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MOFD awarded huge fuel break grant of nearly \$6.5M

By Vera Kochan

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District was notified Sept. 8 and that it would receive a \$6,380,563 grant from the Cal Fire Early Action General Fund Fiscal Year 2020-21 Fire Prevention Grant Awards. The project is named the Tunnel East Bay Hills Fuel Break.

MOFD has every reason to be thrilled since the grant is reportedly one of the largest given in the state. While the grant is less than the full amount requested, it is sizable none-the-less. The success of the 2019 North Orinda Shaded Fuel Break Project paved the way for the current grant award.

In May 2021, MOFD submitted two grant applications to Cal Fire's California Climate Investments Fire Prevention Grant Program. One that was intended to help fund additional community chipping was not selected. The accepted project "will significantly reduce the threat of uncontrolled wildfire and associated green house gas emissions by reducing high fuel concentrations and disrupting the horizontal and vertical continuity of fuel beds," according to Cal Fire's project description. "The tree canopy formed by healthy mature trees will remain largely intact to reduce the future growth of brush and understory vegetation and to preserve sequestered carbon in existing trees. The desired result is to restore fuel loading to more natural levels that can be maintained by the periodic introduction of prescribed fire."

MOFD expects to receive the contract within 30 days after Sept. 8, at which point they will determine when the program will begin, and the finalized specifics of the boundaries the project will affect, due to the slightly less than hoped for grant award.

During the Sept. 15 MOFD Board of Directors meeting, Chief Dave Winnacker explained that currently the project's perimeters run from the Orinda BART station to Cal Shakes, down the eastern side of Wilder, around Lost Valley, along the Indian Valley corridor, around Sanders and out to Bollinger and Saint Mary's. "This was an all-hands effort," stated Winnacker. "I have a great deal of gratitude to all of the members of the staff who contributed in the development of this application, and the experiences, and the prior relationships that were leveraged to ensure that the grant was written in a manner that resulted in it being favorably received; and we are tremendously grateful to our partners at Cal Fire SCU. Their advocacy on our behalf and their support for our ongoing fuel mitigation efforts, specifically Fire Chief Jake Hess and Unit Forester Ed Orre - without their support this project, as with our previous project, 1) would not have been approved, and 2) we would be challenged, to say the least, to execute it without their support and without access to their deep reservoirs of experience in this particular area."

Winnacker also gave kudos to MOFD Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs who knew what and what not to include in the application due to his past experiences with the grant process.

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