



**JIM DESMOND**  
SUPERVISOR, FIFTH DISTRICT  
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

**AGENDA ITEM**

**DATE:** January 28, 2025

**17**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

**SUBJECT**

**ENHANCING CLEARING AND BRUSH MANAGEMENT EFFORTS TO REDUCE  
WILDFIRE RISK IN THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO AND WAIVE BOARD POLICY  
A-72 (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

**OVERVIEW**

We have seen historic fires throughout California and the western United States in recent years, including the significant fires that recently ravaged Los Angeles. Given the severity and destructive power underscored by these fires, it's clear we must always be prepared for this very real risk in San Diego County. This must include having an effective clearing and brush management program in place. Proactive wildfire risk management is critical for reducing both the frequency and severity of wildfires. One of the most proactive steps we can take as a region is to eliminate or significantly diminish the amount of overgrown vegetation in the wildland-urban interface areas (areas of transition from wilderness to developed land). This includes removing things such as dead plants, grasses, shrubs, and trees - all of which provide for hazardous wildfire fuels. By deliberately managing dead and overgrown vegetation we're able to better contain and reduce the intensity of future fires. While the focus is to protect human lives and property, effective clearing and brush management also helps contain fires and slows their spread, making emergency response efforts easier for firefighters and first responders in the air and on the ground.

When it comes to clearing and brush management, we should explore all available tools and options including both traditional and modern solutions. One such tool includes employing the use of livestock to clear areas for defense against wildfires. For example, the use of goats and sheep for clearing, which eat a variety of types of vegetation and can navigate challenging terrain commonly found in the unincorporated areas appears to be an effective and common-sense approach to reduce wildfire fuels in the County. Not only are they great grazers, but they are also a natural solution that doesn't require the use of heavy machinery or harsh herbicides. As a government we should capitalize on the very real benefits that a deliberate and effective use of livestock could bring to our overall defensive strategy against wildfires. That being said, as part of today's item all methods and current best practices should be reviewed for consideration, such as mowing and prescribed burns. The second option as part of today's item includes conducting a comprehensive evaluation of County properties such as road rights-of-way, parks, and preserve lands for opportunities to apply additional clearing. The purpose of this would be to strategically remove fuels and other hazardous vegetation on County property, particularly where located along

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or near the boundaries of adjacent fire-prone wildlands. By establishing new or enhancing existing brush management efforts on County land, we can better slow or help contain the spread of fires to protect residential neighborhoods, agricultural land, and other critical areas such as power and water infrastructure.

While taking steps to reduce fuels on County property is essential, it's important to keep in mind that large amounts of fuels reside on private property. Private properties in the rural areas are often many acres in size and contain vast amounts of vegetation, and it's the owner's prerogative to perform clearing and brush removal. Additionally, clearing large properties often requires the use of expensive machinery and chemicals such as woodchippers, bulldozers and herbicides. Not only that, by many residents likely have more vegetation to dispose of than their organic waste bins can hold. Newer technologies could be used to assist rural residents in their vegetation management efforts. Utilized by the US Forest Service, vegetation incinerators, or "air curtain burners" are self-contained industrial incineration devices. Air curtain burners burn organic waste at very high temperatures while a high-velocity air curtain is blown across to reduce smoke and emissions. The County could utilize air curtain burners through the San Diego County Fire Protection District (County Fire) to assist residents in clearing their vegetation by providing a way for people to inexpensively dispose of brush and vegetation. For instance, County Fire could host brush recycling events with air curtain burners akin to community recycling events for electronic waste.

Taken together, today's action directs the Chief Administration Officer (CAO) to do three things: 1) explore additional tools and options to enhance the County's clearing and brush management efforts, conducting a feasibility analysis on modern best practices, including the use of livestock, such as goats and sheep for clearing overgrown vegetation; 2) conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all County property, particularly road rights-of-way, parks, and preserve lands for opportunities to apply additional clearing; and 3) explore ways to help residents clear their own properties through financial incentives or direct assistance in the disposal of brush and vegetation.

**RECOMMENDATION(S)  
SUPERVISOR JIM DESMOND**

1. Waive Board Policy A-72 Agenda and Related Process, Section 2.C.2.ii, which establishes required timelines for review when preparing a Board Letter.
2. Direct the CAO to explore options to enhance the County's clearing and brush management efforts and report back within 120 days, including conducting a feasibility analysis on modern best practices, including the use of livestock such as goats and sheep for clearing overgrown vegetation. Generally, this recommendation should include, but is not limited to:
  - a. Explore options to have the County directly assist interested private property owners clear their land. Examples might include the County performing or contracting for vegetation removal services, administering grants, or creating other financial incentives such as rebates.

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- b. Explore funding options, including grants, for the purchase of mobile above-ground vegetation incinerators, known in the fire industry as “air curtain burners.”
  - c. Study the costs and staffing needs for County Fire to create and host community vegetation burn events utilizing air curtain burners, as mentioned above.
  - d. Assess the availability of local ranchers or other businesses who perform brush clearing services and explore potential public-private partnership opportunities.
  - e. Coordinate with appropriate stakeholders, such as fire districts, agricultural members, state and federal wildlife agencies and others to ensure wildfire defensive strategies are aligned and mutually beneficial.
3. Direct the CAO to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of all County property, particularly road rights-of-way, parks, and preserve lands for opportunities to apply additional clearing and report back within 120 days. This should include, but is not limited to:
- a. Evaluate road rights-of-way, parks and preserve lands and identifying areas that could provide for new or enhanced clearing efforts to reduce fuels adjacent to or near fire-prone wildlands, especially when located near existing residential neighborhoods.
  - b. Look for update opportunities in the County’s Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) to better align conservation and brush management goals.
  - c. Coordinate with appropriate stakeholders, such as fire districts, agricultural members, state and federal wildlife agencies and others to ensure wildfire defensive strategies are aligned and mutually beneficial.

**EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The year-round threat of wildfires disproportionately impacts rural, low-income, and underserved communities in San Diego County where limited water infrastructure and resources heighten vulnerabilities. Enhancing fire preparedness through enhanced clearing and brush management ensures equitable protection for these communities which often face the greatest risks. By seeking to prioritize a proactive strategy such as clearing to slow or potentially stop a fire, today’s action addresses disparities in emergency response capabilities and promotes safety for all residents, including those in remote and historically under-resourced areas.

**SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

This proposed action contributes to the County of San Diego’s Sustainability Goal of protecting the health and well-being of all San Diegan residents. Enhancing public safety is of paramount priority for the County’s more vulnerable residents. In addition, the effective and deliberate use of livestock to clear land for defense against wildfires avoids the pollution that would otherwise be generated by traditional methods like mowing or applying herbicides. Livestock are a natural

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solution whose use would significantly align with the County's sustainability goals. Air curtain burners could be an effective tool to assist private property owners in the clearing and brush management efforts while potentially be more environmentally friendly than traditional methods of burning vegetation.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact associated with today's actions to direct staff to explore tools and options on clearing brush management and report back within 120 days. The report back will include financial impacts and staff requirements along with potential funding options, including the redirecting of current resources through the reduction or elimination of existing programs to implement any of the options approved by the Board in the report back. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration.

**BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

N/A

**ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

**BACKGROUND**

We must always be prepared for the real risk of wildfire in San Diego County. This includes having an effective clearing and brush management program in place. Proactive wildfire risk management is critical for reducing both the frequency and severity of wildfires, and one of the most proactive steps we can take as a region is to eliminate or significantly diminish the amount of overgrown vegetation in the wildland-urban interface areas (areas of transition from wilderness to developed land). When it comes to the County's clearing and brush management efforts, we should explore all available tools and options to enhance and bolster existing practices. One such tool contemplated in today's item includes employing the use of livestock to clear areas for defense against wildfires. Well-maintained areas (cleared of overgrown and dead brush) along County roads and throughout our park and preserve lands can help slow and contain future fires. Establishing new or enhancing existing brush management efforts on County land through the systematic use of livestock or other means is an effort worth exploring, and one that could be deployed strategically throughout the unincorporated areas to better disrupt the spread of fire in the wildland-urban interface. For homeowners and businesses in or near fire-prone areas in the unincorporated County, brush management plays vital role in creating defensible space around home and communities. By clearing flammable vegetation close to homes and other structures, we can significantly reduce the chances of a wildfire reaching and destroying lives and properties.

Overall, the goal of today's item is to highlight that proactive brush management done in the right areas is something we should take seriously to help lower the likelihood of cataclysmic damage in the event of a fire. The benefits of enhancing our existing efforts are many. Managed landscapes may become more resilient to the risk of diseases that can weaken plant life, which further exacerbates the problem by creating further wildfire fuels, and so on. By actively engaging in clearing and brush management, not only do we physically reduce potential fuels, but we also set

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an example for residents and stakeholders on the importance of wildfire risk reduction. Today's actions give us an opportunity to better educate and demonstrate for members of the public on the importance of clearing, which may inspire and empower individuals to want to better protect their properties and the broader community.

By exploring options to assist private properties in their land management efforts, we can potentially help eliminate much more fuel than would otherwise be achieved by managing County properties alone. However, the reality is that large amounts land in the unincorporated areas are privately owned. Private properties in the rural areas are often many acres in size and contain vast amounts of vegetation, and clearing of this nature often requires the use of expensive machinery or chemicals such as woodchippers, bulldozers, and herbicides. Not only that, but residents often have more vegetation than their organic waste bins can hold, making storing and disposing of cleared vegetation inconvenient, impractical or perhaps impossible. Newer technologies could be used by the County to assist and encourage rural residents in their vegetation management efforts. Utilized by the US Forrest Service, vegetation incinerators, or "air curtain burners" are self-contained industrial incineration devices that can be towed behind a truck. Air curtain burners burn organic waste at very high temperatures while a high-velocity air curtain is blown across to reduce smoke and emissions. Many models burn at a rate of 1 ton of waste an hour. Because of the unique burning process, this method of vegetation disposal could better align with the County's environmental goals as compared to traditional methods of burning vegetation and organic waste. The County could utilize air curtain burners through County Fire to assist residents in clearing their vegetation by providing a way for people to inexpensively to dispose of brush and vegetation. County Fire could host brush recycling events with air curtain burners akin to community recycling events for electronic waste. Under this idea, residents could either bring their vegetation (that they cleared themselves) to a central site in the community for disposal, or perhaps County Fire could schedule dates and times to meet residents on their property to perform the service.

Today's action will review and assess our preventive wildfire efforts through effective brush and vegetation management. Exploring all options and effective tools, such as livestock grazing and utilization of mobile above-ground air curtain burners will give the County a better sense of how to increase protection in the wildland-urban interface areas from the threat of wildfires. Ensuring County owned and managed land such as our parks and preserves are properly maintained can set an example for the community and protect our residents. Enabling and empowering residents of the unincorporated areas to better manage their private land can help the entire region be safer from wildfires.

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

Today's proposed action supports the Equity Initiative of the County of San Diego's 2024-2029 Strategic Plan by ensuring equitable fire service regionwide.

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Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Desmond", written in a cursive style.

JIM DESMOND  
Supervisor, Fifth District

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

N/A