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What exactly is a shaded fuel break anyway?

By Nick Marnell

Thanks to the initiative of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, a systematic study by the state fire agency and rapid action by the governor, work on the North Orinda Shaded Fuel Break project will soon begin on the northern edges of Lamorinda.



But what is a shaded fuel break?

According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, fuel breaks are wide strips of land where trees and vegetation have been reduced or removed. A shaded fuel break is constructed in a forest-type setting, not unlike the northern rim of the NOSFB project along Bear Creek Road and the Lafayette Ridge. As shown in the photos, the vegetation at ground level has been removed, and the tree canopy has been thinned, reducing the likelihood that a dangerous wildfire will head into an urban area.

Photo Sora O'Doherty Before and after photo Photo courtesy Cal Firey

At a May 22 public meeting in Orinda, MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker outlined the details of the fuel break project to about 50 attendees. The chief explained how hot, dry, north and northeast winds descend upon Lamorinda in the fall, bringing the potential of a serious wildfire as occurred in 1923 and in 1991 in the East Bay hills. The fuel break will reduce this threat to Lamorinda.

The idea to create the shaded fuel break was presented to Cal Fire by MOFD Battalion Chief Jerry Lee in November. The state fire agency expanded the breadth of the proposal and presented it to Gov. Gavin Newsom in January, who expedited the project, along with 34 others in high-risk wildfire areas of California. MOFD, the de facto project manager, has partnered with various public agencies to complete the work that encompasses 14 miles of open space between Tilden Park and Acalanes High School.

Winnacker explained that the \$4 million, seven-month project will begin in mid-June, and Orinda residents should be prepared for smoke as prescribed burns of annual grasses get underway. Road closures may be necessary but major Lamorinda arteries should not be impacted.

Environmental issues were of concern to the public. Though Newsom has exempted the project from state environmental regulations, Winnacker explained that federal and local regulations will be closely followed and monitored by a biologist and an archaeologist. Nesting birds will not be displaced. Even with all of the fuel removal, the natural appearance of the area will be preserved.

The chief stressed that the fuel break is only one part of a system to reduce the regional threat of a wildfire, and reminded homeowners about the critical need to create defensible space around their property. He also urged residents to sign up for the county Community Warning System, to schedule a date for the MOFD wood chipper to come to their neighborhood and to regularly check the Ready for Wildfire website.

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