

Fire Safety and Nature in a New Hillside Natural Area Plan: Jan. 4, 2024, input from stakeholder [Friends of Five Creeks \(F5C\)](#) for a draft Hillside Natural Area Fire Resilience and Forest Conservation Management Plan, as part of public comment scheduled to close Jan. 5. [Six slides illustrating some points below are here](#).

This document centers on how to achieve the goal stated in consultants' slide presentation at Public Workshop 1: **"An updated plan is needed that will address and balance fire resilience with native forest conservation and will help secure grant funding."** California's 2021 Wildfire and Forestry Resilience Action Plan (<https://wildfiretaskforce.org/action-plan/>, 2021, p. 13) points out specifically that **"Healthy forests include woodlands, grasslands, chaparral, shrublands, and related vegetation types."**

We agree that **the most pressing priority probably is removing tall, highly flammable groves of eucalyptus and pines**. We understand the city's eagerness to obtain permits in what may be a short-lived window of grant opportunity.

However, **El Cerrito should not miss this opportunity to take low-cost steps to plan for other aspects of fire-hazard reduction while protecting and nurturing varied plants and wildlife and increasing human enjoyment, including collaboration with citizens.**

This long document has three sections, organized around agreement, differences, or supplements to the thoughtful and detailed Nov. 12, 2023, letter from Make El Cerrito Fire Safe (MECFS), whose efforts through the years we admire and salute.

1. Points of agreement with the Nov. 12, 2023, letter from Make El Cerrito Fire Safe

- **F5C and MECFS share a main goal:** Friends of Five Creeks (F5C) and MECFS seek a **plan that, as El Cerrito has promised, will "guide the City's fire fuel reduction, native forest conservation, and maintenance activities."** We agree on the urgency of removing tall, highly flammable groves that could spread fire rapidly over large areas.
- **As the MECFS letter says, a plan must be based on accurate information. Maps that accurately delineate boundaries of public properties are essential (Slide 1).** Several private properties project well into what appears to be the Hillside Natural Area, even crossing service roads (map right). Accurate maps also are needed to establish and maintain access and fuel or fire breaks, and to promote mutually beneficial cooperation. This applies on many levels. Here are two examples:
 - **Staff, down to sub-contractors, need maps** to make sure that patches of tall dry weeds are not left unmowed – an ongoing common problem – and to protect habitat from accidental destruction ([Slides 1 & 2](#)).
 - **Maps would show that some blanket guidelines are impractical or impossible.** For example, requiring fuel breaks 100 feet beyond property lines would in some cases be next to impossible due to creek canyons or cliff-like slopes. In other cases, they would paradoxically destroy vibrant habitat while landowners could plant, for example, flammable Pampas grass or juniper well into what appears to be "natural area."



This is not theoretical. Property owners have planted fire-prone eucalyptus and prickly-Moses acacia immediately adjacent to the Hillside Natural Area; others maintain clumps of Pampas grass or French broom.

- **The MECFS letter is correct that there have been more fires than consultants have reported.** We remember two in the main Hillside Natural Area, both apparently from campfires. In October 2018, we photographed the remains of one (photo available). Camping continues (photo available).

Like MECFS, we believe this new plan must incorporate [the El Cerrito - Kensington Wildfire Action Plan \(2017\)](#) and the Resolution Declaring Wildfire Prevention and Safety As A Top Priority (2021).

The thoughtful 2017 plan sets goals. The new plan can provide specifics on how to move toward carrying out those goals, including those quoted below.

- Section 6.1: **“A method for changing, updating, and revising the plan, and the need to monitor, keep people involved, plan collaboratively, and report specifics of treatment and other activities.”**
- Section 2.3.5: **“Funding and incentives for private property owners. ‘Seed’ funding. Balancing habitat needs and defensible space. Effective techniques to reduce noxious weed invasion after soil-disturbing hazardous fuel reduction treatments.”**
- Section 2.3.7: **“Scientifically based resource and vegetation management that protects and improves native habitat values.... Balance protection of biological resources with hazardous fuels removal...Including use of volunteers to reduce fuel loads...”**

Already, volunteers and small grants to local organizations have contributed significantly to fire-fuel reduction. The city has supplied publicity, tools, and green-waste removal. It has allowed volunteers to mark plants that need protection for some work, and often acted on tips submitted by citizens through informal channels. Citizens could do more at little cost, from maintenance to developing joint projects. Examples are below, under Section 3.2.

- Section 3.1: **“Removal of invasive plants of known high flammability listed in a recognized source...Many of the recommended actions will take long-term commitment over multiple years to address the complex hazards.** Some actions have current funding, but additional funding and efforts are needed...”.

A new plan should require a regularly updated list of target plants and methods to map them and track effects of actions. (Slide 2) Lack of accurate maps and records continues to lead to dangerous pockets of vegetation being overlooked. It creates an illusion that current conditions are long-term. In addition, knowledge and institutional memory are lost when key staff members change. Some flammable invasives, such as the cotoneaster that has all but taken over the slope north of Schmidt Lane. These omissions are dangerous in the face of climate change and new “invasions.” A new plan should recommend methods of tracking multi-year efforts, from “restorations” to removal of specific problems plants such as French broom and Pampas grass. **Citizens can aid these efforts using non-profit GPS mapping apps such as iNaturalist and CalFlora.**

Sections of the 2017 document on what is funded or not should be updated, and possible funding improvements suggested.

- Section 3.2: **“Working with potential partners** to find common ground, share ideas, and develop joint implementation of local projects. These partners may expand **beyond traditional agency partners to include volunteer groups...organizations...homeowner associations....”**

The new plan should specify some ways the city should work with these groups and allow for adding more ways. Here are a few possibilities: Better integration with city committees and Green Teams; encouragement, publicity, and support for neighbors and groups seeking small grants; clear, publicized methods for reporting problems; and working with citizen volunteers using citizen-science apps to map, mark, and report resources to be protected, spots needing fuel reduction, or effects of interventions. ..

2. Points of difference from the Nov. 12, 2023, letter from Make El Cerrito Fire Safe

Based on our volunteers’ many years of reducing fire risk, mapping, and stewarding diverse plants and animals in this treasured urban green space, Friends of Five Creeks respectfully differs from or suggests supplementing some points in the MECFS letter.

- **Incorporate the broad range of possibilities for reducing fire hazard from the 1994 plan, not the plan itself.** Development, conditions, and climate probably have changed too much in 30 years to directly incorporate the 1994 HNA Fire Hazard Reduction Plan. An updated plan should revisit the 1994 plan’s still-relevant considerations, including for example, access, adequate water lines or other methods of fighting fires, and budgeting for maintenance.
- **Blanket widths for fire and fuel breaks edging trails, roads, or property lines, or rigid mowing heights and schedules, would be dangerous and unworkable, leading to erosion, slides, washouts, and invasion by fire-prone weeds.** Here are a few examples ([Slides 3, 5](#)):
 - Along the service road that runs north from the Hillside Church area, vital to reach the sewer line and channelized Wildwood Creek, tree removal has already required covering extremely steep creek bank with plastic to prevent a washout – not a sustainable solution. Segments of the almost cliff-like bank above the road, once rich in honeysuckle, ferns, and native shrubs, are now bare (due to drought and removal of fallen trees) and threaten slides onto the road.
 - The service road that leads downhill from the north end of Regency Court runs in part only a few feet from the steep creek canyon. Cutting the elderberries, buckeyes, and other native trees and shrubs here would put the road at risk, particularly as climate change brings stronger and more destructive storms. “Leaving the roots” is not a sustainable long-term solution. Just as on the service road described above, segments of the steep roadcut that have been stripped of vegetation threaten to collapse onto the road.
 - Section 1, on the need for accurate maps, outlines the unworkable or paradoxical effects of requiring fuel breaks based on property lines rather than structures. Effective fire safety requires cooperative effort among property owners and the city. Agreements including conservation or other easements are a possibility.

- Many native plants cannot survive or spread themselves if mowed before they can set seed, mowed so low that they cannot shade out competitors, or cut so low and often that they simply die.

Mowing should be scheduled, but flexibly and based on existing vegetation and climate conditions. In a simple example, in the late, wet spring of 2023, early mowing would have been largely a waste --- while unusually extensive late mowing was needed due to late-sprouting heavy fuel loads. This mowing didn't all get done.

A plan should budget for the cost of maintaining fuel and fire breaks and consider the likelihood that El Cerrito will maintain them. Disturbance, including mowing, invites invaders. After the Oakland Fire Storm, the East Bay Regional Park District created a firebreak in the hills east of Berkeley homes. Despite its extensive resources, it did not maintain this, so that by the time current fears of fire rekindled, much of this "break" had grown up in tall, dangerous thickets of invasive French broom, poison hemlock, fennel, and the like.

3. How can El Cerrito balance fire resilience with native forest conservation?

Keeping people safe while preserving natural values to the extent practical will require flexibility and ongoing adaptation. From experience, Friends of Five Creeks suggests some guidelines we believe will be among the most effective and least expensive ways to achieve both these goals.

- **A plan should budget for the long-term costs of removing and replacing, maintaining fuel and fire breaks. It also should weigh the likelihood that El Cerrito will maintain these.** As consultants have pointed out, disturbance, including mowing, invites invaders.

After the Oakland Fire Storm, the East Bay Regional Park District created a firebreak in the hills east of Berkeley homes. Despite its extensive resources, it did not maintain this, so that by the time current fears of fire in the wildland-urban interface were rekindled, much of this "break" had grown up in tall, dangerous thickets of invasive French broom, poison hemlock, fennel, and the like.

- **Preservation is much cheaper and more likely to succeed than restoration.** In their December presentation to stakeholders, consultants asked: How can we manage costs for planting, monitoring and maintaining native plant and tree communities? What is the realistic vision for the restoration of native habitat? The best answer is, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

A little extra planning and effort to keep native understory when trees are removed. and to protect hotspots with varied plants and habitat will be much cheaper and easier than paying for consultants, plans, and permits. and then trying to keep new "restoration" plantings alive, generally without irrigation, while curbing eager invasives ([Slides 3- 6](#)).

Most of Friends of Five Creeks work over 27 years has been trying to save areas that were "restored" by professionals and then abandoned. Our advice: If someone says they can restore an area, insist that they show you similar projects where their proposed techniques have succeeded and been maintained for at least 10 years.

- **Guidelines for mowing, fuel breaks, fire breaks and other interventions should be flexible, adopted with recognition of terrain and existing conditions, and accurately mapped so that staff and contractors can follow them.**

Much of the area's biodiversity would be devastated by rigid, generalized rules for fire and fuel breaks, mowing dates, or removal of understory potential "ladder fuels." Here are examples, including actions needed:

- **Small areas needing protection, including those needed by wildlife such as wood rats, should be mapped, marked, and protected.** The Hillside Natural Area is a relatively small "ecological island" surrounded by development. Many native plants or animals, once wiped out, are unlikely to re-colonize through barriers of buildings, streets, cars, and people. In addition, many species not legally requiring protection state- or nationwide can be easily wiped out because they are found in only one or a handful of spots in the Hillside Natural Area ([Slide 6](#)).
- **At least the "better" wildflower meadows deserve appropriate and flexible mowing heights and times.** Annual plants must set seed in order to survive. Mowing too early can wipe them out. In California's climate, many annuals have mass "superblooms" with years between when few sprout. If these are mowed too early, a replacement seed bank may not be built up for many years, if ever. Early mowing already devastated the sky-blue arroyo lupine, now rare. But even tough perennials will eventually blink out if they are repeatedly mowed too low, cannot grow enough leaves to feed their roots, and cannot set seed.
- **To maintain diversity, vegetation removal and mowing should recognize the following realities, and work with nature rather than trying to fit it into false categories and generalizations:**
 - **The Hillside Natural Area is a complex mosaic of slopes, soils, exposures, moisture, conditions of shade and sun, and many other factors, many of which we do not understand. Its wildlife requires food and cover, and in turn influences what grows.**
 - **Without fire, expansion of the closed-canopy oak forest, with little understory, has created a nearly barren understory over large areas (now then broom has been suppressed) ([Slide 4](#)). This is already a shaded fuel break over large areas ([Slide 4](#)).**
 - **Plants and animal life is generally more abundant in forest edges, clearings made when old trees die and fall, and openings provided by roads and trails ([Slides 3, 5](#)).**
 - **These road and trail openings often are especially important as refuges for native plants that cannot compete with invaders in "good" conditions. Poorer soils, steep banks, a bit of extra drainage can be vital for delicate melic grasses, polypody and goldback ferns, and some wildflowers ([Slide 6](#)).**
 - **Eucalyptus trees, despite shedding abundant oils and bark, often foster healthy communities of toyon, native blackberry, honeysuckle, yarrow, soap root, and other natives – more than in adjacent oak forests or grasslands. ([Slide 4](#)). Trees should be removed carefully, keeping this source of new natives.**

The Hillside Natural Area can have a plan that keeps people safe, and costs low, by working with nature. We hope this will be El Cerrito's goal.