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MOFD comes down hard on fire code violators

By Nick Marnell



Goats can be one solution to abate weeds. Photo Pippa Fisher

Owners of eight district parcels found out the hard way that the largesse of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has its limits when it comes to exterior hazard abatement requirements.

Fire district officials have emphasized an educational outreach to residents, as property owners worked to comply with the district fire code and abate problem vegetation by the middle of June. Parcel owners were sent an informational postcard in April reminding them of the deadline and after June 15, property inspections began.

Having found major fire code violations on their properties, MOFD mailed owners of 13 parcels a Notice to Abate on June 19. Five of those owners either completed the work required or requested an extension from the district. The eight who ignored the notices were warned that their refusal to adhere to the fire code

would result in an abatement hearing before the district board and they ignored that as well.

"People have counted on blowing us off," Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said.

Those days are over.

The eight parcels cited were large, unimproved and unmaintained properties overcome with wild vegetation. At the July 15 abatement hearing, the MOFD board unanimously voted to declare each of the eight properties a seasonal and recurring nuisance, and ordered the fire chief to abate the properties.

"The absence of a cooperative owner makes it very difficult for us to work toward the voluntary compliance that is always our goal," Winnacker said.

The district will hire a contractor to abate the properties and then send the owners a bill for the work. If the owners refuse to pay, the district will file a lien on their property with the county. The abatement costs are not cheap, with some properties possibly exceeding \$10,000 in contractor charges.

With the increase in the number and ferocity of California wildfires, and the major push by residents to increase district fire prevention efforts, MOFD is allowing no slack in adherence to the fire code.

"Property owners in Moraga, Orinda and Canyon should be put on notice by this," President Steven Danziger said. "This was just the first, and you can expect to see more of these hearings. We are serious about property owners mitigating their properties."

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