



24-5267

DATE: April 16, 2024 (Item No. {{item.number}})

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: James R. Williams, County Executive
Dana Reed, Director, Office of Emergency Management

SUBJECT: Highway 35 Hazardous Fuels Reduction Wildfire Mitigation Project, Phase 1

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Approve request for Appropriation Modification No. 183 - \$541,941 increasing estimated revenue and expenditure appropriations in the Office of Emergency Management budget, relating to mitigation actions for Phase 1 of the Highway 35 Hazardous Fuels Reduction Wildfire Mitigation Project. (4/5 vote)

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no net impact to the County General Fund as a result of approving the recommended action. The County has been awarded \$541,941 of federal funding from the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), Phase 1. With these funds, the Department is requesting to increase services and supplies budget one-time by \$541,941. The County will be reimbursed for eligible grant expenditures beginning in County Fiscal Year 2023-2024.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION AND BACKGROUND

On May 24, 2023 (Item No. 79), the Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution and delegation of authority for the County Executive to apply for and administer the HMGP. At the time of the authorization, a grant award had not been made so no appropriation modification could be presented to take the necessary budget actions. On November 20, 2023, the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) was notified that the County's grant application detailing proposed expenditures for \$541,941 for the HMGP was approved. The grant requires a local 10% match of \$57,046 that will be met primarily using Central County Fire Protection District (County Fire) staff time towards Phase 1 of the Highway 35 Hazardous Fuels Reduction Wildfire Mitigation Project.

In collaboration with OEM, County Fire submitted an HMGP application to reduce hazardous fuels along a 16-mile corridor on Highway 35, between Black Road and Page Mill Road in Santa Clara County. This corridor has a risk of wildfire spread because of hazardous fuel loads along the rights-of-way. A wildfire in the project area could endanger thousands of lives and property in Santa Clara County, Santa Cruz County, and San Mateo County. This is

a phased project and comprises two distinct phases as outlined in this scope of work. County Fire will be the executive body for this project, while OEM (subapplicant) will be managing the HMGP Grant. Due to this collaboration, specific tasks have been assigned to each organization, and a project planning team will be established upon project initiation.

The goals and expected outcomes of the project are to:

1. Reduce fire hazards in the project area and within the wildland-urban interface to an acceptable level of risk;
2. Maintain and enhance ecological values for plant and wildlife habitats consistent with fire reduction goals;
3. Preserve aesthetic landscape values for park users and neighboring communities; and
4. Provide a vegetation management plan which is cost-effective on a continuous basis.

The project area is defined as a 16-mile section of State Highway 35 (Skyline Blvd) between Black Road in Los Gatos and Page Mill Road in Palo Alto. Highway 35 serves a rural mountain community of approximately 2,703 structures and a population of approximately 5,000 residents, including the South Skyline community. It also serves as a major commute route between San Mateo County and Santa Clara County.

Much of Highway 35 in the project area is only 1½ lanes wide. Access roads are typically very narrow. Driveways are long in many areas. Dead ends and few turnarounds further challenge fire risk. Access and egress to the impacted communities are also severely limited to one single roadway. The water supply for fire suppression is very limited (please refer to attached project photos). Parcel-level defensible space alone is inadequate to protect residences in this area. Other values at risk include critical telecommunications infrastructure, domestic water supply watersheds, an elementary school, and two fire stations. Fire history in the area has demonstrated dangerous rates of spread and heavy loss of property. Notable fires include the Lexington Fire (1985), Summit Fire (2002), Croy Fire (2008), and the Loma Fire (2016). Despite this risk, a significant amount of acreage has no recorded fire history.

The objectives of the project are to reduce wildfire threat to life and property, and to reduce or eliminate damages in case of a wildfire. Mitigating wildfire threats to life and property will be accomplished by removing hazardous trees, reducing ladder fuels, dead, dying, and diseased fuels, and brush and exposed (refuse) trash in the project areas. Furthermore, the objectives of the project are to improve the safety in neighborhoods within the project area. This project will add to Santa Clara County's developing wildfire hazardous fuel reduction line system, which provides the increased probability of wildfire control and increases life-safety for the people in the project area.

The project implementation will serve to create life-safety by reducing hazardous vegetation fuel (fuel or fuels) along Highway 35. A continuous line of hazardous fuel reduction for approximately 16 miles will serve to mitigate the threat of wildfire to life and property adjacent to Highway 35 and the surrounding communities exposed to fire behavior that originates around the road and might cross the highway. Best management practices will be identified during the Phase 1 process by the contractor hired to complete the work in coordination with the environmental consultant hired for the project.

This project will enhance an already robust fuels reduction project network created in this mountain community and as an ancillary benefit will harden a heavily traveled ridgeline road. Although this project is being proposed by Santa Clara County, its benefits are multi-jurisdictional and will save lives and property in Santa Cruz and San Mateo County as well because fires do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. Please see attached project map for a visualization of the scope, location, and impacts of the project.

Agencies Having Jurisdiction and Funding:

Santa Clara County Fire Department, Santa Clara County Office of Emergency Management, Caltrans, City of Palo Alto, County Parks, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, and all other applicable land management agencies.

Ninety percent of funding is from the Federal Emergency Management Agency through the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, with 10% local match funding provided by County Fire staff hours.

Project End State Objectives:

The project will clear hazardous vegetation and hazard trees from the road edge to create a hazardous fuels reduction area to mitigate the threat to life and property in the event of a wildfire. In areas with the roadside elevation above the pavement, vegetation fuel type and density may increase the treatment. Any extreme cases of slope and topography will be identified and may result in isolated treatment at further distances if potential fire behavior threat warrants. All treatment distances will be limited to Caltrans and City of Palo Alto easements and adjacent managed lands. This completed fuel reduction will reduce the risk of a roadside fire escaping and threatening life and property along Highway 35 and growing into a larger conflagration that would threaten the surrounding communities. It will reduce the possibility of a fire crossing the highway and spreading dangerous conditions into Santa Cruz County or vice versa. This project will reduce the damage in the event of a major Wildlife Urban Interface disaster.

CHILD IMPACT

The recommended action will have a positive impact on children and youth by increasing preparedness for an emergency.

SENIOR IMPACT

The recommended action will have a positive impact on seniors by increasing preparedness for an emergency.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

The recommended action will have no/neutral sustainability implications.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE ACTION

The project area contains high-hazard fuels that have significant potential to produce or conduct a devastating wildfire, and action is needed to reduce the risk of a fast-moving wildland fire emerging from or moving through the parklands and igniting residential neighborhoods and other structures and facilities adjacent to the parks. Similarly, the

potential exists for fires starting on and moving from adjacent non-park lands through high-hazard fuels and causing unacceptable damage to residences and critical facilities. If no action is taken, hazardous fuels build up in the three-county project area will continue to endanger lives and property in case of future fires.

STEPS FOLLOWING APPROVAL

Upon approval, the Clerk of the Board is requested to send notification to Parastou Najaf in the Office of Emergency Management.

ATTACHMENTS:

- DR 4482 630 77R Phase One Award Package
- F85 183 FEMA Grant for Highway 35