



## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 2021-0150, **Version:** 1

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**To:** Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

**Department or Agency Name(s):** County Administrator's Office

**Staff Name and Phone Number:** Christel Querijero 565-7071, Yvonne Shu 565-1739

**Vote Requirement:** Majority

**Supervisorial District(s):** Countywide

**Title:**

Findings from the Vegetation Management Policy and Planning Group Discussions Convened by Berkeley Law's Center for Law, Energy and the Environment (CLEE), and Consideration of Vegetation Management Allocations from the PG&E Settlement Funding

**Recommended Action:**

Receive findings from the vegetation management policy and planning group discussions convened by Berkeley Law's Center for Law, Energy and the Environment (CLEE), and consider vegetation management allocations from the PG&E Settlement Funding

**Executive Summary:**

The Board of Supervisors allocated \$25 million from the PG&E settlement toward vegetation management on October 6, 2020. At the December 15, 2020 Board meeting, staff presented feedback and leading ideas for the vegetation management allocation, resulting from six weeks of internal discussions and community outreach. Although no allocations from the \$25 million were made in December, your Board approved the use of additional PG&E settlement money for policy planning support discussion groups, in addition to expansion and outreach education of the fuel mapper decision support tool. This item provides an update on the fuel mapper decision support tool and the County Wildfire Protection Plan, and a summary of the policy and planning discussion groups.

**Discussion:**

**PG&E Allocation Summary**

Litigation by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors against Pacific Gas & Electric to recover damages related to the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires (2017 Fires) resulted in an allocation of \$149.3 million. On August 11, 2020, your Board received background information on the fiscal impact and damages that the Sonoma County entities incurred from the 2017 Fires. As part of this discussion, your Board directed staff to accept input from the community and to return to the Board with that feedback for consideration of the allocation of the settlement funds into general expenditure categories. On October 6, 2020, staff presented a summary of the community feedback for the Board's consideration, and your Board allocated \$25 million from the settlement for vegetation management efforts.

At the December 15, 2020 Board meeting, staff presented feedback and leading ideas resulting from six weeks of meetings and discussions on vegetation management with County department/agency stakeholders and community members. Although no allocations from the \$25 million for vegetation management were made at

that meeting, your Board approved the use of additional PG&E settlement money for policy planning support (\$70,000), in the form of two discussion groups convened by CLEE, expansion of the fuel mapper decision support tool to landscape scale (\$1,000,000), and outreach/education for the roll-out of the parcel-scale tool countywide (\$600,000). Additionally, your Board approved \$59,070,000 for transportation and communications infrastructure, utilities undergrounding, and emergency preparedness at the December meeting.

<b>PG&amp;E Settlement</b>	<b>149,300,000</b>	
Board-approved allocations		
Funds allocated at FY 20-21 budget hearings	26,800,000	Sept. 2020
Renewal Enterprise District/Housing	10,000,000	10/06/20
Vegetation Management	25,000,000	10/06/20
Transportation and Communications Infrastructure, Utilities Undergrounding, Emergency Preparedness	59,070,000	12/15/20
Fuels Map Decision Support Tool	1,600,000	12/15/20
Policy Planning Support (CLEE groups)	70,000	12/15/20
<b>Balance</b>	<b>26,760,000</b>	

### Fuel Mapper Decision Support Tool Update

On 12/15/20, your Board approved the use of additional PG&E settlement money to support outreach/education for the roll-out of the parcel-scale wildfire fuel mapper countywide (\$600,000) and to expand the fuel mapper decision support tool to landscape scale (\$1,000,000).

The parcel-scale wildfire fuel mapper, a collaborative project of the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE), Pepperwood, and Tukman Geospatial, with support from PG&E, the Thornton Foundation, and CAL FIRE, provides Sonoma County landowners of properties greater than three acres information to better understand fire fuels on their land and resources on how to reduce fire risk. The mapper evaluates unique landscape and fuel elements specific to a selected property parcel or watershed and increases the landowner’s understanding of how to protect the landscape. Between March and June 2021, UCCE plans to “soft” launch the fuel mapper tool on 5-10 properties in Sonoma County, create educational videos to assist landowners, work with Circuit Riders to provide training, and gather feedback from parcel owners on potential changes needed to the fuel mapper tool.

Since December, Sonoma Water staff have taken steps toward developing the landscape scale decision support tool, including putting together a team and developing scopes of work and a schedule. It is anticipated that the prioritization tool will be ready in one year, with testing in early 2022. Sonoma Water staff are in the process of forming a technical work group and stakeholder user group for advice and input throughout the process. Sonoma Water is planning to return to your Board in May 2021 with related agreements and an update on their progress.

### Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) Update

As discussed in the December 15, 2020 Board summary, the County vegetation management working group agreed to a set of working principles to guide discussion related to the \$25 million vegetation allocation, including using the hazard reduction priority list from 2016 Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The CWPP priorities were themselves the result of collaboration with a variety of agencies and community

members. Even though these priorities were developed prior to the series of wildfires that have devastated the county since 2017, they are still relevant today.

The priorities from the CWPP are as follows and are not listed in rank order:

- Projects that help Wildland-Urban Interface residents reduce fire fuels in the defensible space zone of homes, and along important egress and access routes.
- Projects that help residents reduce structural ignitability.
- Projects that serve to educate residents about fire, fire risks, vegetation management, ecosystem and forest health, structural vulnerability, and how to most efficiently reduce risks.
- Projects that increase community safety through planning.
- Strategic fuel breaks that can help firefighters stop the advance of wildfires, thus protecting homes, communities and natural resources. In addition to reducing wildfire threats, fuel breaks should also serve to improve ecosystem health.
- Projects that help highly motivated and organized community groups achieve their fire safety goals.
- Projects that consider demographic trends of residents such as age, language and disabilities.
- Projects that allow large land holding managers and nearby residents to achieve mutually acceptable strategies for fuels management.
- Projects that improve conditions and health in a variety of fire-prone ecosystems, especially in areas impacted by tree diseases, pathogens or insects, or in areas where native species are at risk because of changing conditions.
- Projects that address fire-prone invasive plant species including but not limited to gorse, broom, and eucalyptus.
- Projects that make use of woody biomass and other emerging technologies.
- Projects that support and aid fire agencies in achieving their missions.

The 2016 CWPP is currently being updated, with funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. The updated CWPP is expected to contain similar priorities and will provide increased data about fuels and mitigation strategies for wildland areas. The update includes development of a Wildfire Hazard Index, which is expected to launch in March 2021. The public engagement aspect of the CWPP process is off to a strong start, with 110 individuals participating in the public kick-off meeting on February 16, 2021. Extensive collaboration from all County stakeholders who are concerned about wildfire is a critical component of the CWPP. Digital Mapping Solutions (contractor), Fire Safe Sonoma, and County staff are actively enacting multiple outreach strategies to engage the public in the process.

### **Revisiting Leading Ideas from the County and Community**

At the December 15, 2020 Board meeting, staff shared a list of leading ideas, drawn from community and County department/agency feedback (Attachment 1). Of those ideas, the following are similar to those derived from the policy discussion groups, detailed in the next section:

- Staffing; vegetation management lead: This lead would provide central coordination, outreach and education, and leadership of vegetation management initiatives across departments/agencies and in coordination with community partners, such as Sonoma RCD or Fire Safe Sonoma. This lead entity would also be responsible for lobbying and legislative efforts for County vegetation management priorities and applying for related funding.
- Implementation of vegetation management projects in recently burned areas: Taking advantage of

terrain that has already been burned affords the opportunity to continue vegetation management of that particular area, including reducing the potential for a severe reburn and ensuring tree regeneration. Minimizing erosion and retaining enough forest structure for wildlife are additional concerns of recently burned areas, which have occurred across County Regional Parks and on Ag + Open Space lands.

- Funding for youth crews: Sonoma Water, Regional Parks, Transportation & Public Works, and UC Cooperative Extension have hired youth crews to conduct vegetation management through organizations such as Youth Ecology Corps (administered through Human Services Department), Conservation Corps North Bay, and Circuit Rider (Center for Social and Environmental Stewardship). These programs provide paid work experience and a pathway to move into regular jobs at the County or at local companies.
- Outreach and education: Clear, consistent guidance on vegetation management and effective communication of that guidance is cited as a consistent need at the local, community level.

In addition, pre-award selection is anticipated in June 2021 for Permit Sonoma's \$50 million grant application to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program. If awarded, this grant would require a 25%, or \$12.5 million local match. The BRIC proposal consists of a multi-variate, landscape approach to fire mitigation that will help move residents towards generational change in how homes and wildlands adapt to future wildfire.

### Findings from the CLEE groups

UC Berkeley School of Law's Center for Law, Energy & the Environment (CLEE) organized and facilitated two discussions to identify top priorities for the \$25 million in PG&E settlement funds allocated for vegetation management activities. The first group, comprised of state-level experts, was held virtually on February 17, 2021; a convening of local experts and stakeholders was held on February 24, 2021. CLEE also sent out participant surveys and conducted outreach before and after both events.

Group participants outlined a multi-faceted set of principles to guide future fund allocations, including:

- Prioritizing vulnerable communities (such as lower-income residents, renters, and those most affected by air quality impacts), critical infrastructure, and special assets
- Incorporating and supporting robust public outreach, engagement, and education at every step
- Accomplishing multiple forest and ecosystem health objectives by performing high-quality, science-based treatments
- Recognizing effective vegetation management requires continuous, dedicated implementation
- Leveraging by seeking other funding opportunities and creating sustainable funding mechanisms

Participants identified top priorities for the funds, including targets for immediate spending on high-priority vegetation management activities and objectives for long-term program development and sustained spending. Priorities and recommendations coalesced into the following categories:

- Centralizing governance and stakeholder coordination: Governance capacity will be essential for administration of settlement funds and of future funding sources, coordinating stakeholder participation, communication with the public, spearheading outreach and education, compiling the latest research, and leading future funding efforts.
- Expanding community outreach and education: Participants consistently identified the need for additional outreach, information sharing and exchanges with residents and workers on wildfire safety

and vegetation management. This could include targeted community outreach, a focus on equity-focused, bilingual outreach and partnerships with tribes and other indigenous organizations.

- Conducting immediate vegetation management activities: Participants broadly agreed that approximately one third, or \$8 million of the initial \$25 million allocation, should be directed to high-priority, near-term vegetation management activities in high-risk areas and near key ecosystems. The full report (Attachment 2) provides suggested award criteria, project zones, and project types.
- Maintaining relevant and up-to-date data sources for planning and evaluation: Ongoing and predictable funding for consistent data collection would enable development of an implementation tracking system for these efforts to measure progress towards meeting Sonoma County's vegetation management needs.
- Leveraging long-term financial sustainability: Potential opportunities for investment include a revolving fund, a financing district, Forest Resilience Bonds, sales or parcel tax revenue measure, biomass facility/use feasibility study and contract grazing.
- Building the local workforce: The County will need a skilled and dedicated workforce equipped to meet the immediate and long-term vegetation management need. There is also an important opportunity to link workforce development with the advancement of equity, by providing workforce training and long-term career growth opportunities to disadvantaged communities.

Significantly, establishing governance is a vital first step to coordinating countywide vegetation management activities and to managing the funding for the future, and more immediately, to help administer the vegetation management funds. A single entity, solely focused on vegetation management in the county, would begin to position the region for ongoing success and would be a resource for the community, non-governmental organizations, and even County departments.

The recommendation that one-third of the \$25 million, or \$8.3 million, be allocated to near-term vegetation management activities is in concurrence with community and County feedback, especially as it relates to recently burned areas and expanding and supporting vegetation management needs in the community. The urgency to accomplish vegetation management activity ahead of the 2021 fire season will require both governance/staffing and consensus on the process and criteria for the selection community-based efforts.

The remaining two-thirds, or \$16.6 million, would then be leveraged over a longer timeframe of 10 years, with a goal of creating a lasting funding mechanism for vegetation management. Suggested areas of investment include governance, data/research, workforce development, and measures to sustain funding, which are included in more detail in the full report.

These principles and categories gleaned from the discussion groups validate previous County and community stakeholder discussions and acknowledge the local expertise in Sonoma County.

### **Next Steps for Consideration**

Should the Board be ready to move forward, staff recommends that the Board consider taking the following, immediate actions for the \$8.3 million:

1. Establish an interim group that would facilitate allocating funds for near-term projects, with proposed representation from Regional Parks, Sonoma Water, Permit Sonoma, Ag + Open Space, UC Cooperative Extension, County Counsel, and the County Administrator's Office. Staff also recommends inviting

representatives from CAL FIRE, Fire Safe Sonoma, and the Regional Climate Protection Authority to be a part of this interim governance group. A long-term governance structure would then be developed for consideration in January 2022.

2. Authorize staff and/or the interim governance group to establish a streamlined process for submission, evaluation and award of proposals for near-term projects, and delegate authority to this group to disburse funding as soon as possible, and to the degree possible, ahead of the 2021 fire season. Ag + Open Space, with its existing capability of disbursing funds, could serve as the interim or even long-term resource for the funds disbursement function, after determination of near-term projects is made by the governance group.

Assuming a governance structure is in place, staff recommends that your Board consider the following elements for immediate vegetation management activities:

- a. Implementing projects in high priority areas: County departments and agencies have previously discussed the notion of “high priority areas” and have agreed (with support from community stakeholders), to use the CWPP hazard reduction priority list as a guide when prioritizing projects. CLEE has also provided suggested criteria for selection of these types of projects.
  - b. Outreach and education: Clear, consistent guidance on vegetation management and effective communication of that guidance is cited as a consistent need at the local, community level. While your Board previously approved additional PG&E funding for outreach related to the parcel-level, decision support tool, County departments/agencies and community groups have a need to bolster their outreach and information-sharing, and the community is hungry for this information and guidance.
  - c. Community grant allocation: Community organizations are actively conducting vegetation management activities, and an allocation toward a community “bucket” would enable them to expand those programs and/or potentially create new ones. With a governing group that could evaluate simple proposals in the near-term, these community organizations could make a difference ahead of the 2021 fire season. The governance group would evaluate proposals for the community grant allocation piece.
3. Allocate \$660,000 for a three-year coordinator position to provide support related to vegetation management efforts. Staff will return to your Board as soon as feasible with a full job description and recommendations for where the position should reside.
  4. Allocate \$1.5 million to hire a CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) consultant to develop a county-wide program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that would streamline environmental reviews for similar vegetation management activities or geographies. This was one of the leading ideas from the community and County feedback in December 2020 and remains a priority, due the amount of time required for such a review, and once completed, would enable faster implementation of vegetation management activities. This is a necessary step to move ahead with large-scale vegetation and/or forest management in the county. Permit Sonoma would be the lead department for this process.

**Prior Board Actions:**

10/6/20 Allocation of \$25M from the PG&E settlement for vegetation management

12/15/20 Received County and community feedback on vegetation management priorities; allocated \$70,000 for CLEE groups and \$1.6M for expansion of the fuel mapper decision support tool to landscape scale (\$1,000,000), and outreach/education for the roll-out of the parcel-scale decision support tool countywide (\$600,000)

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 20-21 Adopted</b>	<b>FY 21-22 Projected</b>	<b>FY 22-23 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested			
<b>Total Expenditures</b>			
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
<b>Total Sources</b>			

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

<b>Staffing Impacts:</b>			
<b>Position Title (Payroll Classification)</b>	<b>Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)</b>	<b>Additions (Number)</b>	<b>Deletions (Number)</b>

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

**Attachments:**

Attachment 1: Leading Ideas from December 2020

Attachment 2: CLEE report

Note: supplemental information will be forthcoming and will be uploaded by March 18<sup>th</sup>

**Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:**