protect public and private property through fuel reduction treatments and creation of defensible space around structures in the wildland urban interface.

Where an immediate need is identified for fire fuel reduction in residentially developed areas prior to approval of the Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan, develop an interim fuel reduction program for these areas”

Need and Purpose

Climate change and a long term policy of fire suppression in forested lands that has led to an accumulation of fuel loads. These high fuel loads, coupled with extended drought, and the spread of invasive species has resulted in larger and more catastrophic wildfires that threaten Sonoma County’s coastal resources and put coastal communities at high risk of being destroyed by wildfire. The Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan will allow for a programmatic response to these risks and streamline the permitting process for fire fuel reduction and management of forest lands in the coastal zone.

“Public Works Project” in the context of the Coastal Act

Under the Coastal Act, the term “Public Works Project” encompasses all public projects developed by a public agency, and is not limited to projects that are generally associated with public works such as roads, utilities, and public infrastructure.

Section 30605 of the Coastal Act states, in part:

To promote greater efficiency for the planning of any public works ... and as an alternative to project-by-project review, plans for public ... may be submitted to the commission for review in the same manner prescribed for the review of local coastal programs set forth in Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 30500). ... If any such plan for public works is submitted after the certification of local coastal programs, any such plan shall be approved by the commission only if it finds, after full consultation with the affected local governments, that the proposed plan for public works is in conformity with certified local coastal programs in jurisdictions affected by the proposed public works. ... Where a plan for a public works ... has been certified by the commission, any subsequent review by the commission of a specific project contained in the certified plan shall be limited to imposing conditions consistent with Sections 30607 and 30607.1. ...

A Public Works Plan is one of the alternatives available to the Commission and project proponents for Commission review of large or phased public works projects, and allows for programmatic approval rather than requiring each landowner to apply for a coastal development permit on an individual basis. Approval of a Public Works Plan requires certification by the Coastal Commission and may require additional environmental review if the plan exceeds the scope of the California Board of Forestry’s Program EIR



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for the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP PEIR). PWP projects that don't fit under the scope of the CalVTP PEIR, or are too small in scope to use the CalVTP PEIR would be analyzed under separate environmental review, tiering off the analyses and measures in the CalVTP PEIR.

Structure Protection

Recent wildfires in Sonoma County have demonstrated that when/if fuels are allowed to accumulate around structures, it becomes a hazard not only for an individual property, but for the neighboring properties and surrounding open space as well. Without adequate vegetation management, including fuel breaks such as those proposed as fire prevention projects, catastrophic wildfires are likely to be more frequent and larger, thereby causing damage or destruction to homes, businesses, utility lines, roads (including due to landslides caused by post-fire erosion events), and other structures, as well as habitat degradation in certain cases.

Fire prevention projects are generally implemented as defensible spaces around existing structures, or as fuel breaks along existing roads to provide strategic fire breaks and staging areas for fire fighters. While fire fuel reduction may result in impacts to coastal habitats and species, the Coastal Act regulates maintenance of existing, legally-established structures, roads, and other such development differently than the manner in which most new development is authorized. Specifically, the Coastal Act only requires that these activities be conducted in a manner most protective of coastal resources.