



Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

See a sample reprint in PDF format.

Order a reprint of this article now

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA | May 8, 2013, 4:04 p.m. ET

Cutbacks in Chipping Service Raise Alarm

Budget Squeeze Worries Safety Officials as Wildfire Season Is Off to Early Start

By JIM CARLTON

LEXINGTON HILLS—A California brush-chipping program that helps homeowners clear fire-prone vegetation from their properties is undergoing steep budget cuts. This comes as the wildfire season in the Bay Area has gotten off to an unusually early start.

The free service, which grinds up branches and other vegetation that residents stack up on the street, has been in place in many parts of the state since 2007. Public-safety officials credit it with helping residents of wildland areas like this Santa Cruz Mountains community prevent the spread of fire. But the program, which is largely funded by federal grants and local donations, has been hit by federal budget cuts in the past three years, and that has damped its effectiveness, public-safety officials say.



Allan Thompson

Trees and other brush are churned into chips on Old Logging Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains this spring.

The Santa Clara County FireSafe Council, for example, has seen its federal funding fall 58% to \$128,200 this year from a peak of \$306,286 in 2010, resulting in brush-chipping work falling to 521 acres from 871 acres over the same period, estimates Allan Thompson, treasurer of the group. The council is a nonprofit made up of smaller fire-safety groups, such as the South Santa Clara County FireSafe Council.

Mr. Thompson says his council, which also receives matching local funds, no longer has money to remove trees afflicted with Sudden Death Oak syndrome and likely faces more service reductions. "Next year, we'll have to cut down more on the chipping, and that will be

bad," he says.

Meanwhile, two consecutive winters of below-normal precipitation in the state have left vegetation tinder dry, prompting the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, to ramp up staffing in Southern California and the Bay Area in mid-April—weeks ahead of when the fire season typically starts in late May and June. An outbreak of blazes last week in Napa and Sonoma counties briefly threatened homes.

Following disastrous infernos such as the 1991 Oakland Hills fire that destroyed nearly 4,000

homes, state officials have been warning residents of fire-prone areas to keep excessive vegetation at least 30 feet away from homes.

The California Fire Safe Council, a nonprofit safety advocacy group with state, federal and private partners, since 2002 has distributed federal grants from the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies to hundreds of local fire-safety groups in the Bay Area and elsewhere, to help pay for work including disposal of brush. Some of the groups started doing more chipping work around 2007, and for ones like the Santa Clara County council, that is where they spend most of their money, Mr. Thompson says.

But federal budget cuts have reduced the amount of grants the state council has to disperse to \$6.2 million this year from a peak of about \$23 million in 2010, hurting the fire prevention efforts across California, says Pat Kidder, chairman of the Sacramento-based statewide council.

The council had to turn down \$12.3 million, or 64% of grant requests from local fire-safety groups this year, compared with a rejection rate of about 40% three years ago, Mr. Kidder adds. Considering that wildfires can cause hundreds of millions in property damage, the cutbacks don't make fiscal sense, he says.



Contra Costa Times/Zuma Press

A scene from 1991, when a wildfire sent Oakland Hills residents fleeing from their homes.

"The [local fire safety] councils don't get enough credit for the money they're saving, as well as the fires they are preventing all over the state," Mr. Kidder says.

The California fire-prevention program used to get funds from "many" federal sources, but is down to only the U.S. Forest Service, says Larry Chambers, spokesman for the agency in Washington. "We do provide priority funding to California for fire safe council activities, and it is the only state that receives such funding," Mr. Chambers says.

Officials of the Bureau of Land Management, which has also provided some funding in the past but not this year, say budget cuts that took effect this year because of Congress's sequestration deal may result in even fewer funds for the fire safety program. "We'll still stay actively engaged with the council and help in any way we can," says Doran Sanchez, a BLM spokesman in Sacramento.

In the hills above Morgan Hill recently, Battalion Chief Brandon Leitzke of Cal Fire drove through a rural neighborhood where most of the homes sat on closely pruned lots. "This creates defensible space," he says

For many homeowners, the chipping program has made it easier to dispose of debris by grinding tree limbs and other wood scrap into tiny pieces that are strewn in the countryside where they no longer pose a fire threat. Like many parts of the Bay Area, increased restrictions on burning the debris have made that less of an option, while rising fuel costs have made hauling it to a dump harder, says June Salsbury, an area manager with the Santa Clara County council.

"We used to burn, but it's hard to find a day to burn," says Carina Walsh, 48, a respiratory therapist, after a crew late last month chipped piles of oak limbs and other debris that she and her husband, John, cleared on their 3.6-acre property in Lexington Hills, above Los Gatos. "So this [chipping] works great."

On that day, a four-man crew used a Vermeer BC 1800 chipper to dispose of brush at 22 homes, many situated along winding, narrow roads. "It's dangerous, but we take a lot of care," says crew foreman Antonio Mauricio as the men fed tree limbs and branches into a machine that spat out a cloud of chips into the adjacent forest.

The work is messy and time-consuming, but Mr. Thompson and other council members say it is vital to protecting the community. Pointing down a mountainside dotted with timber and homes, he says that without providing these fire breaks, a wildfire could spread unimpeded.

"What you're really doing here is saying, don't let a fire grow, because it could go to downtown Los Gatos," he says.

Write to Jim Carlton at jim.carlton@wsj.com

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com