

Quarry Park Eucalyptus Canopy Fire A Tragedy Waiting to Happen?



Eucalyptus Burning

Background

The Paradise fire brought home the devastation caused by high winds, hot temperatures and low humidity.

Quarry Park is more than 1/2 square mile of eucalyptus that could make El Granada a synonym for Paradise.

I started this project after a 2017 trip to Portugal when my wife and I saw how closely the area resembled home, with its eucalyptus and broom. A month later massive wild fires killed 60 people in the area we had travelled through.

The last time El Granada had a major fire was in late November 1929 when a wildfire raged from Pescadero to Montara.

So far, we have been very fortunate, but we cannot continue to rely on luck!

Montara / El Granada - 1929

MONTARA WIPED OUT BY FIRE; FLAMING WALL SWEEPS INLAND

25 HOMES, CHURCH, CATTLE BURN; 6 FIRES RING COUNTY AS RED CROSS RUSHES AID

Cities of central San Mateo county were wiped as those cities by flames today as giant brush fires raged eastward over the mountains of the peninsula the Maroma mountains, after weeks of drying out for some days last night.

Montara, a town of 1000 people, has been made homeless, nearly 50 houses, a church, and other public buildings have been destroyed, cattle have been burned to death in many herds, and damage estimated at more than \$200,000 has been done. Eighteen houses were destroyed at Montara as householders fled, setting only the smoking wrecks of the flames.

Nearly a thousand men, recruited from highways, cities, and mountain towns on the coast.

The fire to the north and west of the Maroma and Sycamore, began at six o'clock throughout the county, was being fought back today from the skyline backward to property of the Spring Valley Water company, while another smaller fire, starting last night in Pescadero region, was within five miles of the San Mateo County Memorial park, burning through great meadows after having swept to within half a mile of the north end of Pescadero.

FIRE BURNS AUTO
Flames before the latter in Santa Cruz at Monterey last night, Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Wagner and Mrs. Maude Berry, mother of Mrs. Wagner, saved their lives while the fire, taking a suicidal wind, overtook their automobile in a race to Monterey. From only a few feet away from the car, the flames overtook them, and they were killed.

L. A. OPENS BIG DRIVE TO GET
The fire overtook them in the drive to Monterey, where they were killed. The fire overtook them in the drive to Monterey, where they were killed.



AND DAILY NEWS LEADER

S. M. CALLS ON ARMY

CLEMENCEAU ON DEATHBED, SCORNS DEATH, MOCKS FOES

Better Shop Before Noon, Wives Warned

LOGGING ROADS ONLY NEED OF NORTH CALIF. IS S. P. CLAIM

HIGH SCHOOL CLOCK DRAWS FIRE OF S. M. HEIGHTS CLUB

SHERIFF ASKS SOLDIERS' AID FIGHTING FIRE NEAR BELMONT

Dr. Will aid Qualifications of "Star" of Prince Wales
DOUTHER FEAR END PEACE

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SEVERAL RESCUED

Two men fell head first into the flames after being overcome by smoke, but were dragged to safety by companions. In coast side towns virtually all able-bodied men and boys, as well as some women, were on the fire lines from Montara on the north to Miramar on the south. At Moss Beach, only one man and one woman remained in the town, the woman reporting the progress of the flames and the man standing guard to protect against flying embers.

Three employees of the Half Moon Bay Gun Club were rescued after being hemmed in for nearly twenty-four hours. Constable Simmons and twelve men fought a way to them, the process taking six hours.

Fences on the outskirts of the town of El Granada were burned before flames there were turned back. A sizeable pine grove near there was declared burning fiercely, with El Granada Park already in ashes.

The Good News (Mostly)

- Historically
 - High humidity coastal fog belt (“asbestos coast”)
 - Rarely sustained a major fire.
 - In the past, only the ridgetops and inland areas have experienced major fires.
- Unfortunately, seasonal humidity is decreasing, temperatures are rising and the incidence of Diablo winds is increasing.
- We are now in a **Very High Fire Hazard Zone!**

Diablo Winds - Hot Dry Offshore Winds



10/15/2020

Hot Diablo Wind

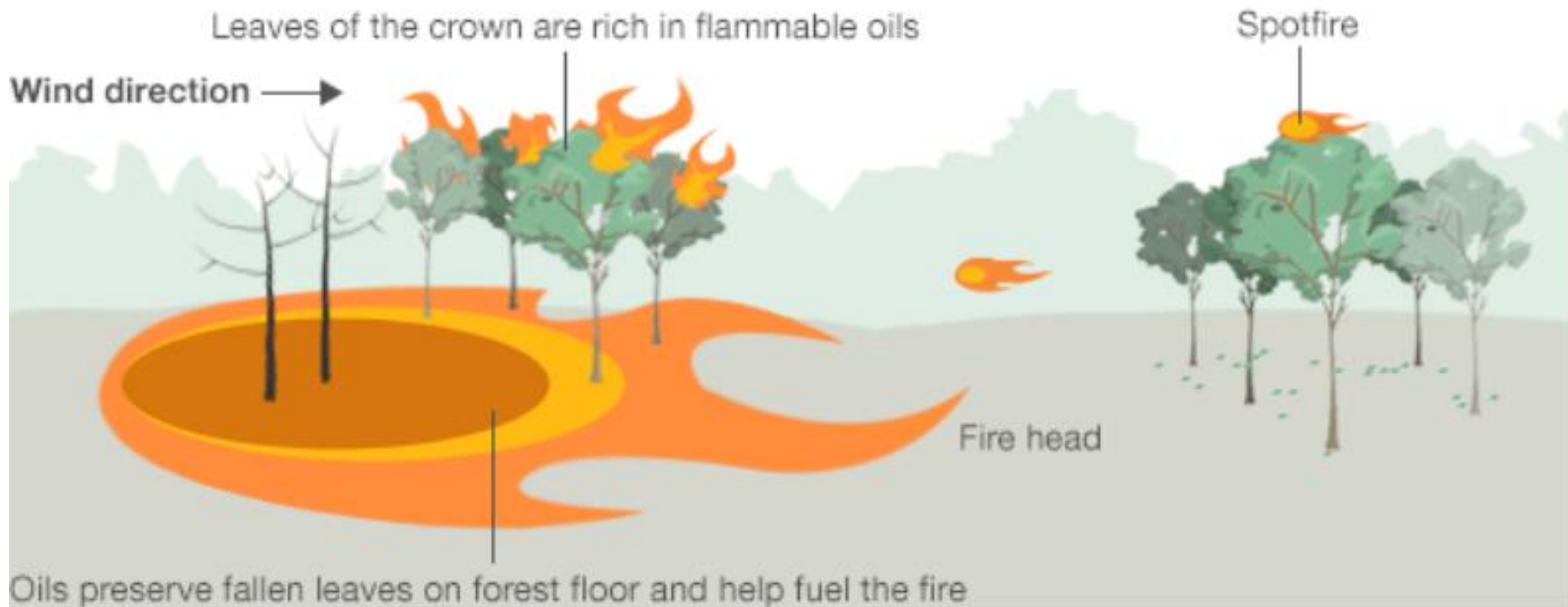
Temperature - 80 Wind – 39 mph Humidity – 12 %



How Would it Start?

- Urban Boundary Accidents
 - House Wiring, Power Poles, Transformers, etc.
 - Generators
 - Collisions
 - Barbeque Grills
- Aerial Fireworks & Gasoline Fire (Quarry Park Rave – August 29, 2020)
- Cigarettes (Anytime)
- Off Road Motorcycles (September 13, 2020)
- Arson
- Powerlines (1.8 Miles above EG highlands)
- Spread from GGNRA, SFPUC Lands

Fuel + Slope + Wind + Ignition = Quarry Park Canopy Fire

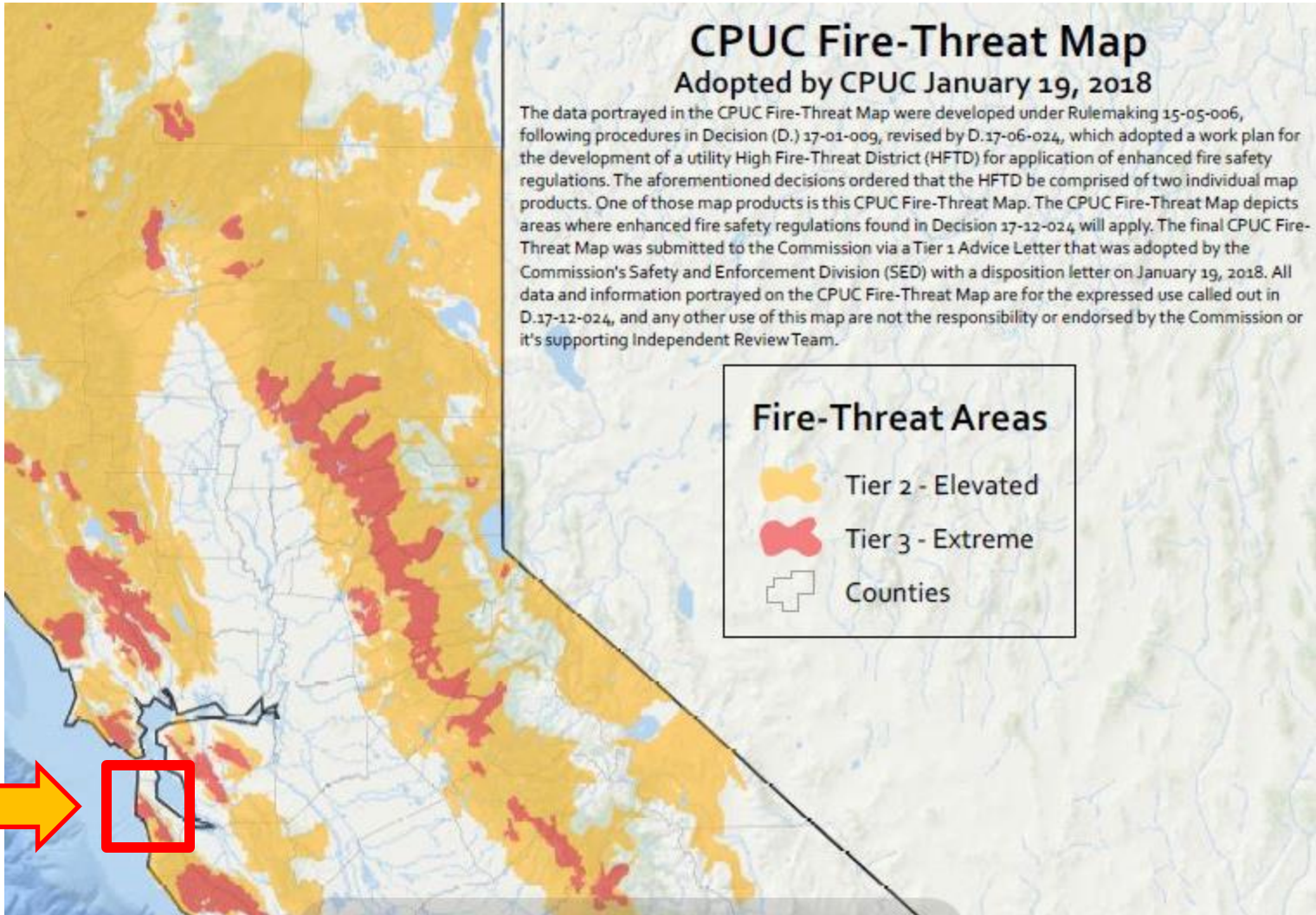


Quarry Park Terrain



700 Foot Elevation 30%-70% Grades
Virtually Impossible to Fight Canopy Fire!

Fire Insurance Rate Hikes and Cancellations

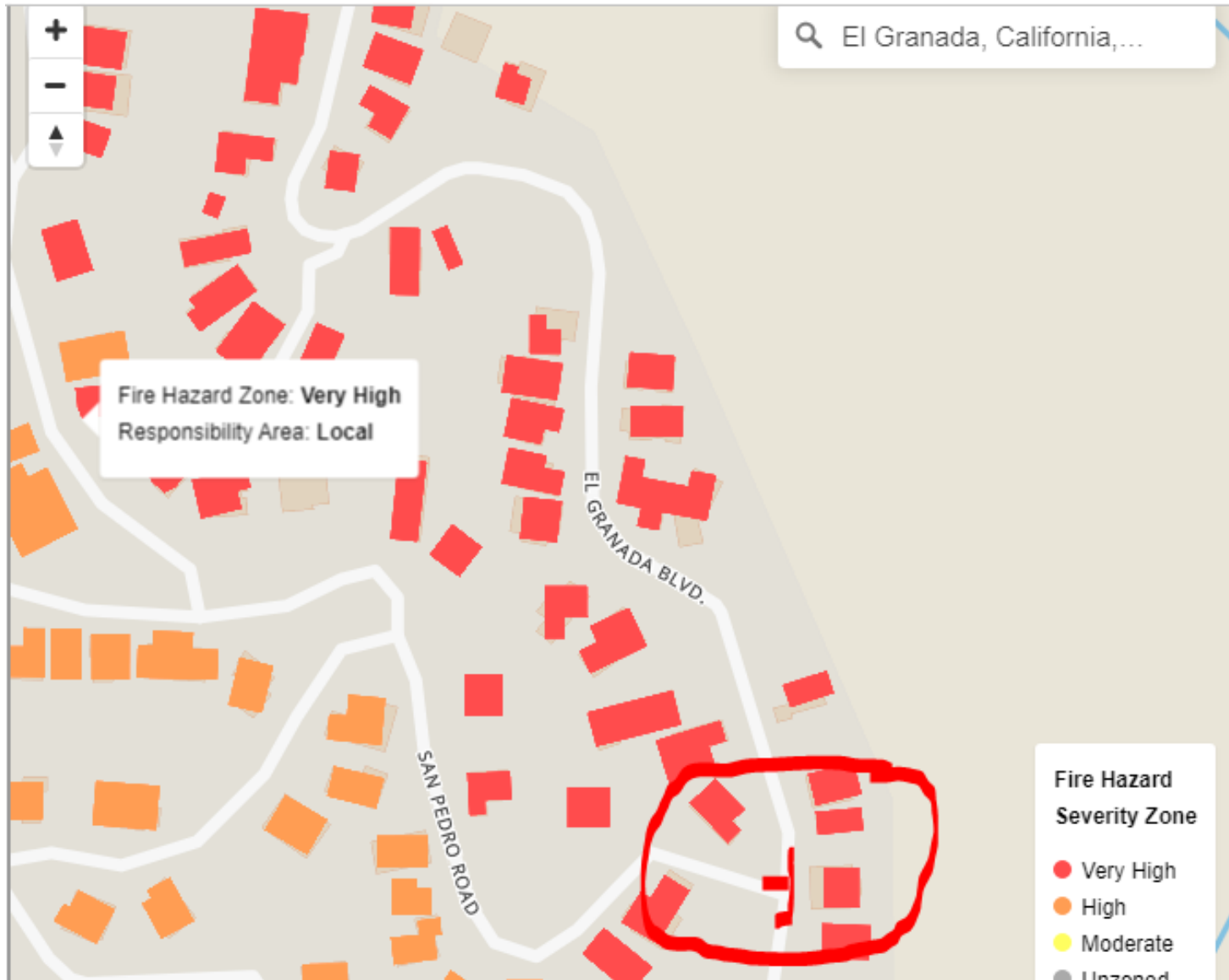


El Granada Highlands – No Exit

Locked Gate



Fire at EG Blvd & San Pedro Rd

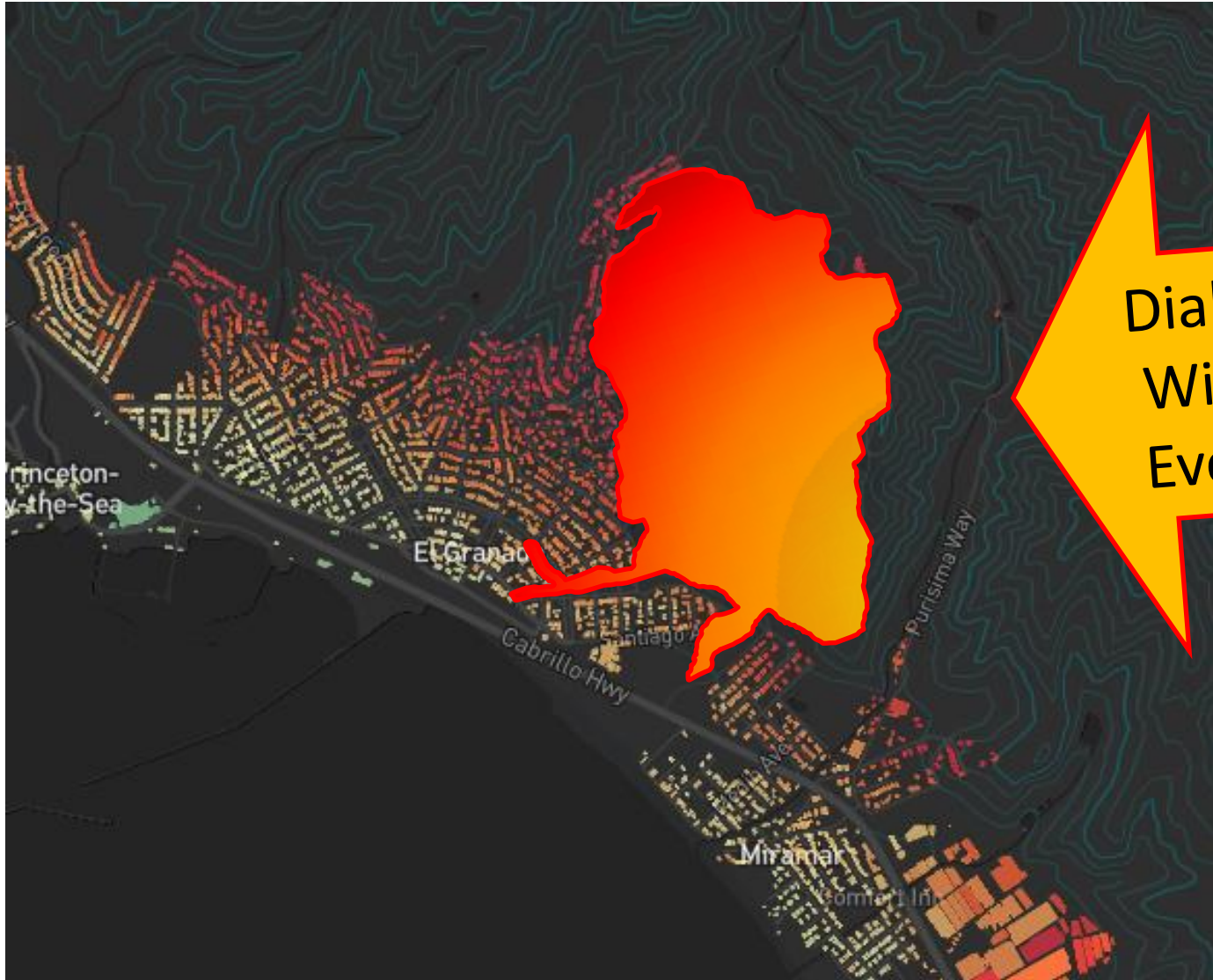


Fire Probability

We have averaged four Diablo Wind events per year (4 -6 per year over last 10 years)

- Recently September, October and November have multiple days with 40+ mph winds and temperatures in the upper 80's. With very low humidity, these factors cause high flammability conditions within a single day.
- The consequences are catastrophic, and the probability is increasing!
- This is no longer “the asbestos coast” that firefighters referred to 20 years ago

Quarry Park Firestorm!



Diablo
Wind
Event

If Canopy Fire is Unstoppable, How can it be Prevented?

- Remove Mature Eucalyptus Trees to establish defensible perimeters.
- Prioritize large tree removal over ground fuel clearance **even if fuel remains on the ground. Brush fires are suppressible, canopy fires are not.**
- Establish fire webcams covering Quarry Park
- Establish volunteers as FireWatch during Diablo wind events.
- But most importantly - **Educate our elected officials to fund the effort to remove the mature eucalyptus!**

CalFire vs SMC Priorities

- CalFire firefighting priorities are, loosely stated, that by culture, tradition and doctrine, the fire service takes great risks to save lives. They take calculated risks to save property under the direction of the Incident Commander that are tied directly to the values being protected versus the likelihood of effective action to protect those values.
- San Mateo Parks criteria in fuel reduction include:
 - Private buildings,
 - Park buildings,
 - Wildland urban interface
 - Fuel type
- Note - No recognition of human life or the insurance cancellations due to Quarry Park and El Granada eucalyptus medians owned by County!

Result: No new mature tree removal efforts in Quarry Park or medians planned for the next 5 years ?

Priorities

- 1 - Protect Lives - Remove mature eucs along EG Blvd where people have no escape from either a Quarry Park initiation point or a San Pedro intersection crossover.
- 2 - Protect Property - Same as above. Plus increase removal of all County eucs bordering EG (Quarry Park and medians).
- 3 - Worry about disposal, replanting, etc.

SMC Parks Fuel Reduction Priorities

Criteria 0	Threat to Human Lives
Criteria 1	Presence of Private Residences
Criteria 2	Presence of Park Building
Criteria 3	Wildland Urban Interface
Criteria 4	Fuel Type
Criteria 5	Vegetation Treatment Considerations
Criteria 6	Ecological Considerations
Criteria 7	Ingress/Egress
Criteria 8	Severity Zones
Criteria 9	Longevity
Criteria 10	Professional Judgment
Criteria 11	Joint Implementation
Criteria 12	Size of Project

**Missing Criteria:
Priority on Human Life &
Devastation of Town**

SMC Parks Fuel Reduction Weighting

- Human Safety: Not Considered
- Building Criteria:

0	0
1 to 10	2
11 to 20	3
21 to 30	4
30 +	5

Which means that 3 locations with 1 building have more weight than the 120 + buildings in EG Highlands.

Accountability

- The County of San Mateo Owns the Canopy Fire Hazard in El Granada Quarry Park and the Eucalyptus Medians.
- Despite this, there are no significant canopy removals being planned.
- Instead resources are being applied to predefined projects which contain little or no threat to life or structures.
- El Granada currently is in a situation identical to the Oakland Hills before the 1991 Fire. We need Immediate Action!

Responsibility

Although San Mateo County didn't cause the problem, they now own the problem!

Action !

- Declare an Emergency – If it isn't one now, by fall it will be!
- Obtain funding to ensure that quarry park and the coastside are eucalyptus **removal** priorities due to:
 - Vulnerable population including elderly
 - Areas with no evacuation options when exposed to fast moving wildfire.
 - Lack of hospitals and effective evacuation routes from coastside (92 & Highway 1 will probably be at a standstill)
 - Property destruction with increasing numbers of uninsured owners.
 - Extreme slopes and mature eucalyptus in Quarry Park blocking firefighting efforts.
- Required
 - Multi Agency Funding Co-ordination – Feds (GGNRA & FEMA) , State Parks, County Parks & County DPW, SFPUC are stakeholders.
 - MCC letters to local, state and federal government that this is a “pay now or pay later” and that the consequences of inaction are deadly!
 - Explore legal action through MCC or GSD.

The End?



Oakland Hills Fire Aftermath, 1991

References

Oakland Hills Fire (FEMA)

- [TR-060 The East Bay Hills Fire \(fema.gov\)](https://www.fema.gov/plan-premit/recovery/060)

California Fire Hazard Maps

- [Defensible Fire Risk Rankings \(defensibleapp.com\)](https://www.defensibleapp.com/)
 - <https://www.defensibleapp.com/>
- [Fire Hazard of Every Building in California: An Interactive Map | Geospatial @ UCLA](https://gis.ucla.edu/blog/fire-hazard-every-building-in-california-interactive-map?fbclid=IwAR0nB4efQipBstyTpPc6hOzqRthgLmLUex6mODNTBB09fU7AXD6XncRpB)
 - <https://gis.ucla.edu/blog/fire-hazard-every-building-in-california-interactive-map?fbclid=IwAR0nB4efQipBstyTpPc6hOzqRthgLmLUex6mODNTBB09fU7AXD6XncRpB>

SMC BOS Wildfire Presentation – Item 4 (et.al.)

- [County of San Mateo - File #: 21-135 \(legistar.com\)](https://legistar.com/View/@@id/21-135)
- <https://sanmateocounty.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4804510&GUID=47A1599F-8AAA-4EC7-B1B5-41C33DA0E4D3&Options=&Search=&FullText=1>

LA Times - Paradise

- [Must Reads: Here's how Paradise ignored warnings and became a deathtrap - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com/local/paradise/la-fi-paradise-death-trap-2017-10-23)