

Oakland runs out of money for crucial fire prevention program

By Kimberly Veklerov | February 18, 2018 | Updated: February 18, 2018 4:54pm

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Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle

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A sign on Thornhill Drive in Oakland warns of hazardous fire conditions. Funds for the Fire Department's vegetation-abatement program has dried up.

Oakland has depleted a fund to clear overgrown weeds and vegetation in the hills — a fire management tactic that's crucial to controlling wildland infernos.

It's not for a lack of money, though. The city allocated some \$600,000 to the operation, but those funds won't get released until July 1, the start of the next fiscal year, weeks after the fire season typically begins. Meanwhile, key Fire Department jobs remain vacant.

Driving in the Oakland hills recently, Vincent Crudele, who leads the Fire Department's vegetation management unit, said he saw fields of bright poppies and acacia trees blooming yellow flowers — a vista that's not supposed to sprout until late spring. The blossoming could signal an early start to the fire season, which has run from May to November in recent years.

“As much as we try scientifically to predict when and where fires are going to happen, there’s no rhyme or reason,” he said. “It’s not a matter of if it will happen, but when it will happen. ... That’s why we create fuel breaks.”



Photo: Steve Ringman, The Chronicle

The Oakland Hills fire burned hundreds of home and created a dust cloud that could be seen for miles on Oct. 20, 1991.

The funding deficiency is partly due to voters rejecting the renewal of a \$65 parcel tax in 2013 that paid for **wildfire prevention activities**. The leftover monies were stretched through last year before drying up entirely.

Usually this time of year, Crudele said, the Fire Department would be removing hazardous growth on private properties whose owners haven’t complied with vegetation regulations, then fining the owners. Roughly one-tenth of the 20,000 inspected residences do not meet the city requirements on any given year.

Firefighters annually check whether residents have, for instance, maintained 10 feet of space between tree limbs and chimneys and cleared their roofs of leaves and needles — the kind of fuel onto which flying embers latch to spark a house fire that can jump to the next structure.

The department still has a small pot of cash — \$69,950 as of last week — to deal with clearing vegetation on city-owned land, according to Crudele. He said that will be spent on clearing roadside vegetation, which is among the first to turn brown under steady sunlight and which threatens to go up in flames any time a driver tosses a cigarette butt or gets into an accident.



Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle

Trees and grass grow above Shepherd Canyon in Oakland.

Other more costly projects, like the clearing of invasive French broom below the Montclair Railroad Trail, won't happen until late in the summer. The last time crews tackled the 7½-acre parcel, they removed 78,000 pounds of the shrub, which can rapidly reach 8 feet in height. Once dried out, the vegetation forms a meadow of tinder.

Some City Council members extra leery after [the Wine Country fires](#), such as Rebecca Kaplan, want next fiscal year's funds to be released early.

“All we're saying is, instead of doing the work starting in July, do the same amount of work but start in May,” she said. “It wouldn't affect the future year's

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budgeting.”

Not helping the funding conundrum: Three of four full-time inspector positions are vacant, though Crudele said the city is filling them. Councilman Dan Kalb said part of the problem is that vegetation inspectors in the Fire Department are paid significantly less than their counterparts who inspect buildings.

“I don’t know why,” he said. “It doesn’t make sense to me. I think the administration wants to close that gap, but it hasn’t happened yet. Even when you hire someone, it’s hard to keep them there.”



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