

**COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO  
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
TUESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2025**

**MINUTE ORDER NO. 17**

**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 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.
  - 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 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

**ACTION:**

ON MOTION of Supervisor Desmond, seconded by Supervisor Montgomery Steppe, the Board of Supervisors took action as recommended.

AYES: Anderson, Lawson-Remer, Montgomery Steppe, Desmond

ABSENT: (District 1 Seat Vacant)

State of California)  
County of San Diego) §

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a full, true and correct copy of the Original entered in the Minutes of the Board of Supervisors.

ANDREW POTTER  
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors



Signed  
by Andrew Potter