



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

## AGENDA ITEM

### BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Second District

TERRA LAWSON-REMER  
Third District

MONICA MONTGOMERY STEPPE  
Fourth District

JIM DESMOND  
Fifth District

**DATE:** June 3, 2025

**14**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

### **SUBJECT**

**RECEIVE PRESENTATION ON REGIONAL FIRE PREPAREDNESS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

### **OVERVIEW**

In January 2025, Los Angeles County was severely impacted by several wildfires that caused catastrophic damage to residents in the Altadena and Pacific Palisades communities. In total, the wildfires destroyed over 15,000 homes and businesses, burned 37,000 acres, resulted in at least 29 deaths, forced 100,000 people to evacuate, and caused tens of billions of dollars in property damages. On January 28, 2025 (16, 17), the Board of Supervisors (Board) took several actions to bolster wildfire preparedness, response, and educational efforts in our region and to conduct a comprehensive review of the County's clearing and brush management efforts. The Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to purchase a twin-engine helicopter for San Diego County Fire to staff and conduct night-time water drops on wildland fires in our region for around-the-clock wildfire response and evaluate the need for additional water tenders. In addition, the Board directed the CAO to return within 180 days with a presentation on overall wildfire preparedness, including vegetation management, water supply and infrastructure, residential insurance, recovery, public education, and emergency response coordination.

Today's action includes the Board receiving a presentation regarding fire preparedness efforts, partnerships with other agencies in the region, and updates on efforts being taken by San Diego Gas & Electric, San Diego County Water Authority, and the California Insurance Commissioner's Office.

### **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

#### **CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER**

Receive a presentation on wildfire preparedness, response and resiliency, water supply and infrastructure, and residential insurance availability in San Diego County.

### **EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

Fire preparedness and prevention help to mitigate wildland fires that frequently start in rural and isolated communities, and disproportionately impact tribal nations, lower-income residents, and senior citizens.

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### **SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

Today's action supports our region's environmental well-being by minimizing the impact of wildland fires on residents and sensitive habitats.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no current year fiscal impact associated with today's action to receive a presentation on fire preparedness efforts and partnerships with other agencies in the region. \$14,300,000 in funding for the purchase of a twin-engine helicopter for County Fire has been included in the Fiscal Years 2025-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan in Finance Other based on anticipated bond proceeds (long-term debt financing). Staff will return to the Board for approval to issue long-term debt.

### **BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

### **ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

On May 12, 2025, the San Diego County Fire Protection District Fire Advisory Board received an update on wildfire preparedness efforts.

### **BACKGROUND**

In January 2025, the Los Angeles region was severely impacted by several wildfires that caused catastrophic damage to several communities. On January 28, 2025 (16, 17), the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to take several actions to support San Diego County's status as a national leader in wildfire mitigation and response. This includes funding the purchase of a night-flying helicopter for San Diego County Fire (County Fire) and evaluating the need for additional water tenders, and return to the Board within 180 days to provide a presentation on water supply, availability, and dam management plans; fire prevention and preparedness, vegetation management practices, increased preparedness services, emergency response coordination, and insurance and financial recovery. Today's presentation includes representatives from the San Diego County Water Authority, San Diego Gas & Electric, and the California Insurance Commissioner's Office.

The County of San Diego works collaboratively to deliver preparedness and response services to residents. This work includes coordination with the 12 other independent, unincorporated area fire protection districts, special districts, federal agencies, the military, tribes and 18 city fire departments to safeguard the region and provide assistance throughout San Diego's communities. In 2008, after the devastating wildfires of 2003 and 2007, the Board established County Fire to provide coordination to rural fire protection districts and volunteer fire companies. Beginning in 2014, County Fire began transitioning from volunteer-reserves to professional staffing at all stations. By 2019, all County Fire stations were staffed around-the-clock with paramedic-level career firefighters. When Borrego Springs Fire Protection District dissolved in 2023, a total of 20 agencies consolidated into County Fire.

Fire protection and emergency medical services are delivered through a cooperative agreement with CAL FIRE. The County funds more than 300 firefighters at 21 fire stations in our region and supports over 100 operational vehicles. Together with 18 State-funded fire stations, during peak

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staffing, over 1,100 CAL FIRE firefighters provide around-the-clock, all hazard response capabilities that includes wildfires, floods, and other emergencies. In addition, the County supports a Community Risk Reduction division that focuses on community education, preparedness, and prevention programs that mitigate the impact of wildfires on our residents.

The Office of Emergency Services (OES) leads disaster planning efforts, engages the public with actions to be taken in advance of a disaster, and delivers real-time information through AlertSanDiego.org and the Genasys Protect Mobile Application to help residents make informed decisions. In addition, OES leads the County's Unified Disaster Council which is established through a joint power agreement between the cities and County. This body meets bi-monthly to plan, coordinate planning activities, create regional policies and ensure mutual aid is available to benefit all residents in our region in the event of a disaster or major emergency.

The San Diego Sheriff's Office is the lead agency for coordinating evacuations in the unincorporated area, operates firefighting helicopters and notification systems. The Department of Animal Services supports residents with evacuations of livestock and personal pets to appropriate locations. Health and Human Services Agency brings critical health and social services to residents who are displaced during emergencies.

**Water Supply, Maintenance, and Availability**

After the Los Angeles wildfires in January, water availability and resource management became a critical issue for firefighting agencies and residents. Locally, the San Diego County Water Authority (Water Authority) is a wholesale supplier of water to more than two dozen independent municipal and rural water agencies. The Water Authority provides guidance and expertise to local agencies on maintaining hydrants and ensures water is available to residents and public agencies as needed to serve local demands. Today's presentation will include an update on local agencies' efforts to ensure fire hydrants are maintained and operational during an emergency as well as water storage practices in our region.

Most of the unincorporated areas are groundwater dependent and outside the service boundary of water agencies and the County Water Authority. The minimal number of fire hydrants, especially in the most remote areas, necessitates the need for water tenders that can stage water which is critical for firefighters to attack wildfires and prolonged structure fires. On January 28, 2025, the Board directed the CAO to evaluate whether additional water tenders were necessary. County Fire staff, with CAL FIRE, determined two water tenders would bolster response efforts and in May two water tenders were purchased and delivered to the County. One will be staged in North County and the other in South County.

**Fire Prevention and Preparedness**

Investments made by the Board in the Office of Emergency Services (OES) over the last two decades has resulted in them being one of only three agencies in California to be accredited by the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) for the County's work in hazard identification, risk assessment, incident management and emergency public information. OES is responsible for helping communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters and other emergencies. They take an all-hazards approach to emergency planning and preparedness that considers the range of disasters that may impact our region. Funding to expand OES to establish a

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Recovery and Community Engagement Unit to support disaster planning, response, and recovery is included in the Fiscal Years 2025-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan. In addition, OES is expanding the County's Ready Disaster Service Worker program staffed by County employees during an emergency to provide more capacity and training to ensure adequate preparation for our emergency response efforts.

San Diego County Fire has become a state leader in wildfire prevention through a comprehensive and robust fire prevention program that includes key initiatives such as defensible space enforcement, home hardening support, and community chipping programs. In 2024, County Fire completed over 50,000 defensible space inspections in County Fire's service area with a 91% compliance rate. In addition, from July 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025, proactive and coordinated efforts have created nearly 350 acres of fuel breaks that are used to slow the spread of wildfires and completed more than 1,500 acres of controlled burns to reduce hazardous fuels in high fire risk areas.

**Parks and Recreation-Owned and Maintained Properties**

The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) manages and operates open space preserves and parks throughout San Diego County. DPR prioritizes critical fire prevention work in facilities that are in High or Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones and that are located within the State and Local Responsibility Areas. To reduce fuel loads and decrease wildfire risk, DPR creates and maintains existing fuel breaks and 100-foot defensible space requirements around high value assets, conducts vegetation management, and removes dead fallen trees. DPR maintains defensible spaces consistent with the Consolidated Fire Code and conducts additional measures, as necessary, in coordination with County Fire. DPR will continue evaluating parks and preserves in coordination with County Fire to determine if new or enhanced clearing efforts are necessary.

**Road Rights-of-Ways and Evacuation Corridors**

The Department of Public Works (DPW) is responsible for about 2,000 centerline County-maintained roads in the unincorporated area. Roads are evaluated at least every two months for critical fire needs. Roads requiring vegetation management are scheduled for mowing or tree trimming. DPW's roadside clearing program consists of mowing up to 10 feet from the edge of the pavement on County-maintained roads where there is obstructing vegetation growth and where it is feasible within the public roads' right-of-way. The primary purpose for the clearing program is to give motorists space to pull over and allow first responder vehicles to pass during an emergency. DPW's mowing is limited to where environmentally sensitive areas are apparent and can be avoided, like wetlands, sensitive plants, or habitats. An environmental review is performed for all mowing areas to identify any sensitive areas, and these are avoided altogether. After mowing, DPW also coordinates with the Department of Agriculture Weights and Measures for herbicide application to slow the regrowth of vegetation.

In addition to DPW's work, County Fire has a 20-foot roadside program. After DPW completes the first 10 feet of mowing, County Fire facilitates the next 10 feet to be cleared along key evacuation corridors in County Fire's service area and adjacent communities. County Fire staff will continue to monitor best practices and emerging trends for increasing evacuation opportunities and improving access for first responders. County Fire cleared or treated vegetation along nearly 900 miles of State and County roads in the first 9 months of the current fiscal year.

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### **Multiple Species Conservation Program**

The Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) is a long-term, regional habitat conservation program focused on balancing the protection of plant and animal species with recreation, development, and agricultural activities within the San Diego region. As part of the MSCP, the County, State and federal wildlife agencies, private developers, and other partners purchase open space land that is set aside and conserved as part of a larger regional preserve system. In San Diego, there is one adopted MSCP Plan that covers the southwestern part of the region (the South County Plan); there is a second MSCP Plan for the northern portion of the region that is currently underway (the North County Plan), and a third plan to cover the eastern portion of the region that is expected in the future (the East County Plan).

Specific actions within the MSCP are recommended that can also help reduce fire risk. Conservation lands that are part of the MSCP preserve system are required to be managed, and management activities are documented in individual Resource Management Plans (RMPs) for each preserve. Each RMP is unique in that they document the specific conditions for each property. However, all RMPs include vegetation management activities intended to protect onsite resources. Many of these vegetation management activities also reduce fire risk and include activities such as maintaining fire breaks, fire fuel reduction, and brush clearing. The MSCP does not prevent establishing defensible spaces consistent with the County's Consolidated Fire Code or additional fire protection measures in accordance with Section 4290 of the Public Resources Code and any other measures as deemed necessary by the San Diego County Fire Chief's Association. As a result of the January 2025 wildfires in Southern California, part of the MSCP Draft North County Plan will include information about fire management allowances in outreach and engagement efforts. Additionally, updates to MSCP websites and related content will be made to provide clear information on how fire management is consistent and allowed within the South, North, and East County MSCP areas.

### **Enhanced Preparedness Opportunities**

At Board direction, County Fire staff evaluated several opportunities to further bolster preparedness in the region. Defensible Space is one of the most important actions a property owner can take to protect their structure(s) during a wildfire. Removing vegetation within 100 feet of a building is key to slowing or stopping wildfire spread and protecting properties from embers, flames, or heat and it gives firefighters a safer area to defend around homes and other structures. County Fire explored existing Defensible Space Assistance Programs (DSAP) to address service gaps. A DSAP program would be focused on supporting the most vulnerable residents served by County Fire who are lower-income or physically unable to complete work on their own properties. The Office of Economic Development and Government Affairs (EDGA) works closely with County Fire to identify priority needs and engage with policymakers on opportunities related to funding and legislation. To this end, EDGA advocated for funding from the State and federal delegations to establish a local DSAP program and continues to monitor for additional funding opportunities.

Air curtain burners efficiently incinerate organic waste at high temperatures, using a high-velocity air curtain to reduce smoke and emissions. Capable of burning up to one ton of waste per hour, they offer a faster, cleaner alternative to traditional disposal methods. These burners provide a

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cost-effective, environmentally friendly way for high-fire-risk communities to dispose of brush and vegetation waste while maintaining defensible space. EDGA advocated for funding from the State and federal delegations to cover one-time costs of purchasing air curtain burners and pickup trucks and continues to monitor for additional funding opportunities.

Finally, County Fire explored opportunities to utilize livestock to mitigate fire risk in the unincorporated area. County Fire staff, with CAL FIRE, determined there was a benefit, especially in hard-to-reach areas, and a Request for Quotes (RFQ) was released on May 21, 2025, for as-needed services. In addition, County Fire staff are continuing to evaluate public-private opportunities for property owners to leverage a grazing contract for work on their land.

**Community Engagement, Public Education, and Disaster Readiness**

Stakeholder engagement is a foundational element of San Diego County’s wildfire resilience strategy. County Fire maintains strong partnerships with Fire Safe Councils (FSCs), CAL FIRE, and other regional partners to ensure that wildfire mitigation efforts are community-driven, geographically relevant, and supported by technical expertise. County Fire has supported the development or revision of over 40 Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) and has facilitated the creation of 15 new Fire Safe Councils. To maintain continuity and collaboration, County Fire, CAL FIRE, and the Fire Safe Council of San Diego County, the umbrella organization for FSCs in our region, regularly convene coordination meetings with 54 local FSCs to assess progress and address issues such as overgrown vegetation, neighborhood access routes, and outreach needs.

County Fire’s Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program continues to provide comprehensive outreach and disaster training to over 40 communities in the unincorporated area to engage and empower residents before and during a disaster. In Fiscal Year 2024-25, CERT provided 45 disaster readiness trainings to over 2,000 County residents. These systems allow for hyperlocal, zone-based evacuation messaging in multiple languages and have become vital tools in providing timely, actionable information to residents during fast-moving incidents.

In addition, OES has successfully worked with partner agencies to promote family disaster plans in multiple language, partner relay networks with trusted community organizations, promotes the “Ready, Set, Go!” regional communications campaign, helping residents create “go bags” and preparing for the first 72 hours of an emergency, registering emergency contact information for the AlertSanDiego and Genasys Protect Mobile Application to help residents make informed decisions and coordinates with emergency managers for the 18 cities.

**Regional Coordination and Aerial Support**

Prior to the 2003 wildfires, the San Diego region was under-resourced with aerial assets that could provide an initial attack on emerging wildfires and sustain firefighters on the ground during a prolonged incident. Today, the County, City of San Diego, CAL FIRE, U.S. Forest Service, and California National Guard work collaboratively to deploy dedicated aerial resources and operationalize reserve or out-of-county resources.

The County maintains robust aerial firefighting capabilities through its cooperative agreement with CAL FIRE and mutual aid partnerships at the local, state and federal levels. These resources are

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critical for rapid response and fire suppression throughout the region's remote and high-risk areas. The San Diego region benefits from having 11 dedicated firefighting aerial assets that includes three (3) from the San Diego Sheriff's Office, five (5) CAL FIRE fixed wing and rotorcraft, one (1) U.S. Forest Service, and two (2) San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) helicopters. During a prolonged emergency, CAL FIRE can request federal approval for military aircraft that can be surged into the firefighting attack. This total does not include the anticipated addition of a County Fire night-flying helicopter in the future.

Staff from County Fire, the San Diego Sheriff's Office, and the Public Safety Group Executive Office, are having conversations with the State and public utility partners to determine the most effective firefighting helicopter platform, determine cost-sharing options, and capital replacement plans as part of purchasing the County helicopter budgeted in the Fiscal Years 2025-27 CAO Recommended Operational Plan.

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**LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today's proposed actions support the Community Initiative of the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by increasing wildfire response resources that protect residents and property in our region.

Respectfully submitted,



*Andrew Strong for*

EBONY N. SHELTON  
Chief Administrative Officer

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

N/A