

OUTLINE

PORTOLA VALLEY WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE REPORT ON WILDFIRE MITIGATION PROGRAMS

This is a proposed outline for a report for the Portola Valley Town Council on potential Portola Valley Wildfire mitigation programs, funding sources, and factors to consider.

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1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

A. Goal

The goal of this report is to document the research of the Wildfire Preparedness Committee (WPC) on possible wildfire mitigation programs for Portola Valley. The report will be a resource for the Town Council, PV residents, and future WPC members.

B. History of this Proposal

The report will include a brief history of the WPC Finance and Insurance subcommittee's research on wildfire mitigation programs and possible funding sources. This will include The WPC Finance and Insurance subcommittee creation in Spring 2022, in part, to identify possible funding for wildfire mitigation programs. Also discussed will be the Town Council's request for WPC to identify a wildfire mitigation program that "makes sense for Portola Valley." A description of the actions taken by the WPC Finance and Insurance subcommittee will include the research the subcommittee performed, and their October 2022 10-YR wildfire mitigation proposal entitled, *Fighting the Ember Storm Together*. The report will also include a summary of prior discussions and activities concerning Portola Valley wildfire mitigation programs.

2. WILDFIRE MITIGATION IN PORTOLA VALLEY: UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

This section will cover key concepts that the reader needs to understand Portola Valley's wildfire risk and the many factors that should be considered while choosing a wildfire mitigation program.

- Are we doing enough? A comparison of what Portola Valley spends on wildfire mitigation compared to its neighbor, Woodside.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of current wildfire mitigation programs.
- Portola Valley's risk factors including information found in fire maps and Safety Element.
- Portola Valley's fire insurance premium changes.
- The Woodside Fire Protection District's (WFPD) role in wildfire preparedness and prevention including educational programs, home inspections, and enforcement.
- Previous Portola Valley discussions about wildfire mitigation programs and funding.
- Funding considerations, including town budget, Federal and State grant potential, and a possible town or district wide ballot measure.
- A brief history of wildfire building codes and fire ordinances.

3. TYPES OF WILDFIRE MITIGATION PROGRAMS

A review of the different types of wildfire mitigation programs which California towns, like Portola Valley, have implemented. When discussing the following programs, the report will emphasize the needs of Portola Valley, the benefits, and limitations of each grant type and how a similar program might be implemented in Portola Valley. Funding sources for each program type will also be explored.

A. Homeowner grants

The town awards money to a homeowner, which covers 100% of the fire mitigation costs up to a not to exceed amount. These grants are flexible and grant eligibility can be modified over time. They often target low-income household because there are no matching funds required.

Town of Fairfax vegetation management grant¹

The grant offers up to \$1,000 to low-income households and seniors for wildfire mitigation work involving vegetation. It also offers up to \$500 to any Fairfax resident, regardless of income status, for the same type of work.

Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District vegetation management grant²

This grant provides up to \$600 for defensible space work identified by their Fire District during a home fire risk assessment report. It should be noted that getting a home fire risk assessment report is a proven call to action for homeowners.

El Dorado County tree grant for seniors³

This town received a state grant⁴ of approximately \$200,000 to help senior citizens remove dead and dying trees from their property. The resident must be 60 years of age or older, own the property, and have incomes at or below 60% of the County's area median income. Applications are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, which means there are limited funds available.

B. Matching fund homeowner grants

These grants match some percentage of what a homeowner has spent on specified fire mitigation. These grants usually include a "cap" or not to exceed amount. This type of grant is flexible and allows a town to change eligibility requirements over time. Matching fund grants rarely assist low-income households, since the funds required to match the grant can be difficult to afford. These grants are also expensive. With a budget

¹ "Vegetation Management Grant." Town of Fairfax, 31 Aug. 2021, <https://www.townoffairfax.org/vegetation-management-grant/>.

² "Grants and Assistance Programs." Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District, <https://shfpd.specialdistrict.org/grants-and-assistance-programs>.

³ <https://www.edcgov.us/County%20Press%20Releases/Pages/Grants-to-Limited-Income-Seniors-for-Hazardous-Tree-Removal-Still-Available.aspx>

⁴ Grant from the California Department of Forestry (CALFIRE) and Fire Protection State Responsibility Area Fire Prevention Fund (SRAFPF) and Tree Mortality (TM)

of \$250,000, a grant that provides \$2,000 in matching funds could fund as few as 125 homeowners per year. It is also not clear that matching fund programs increase fire mitigation work performed within a community.

Woodside's Defensible Space and Home Hardening Matching Fund⁵

This program began in 2018. The grant amount and the type of wildfire mitigation allowed have changed over the years.⁶ The grant has always offered to match 50% of what homeowners spent on wildfire mitigation up to a certain amount. The program started with a budget close to \$236,000, a grant award of up to \$5,000, and the funds were awarded only for only vegetation management work.⁷ In 2020, wildfire mitigation eligible for matching funds expanded to include ignition resistant roofs, ember resistant vents and installing auto gas shutoffs. By 2023, the program's budget was \$350,000 with a smaller grant award of up to \$3,000. In 2023, they listed the grant, for the first time, as being accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, which means there are limited funds available. Woodside claims they have eliminated \$4 million in fuels since 2018.⁸

Los Trancos & Vista Verde Program for Defensible Space⁹

This program pays 50% of specified wildfire mitigation costs up to \$5,000. The following work is eligible for reimbursement: ignition resistant roofs, exterior walls and/or siding, ember resistant vents, attached structures [including decks], hazardous trees/tree-limbing, brush/ladder fuel mitigation, and automatic gas shut off valve additions. The WFPD manages this program. When the program started in 2016, the budget was \$45,000. By 2022, the budget had grown to \$100,000.¹⁰

C. Discretionary fund

When an entity is given a budget to perform projects as needed. This type of program is flexible and can be created to give as little or as much authority to the entity awarding the money as desired.

Portola Valley Ranch fire mitigation project

This discretionary grant has been very successful and is extremely popular with the PV Ranch community. The Ranch Board gave the Ranch manager a budget and general guideline on how we could award matching fund grants to Ranch homeowners for wildfire mitigation work. The manager has asked residents to work with their neighbors

⁵ "Defensible Space and Home Hardening Matching Fund Program." *Defensible Space and Home Hardening Matching Fund Program* | Town of Woodside California, <https://www.woodsidetown.org/community/defensible-space-and-home-hardening-matching-fund-program>.

⁶ "Adopted Budget 2022-23." Adopted Budget 2022-23 | Town of Woodside California, <https://www.woodsidetown.org/finance/adopted-budget-2022-23>.

⁷ "Basic Financial Statements." Basic Financial Statements | Town of Woodside California, <https://www.woodsidetown.org/finance/basic-financial-statements>.

⁸ "Town of Woodside 2022-2023 Budget Worksheet." Town of Woodside.

⁹ Webmaster, XMR Fire. "Los Trancos & Vista Verde Incentive Program for Defensible Space." WOODSIDE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT | Serving Woodside, Portola Valley, Emerald Hills, Ladera, Los Trancos, Skyline, and Viste Verde, <https://www.woodsidefire.org/prevention/los-trancos-vista-verde-defensible-space>.

¹⁰ Town of Portola Valley Ad Hoc Wildfire Preparedness Committee. <https://www.portolavalley.net/home/showpublisheddocument/13708/637304194983800000>.

and to suggest projects that would make their collective properties safer from wildfire. The PV Ranch matches up to 50% of mitigation costs. The Ranch manager also hires the contractor and oversees the work. The report will discuss the possibility of Portola Valley setting up this type of fund to be used by the town manager or WFPD as needed. WFPD could identify high impact fire mitigation projects within PV. The money could be used to assist low-income households. Goals, limits, and oversight could be specified as desired.

D. Enforcement

Enforcement is by far, the most effective fire mitigation program that a town can implement. A study by the FireSafe Council of Oakland on defensible space found that, after the first correctly implemented enforcement cycle, 90-100% of parcels stay in compliance with local fire code. However, to be effective, the program must include 3 pillars or components: targeted outreach that maximizes voluntary compliance; active participation from the community to identify parcels that are out of compliance; and strict enforcement. This includes home inspections, re-inspections, penalties, abatement, and collection which might include billing, taxes, or liens. The study also discusses the need for abatement collection protection for low-income households or qualified seniors.¹¹ The WFPD oversees all enforcement activities in the fire district. The report will review this study and discuss how the WFPD's enforcement program follows or deviates from the Oakland study's "3 pillars."

Enforcement is an expensive fire mitigation program with high overhead costs including inspectors, vehicles, equipment costs such as software and iPads, clerical staff, and abatement costs. However, the cost of an enforcement program can decrease over time and how and when inspections occur can also reduce overhead.¹²

4. FIRE MITIGATION GOALS, GRANTS AND BUDGETS

- Discuss how setting priorities and goals can help focus wildfire mitigation discussions and assist with grant writing.
- Discuss the importance of creating a District California Protection Plan
- Grant writers.
- Discuss what grants Portola Valley might be eligible to receive and how we can improve our chances of getting a grant.

¹¹ Oakland Firesafe Council. https://oaklandfiresafecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/OFSC_2019-Defensible-Space-Study.pdf.

¹² Oakland Firesafe Council. https://oaklandfiresafecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/OFSC_2019-Defensible-Space-Study.pdf.

5. 10-YR WPC WILDFIRE MITIGATION PROPOSAL

A. Research

In Spring 2022, the Town Council requested that the WPC Finance and Insurance subcommittee research a wildfire mitigation program that “makes sense for Portola Valley.” The subcommittee responded by spending 6 months to research these questions and in Winter 2022, presented a 10-YR fire mitigation program entitled *Fighting the Ember Storm Together*.

The program would “make sense” for Portola Valley for the following reasons:

- The 10-YR goals were chosen by reviewing both the goals of the Portola Valley Town Council and the Woodside Fire Protection District. The goals were as follows:
 - Defensible space created on all private property in 10-YR.
 - Ember resistant vents and roofs are installed on all homes in 10-YR.
 - Residents informed on how to defend against an ember storm in 10-YR.
 - Every parcel in town part of a Firewise community in 10-YR
- It made financial sense.
 - It is a low-cost program with a budget of less than \$100,000 for first 2 years of implementation.
 - As the Right of Way program experienced cost reduction, money would be diverted to the *Fighting the Ember Storm Together* program.
 - Because of the way the program was developed, there was a reasonable chance that Federal or State grant money would fund a program expansion in the future.
 - Because the program focused on increasing Firewise communities within Portola Valley, it would lower homeowner fire insurance rates.
 - The program was best use of Portola Valley’s limited funds.
 - The program leverages Portola Valley’s vibrant volunteer community
 - Every homeowner could participate in program.
 - Low overhead
 - Multiple Federal and State agencies encourage Firewise, increasing the chances of Portola Valley getting Federal and State grants in the future.
 - It creates communication conduits which would help educate residents about the danger from wildfire, how to lower their insurance premiums, and how to stay safe in a wildfire.

B. Fighting the Ember Storm Together

The program consisted of three distinct components: a homeowner grant, a communications component, and a toolkit for homeowners.

Empowering Our Firewise Community

The Empowering Our Firewise Community homeowner grant is a matching grant and intended to encourage homeowners to create Firewise communities. In addition, the grant would empower the Firewise Committees by making them the gatekeeper for the homeowner grants.

- The Homeowner grant consisted of:
 - A one-time \$1,500 grant for residents in a Firewise community: A one-time grant reduces town expenditures while still creating an incentive to become part of a Firewise community.
 - Homeowner must match 50% of the grant amount.
 - Homeowner must have had a WFPD inspection within the last year.
 - Grant applications are bundled and submitted by the Firewise committee. The report will go into detail why this keeps the over-head cost of the grant low.
 - Town provides \$3,000/ no match grant for low-income households. This is vital since low-income households cannot afford to match a \$1,500 grant. What is considered low income would be discussed in the report.
- The grant was designed to be cost-effective.
 - Cost is spread over 10 years.
 - Currently few homes qualify for grant, therefore low startup costs.
 - By reducing the eligible residents to receive the grant could lower cost further.
 - Reduces staff time and overhead costs because Firewise Committee reviews grants and bundles them.
- Promoting Firewise has community benefits.
 - Creates a communication conduit to residents through the Firewise Committees.
 - Creates a focal point for community home hardening projects.
- Financial Benefits
 - A Firewise centered program may attract State or Federal grant revenue for WFPD and Portola Valley
 - Insurance premium benefits since Firewise communities receive insurance discounts.

Communication component

This component focuses on coordinating and focusing town and district wide communications to educate and assist homeowners. The report would include a section on possible ways to bring together these teams and work together on common messaging. Team members would include:

- Wildfire Preparedness Committee

- Wildfire Preparedness Fair-current
- Weekly wildfire tips-current
- Firewise chats-possible
- Support residents in the changing insurance market
- Understanding new regulations and fire ordinances
- Investigate new ways to ensure homes are ember safe.
- WPV-READY
- Emergency Preparedness Committee
- Conservation Committee

Wildfire Preparedness Committee tool kit for homeowners

The toolkit would focus on programs or information that make it easier for homeowners to take fire mitigation action.

- R4W Sprint or similar programs: Programs which offer easy and low-cost ways to jump-start fire mitigation in a neighborhood.
- Firewise Committees startup costs or annual cost grant: This small grant reduces the burden placed on the Firewise committee members, who currently spend their own money for expenses incurred by the Firewise Committee.
 - Up to \$10 per home in each Firewise community.
 - Mailings, printing, and event costs.
- Support home hardening solutions
 - Have a physical demonstration site for how to harden existing decks or how to install ember resistant vents.
 - Arrange discounts for residents for home hardening projects.
 - Contractor and manufacturer information.
 - Assist residents with understanding building codes.

6. WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

This section may or may not exist in the final report. After the report is reviewed by the WPC, the committee will decide if they wish to advise the Town Council on a direction or recommended fire mitigation program.