

UCSF Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve Urgent Fire Safety Measures, Fall 2013

Questions & Answers

What work is UCSF conducting on Mount Sutro?

In late August and into September 2013, UC San Francisco is completing urgent fire safety measures in the Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve. This work will consist of creating a 100-foot zone of defensible space around structures, including campus buildings, water tanks and neighbors' homes, to reduce fire risk and to improve firefighters' effectiveness and safety in the case of a fire. The work will consist of removing trees less than six inches (6") in diameter, thinning shrubs and mowing non-woody perennial plants. Cut materials will be chipped and spread on site.

Why is UCSF proceeding with urgent fire safety measures in the Reserve?

Earlier this year, UCSF issued a Draft EIR on a plan to address the health and safety of the Reserve. During the Draft EIR's public comment period, several neighbors questioned the determination by professional foresters retained by UCSF that a fire hazard existed in the Reserve.

With fire season approaching, UCSF contacted the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) for an independent assessment of the Reserve. The SFFD responded to UCSF in writing on July 24, 2013, saying – in part – that, "SFFD has determined that 100 feet of fuel clearance for structures is required due to extra hazardous fire conditions." UCSF is proceeding with this work to address immediate fire safety and emergency concerns. This work is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and separate from the Mount Sutro Management Project.

How much of the Reserve will be impacted by the urgent fire safety measures?

Of the approximately 61-acre Reserve, 15.6 acres will be targeted for urgent fire safety work. This acreage includes the area around structures, including homes bordering the Reserve, as well as water tanks and their water pipes (to prevent them from melting in a fire). As a result of this work, UCSF projects the removal of approximately 1,250 trees (blue gum eucalyptus, black acacia and plum), all of which are less than 6" in diameter.

Where will the work take place?

The areas impacted by the urgent fire safety work are the UCSF Aldea Housing Complex, Surge/Woods Buildings, and water tanks, as well as roadside forest edges within 100 feet of structures along Christopher Drive, Crestmont Drive, Johnstone Drive, Koret Way, and Medical Center Way from Parnassus Avenue to Environmental Health and Safety Buildings.

Won't removing underbrush from parts of the forest decrease its ability to store moisture captured from the fog, thereby causing the forest to dry out and become more fire prone?

No, decreasing underbrush from parts of the forest will not make it more fire prone. While a forest captures water and shades the ground from the sun, it does not store moisture very well. Forests are composed of plants that are designed to absorb moisture from the soil and return it to the atmosphere. The urgent safety work will remove small trees and shrubs that act as a ladder to move a fire up into the canopy of the forest and will reduce the overall fuel near structures. It will also clear accumulated, dead material that is part of, or lodged in, living shrubs on the forest floor. Shrubs that are cut will re-sprout and support a greater percentage of living biomass that is less fire-prone.

I have trouble understanding how we can chip trees and other vegetation and leave it on the forest floor and — and at the same time — say we must remove "dead material . . . on the forest floor." How are the chips from the current work less of a fire hazard than dead stuff that is there

now?

There is a difference. The material that is chipped and left on the forest floor is shorter and in contact with the moist ground surface, so does not act as a fire ladder whereas the tall, layered and drier vegetation that we are moving does act as both a fire fuel and a ladder.

Does this work require an Environmental Impact Report?

These urgent fire safety measures are different and less extensive than the forest management plan analyzed in the Draft EIR, which UCSF made public in January 2013. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which requires state and local agencies to identify significant environmental impacts, provides an exemption for fuel management activities within 100 feet of a structure if the public agency having fire protection responsibility for the area has determined that 100 feet of fuel clearance is required due to extra hazardous fire conditions. The SFFD has made this determination. The planned urgent fire safety measures are therefore exempt from CEQA, so an EIR is not required.

UCSF's original plan called for the removal of trees smaller than 12" in diameter, but the new actions will remove trees smaller than 6" in diameter. Why the change?

The urgent fire safety work only addresses the most severe fire dangers and, therefore, focuses on trees and other vegetation adjacent to structures in the Reserve. UCSF consulted with an outside forester with expertise in firefighting and fire prevention, and he identified shrubs, non-woody perennial plants and trees up to 6 inches in diameter as the greatest hazard. The forester identified these trees as blue gum eucalyptus, black acacia and plum.

Will herbicides be used?

No, herbicides will not be used during this urgent fire safety work. UCSF will maintain the 100 feet of fuel clearance through regular, ongoing, budgeted maintenance work.

How long will the work take?

The urgent fire safety work will take approximately two weeks to complete.

What equipment is being used and will it be noisy?

The equipment used will include hand-held brushcutters, weed eaters, chainsaws and hand-fed chippers. The noise level will be approximately 100 decibels near workers.

Who is doing the work?

A contractor experienced in this type of work will perform it under the supervision of UCSF Facilities Services. The work will be conducted primarily during the workweek, Monday-Friday, with noisy work, including vehicle staging, commencing after 8 a.m. If work is done on Saturdays, anything at higher noise levels will commence after 9 a.m.

How long will parking be restricted and for how long?

Parking will be restricted in the vicinity of the work and likely only for the day of the actual work and to move equipment. Work adjacent to the roadways will be staggered in order to lessen the parking impact to the neighborhood.

Does this mean that UCSF is changing its fire protection work in the Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve?

Yes. UCSF is focusing its immediate efforts on the gravest dangers for the 400 residents on Mount Sutro, its neighbors and the 600-bed UCSF Medical Center. Separately, UCSF will continue discussions with the community on a long-range plan for maintenance of the Reserve. UCSF's top

priorities for the Reserve continue to be executing a fuel reduction program aimed at protecting the people and structures in the immediate vicinity of the Reserve and ensuring the safety of the many daily visitors who use the Reserve's trail system. As in the past, UCSF will work with the community to develop an ongoing program that balances fire safety with neighbors' concerns.

At a public meeting to be scheduled this fall, UCSF will update the community on the status of the Mount Sutro Management Project and the Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR). UCSF is committed to continued dialogue with the community about the larger project of managing the Reserve and identifying a plan that addresses long-term safety issues while also meeting neighbors' concerns.

What makes the Reserve a fire hazard? It appears damp and shrouded in fog much of the year, and some people even call it a cloud forest.

The forest located in the Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve is not a cloud forest. The moderate temperatures of San Francisco are neither tropical nor sub-tropical, which is the climate where cloud forests exist. Even with the dense fog that often blankets the Reserve, the area is comparatively dry due to the characteristics of the eucalyptus trees. Eucalyptus trees pull water from the soil, tying up the moisture in its roots. The forest in the Reserve is at risk of catching fire for this reason. In fact, over the last century, six wildfires have burned Mount Sutro, including one that burned 100 acres.

History also shows that the fog zone of the San Francisco Bay region is not immune to catastrophic wildfires. A pre-settlement fire history of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County documented that fires hot enough to scar Redwood trees occurred approximately every 25 years, so fires were not uncommon. More recently, the Bay Area coastal zone has suffered a number of catastrophic fires.

In the Oakland Tunnel Fire in October 1991, one of the major fuels was the blue gum eucalyptus, the same species present on Mount Sutro. The 1995 Vision Fire in Inverness, which consumed 14,000 acres, occurred in a dense fog zone very much like that of Mount Sutro. During the fire's peak, when Santa Ana-type winds blew from the north to the northeast, it ran at 1,000 acres per hour. In 2008 in Santa Cruz, a fire started along Highway 1 and quickly moved from grass to blue gum eucalyptus. The fire moved rapidly up the hills, destroying many homes and overwhelming firefighting efforts.

A running, high-intensity flame front relies only on relatively small fuels in two fuel classes: one-hour fuels and ten-hour fuels that can dry out within those short periods of hot, dry wind. A running fire takes advantage of fuels up to approximately the size of a thumb, or one inch in diameter. One-hour and ten-hour fuels are labeled as such because the internal moisture and temperature of plants adjust to weather conditions in just one to ten hours, a very short time frame. On those dates when the Tunnel, Vision and Santa Cruz fires burned, an ignition adjacent to Mount Sutro could have had the same result. In July 2008, when fires burned throughout California, San Francisco experienced almost two weeks of weather in which Mount Sutro could have burned with high intensity.

The California Department of Forestry has publicly stated that 2013 is one of the driest winters on record, with the lack of rain resulting in dry conditions across the state.

How can there be "extra hazardous" fire conditions in Mount Sutro Reserve when San Francisco is often not included in Cal Fire's Red Flag Warnings?

The issuance of a Red Flag Warning by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) is separate and distinct from the San Francisco Fire Department's determination of fire conditions in the Reserve. A Red Flag Warning – also known as a Fire Weather Warning -- is issued by the National Weather Service and is determined by the forecasted weather in a specific geographic area. A Red Flag Warning is not determined by the fuel conditions in a certain area or region.

Fire departments, such as [CAL FIRE](#), pass along the Red Flag Warning to landowners and the general public so they can exercise caution and take actions to reduce fire risk on their property, such as limiting its use or even closing it to visitors in the case of land that is generally open to the public.

The determination that the Reserve is an area of “extra hazardous” fire conditions is unrelated to a Red Flag Warning. The San Francisco Fire Department has the responsibility and oversight to assess the fire conditions in the Reserve because it is the agency responsible for fire protection in the Reserve. The fire department’s finding that “extra hazardous” fire conditions exist in the Reserve is based on the type of fuel in the Reserve, its arrangement and the assets at risk. A finding of “extra hazardous” fire conditions can exist in an area even though that area has not received a Red Flag Warning.

What other work should I expect to see this fall?

As part of its regular maintenance program, UCSF will continue to prune and remove hazardous trees, some larger than six inches in diameter, throughout the Reserve.

PG&E and the San Francisco Department of Public Works (DPW) also will be pruning and removing hazardous trees in and adjacent to the Reserve. PG&E will be working around power lines along the roadway on Clarendon Avenue up to the intersection of Christopher Drive, and DPW in the City-maintained areas that border the Reserve.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, please visit: <http://www.ucsf.edu/about/cgr/current-projects/mount-sutro-open-space-reserve>.