



TOWN OF PORTOLA VALLEY STAFF REPORT

TO: Mayor and Members of the Town Council

FROM: Michael Tomars, Chair of the Wildfire Preparedness Committee

DATE: April 15, 2021

RE: Recommendation to Ban the Flammable Five Trees

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tomars', is positioned to the right of the 'FROM' line.

RECOMMENDATION

The Wildfire Preparedness Committee (“Committee”) recommends that the Town Council (“Council”) ban new plantings of the “flammable five” trees (i.e., Juniper, Cypress, Acacia, Pine, and Eucalyptus).

This recommendation further supports the Committee’s ongoing efforts to develop a basic structure for promoting wildfire resiliency and represents the Committee’s evaluation of additional means for creating high impact, mandatory vegetation management programs.

BACKGROUND

On April 10, 2019, the Town Council created the Committee to address outstanding wildfire resiliency issues. Its charter, adopted in May 2019, states the following:

“Given the inherent risk of wildfire in Portola Valley and the changing character of wildfires due to climate change, the Ad Hoc Committee on Wildfire Preparedness shall advise the Town Council, on a limited duration basis, on ways to reduce wildfire danger, and increase resident resiliency in a wildfire emergency.”

The Committee presented its working proposals for a second set of recommendations to the Town Council on November 11, 2020.

DISCUSSION

Of the six proposals made to the Town Council in November 2020, the following three were determined to be more appropriate for inclusion in the Woodside Fire Protection District’s (WFPD) Fire Code than the Town’s Municipal Code: (i) prohibitions on vegetation within proximity of an underground transformer; (ii) a total of 200 feet of defensible

space on properties with a slope of greater than 30%, as defined by the code amendment; (iii) WFPD-approved vegetation management plans for all properties above 50 acres, regardless of ownership model.

The Flammable Five recommendation was reviewed by Town staff and the WFPD. Such reviews determined that this recommendation would be best situated within the Town's Municipal Code.

All the Flammable Five trees have a few things in common: are non-native species, contain resin, and are highly flammable. Tree resin is a natural, sticky substance that trees use to seal any wounds and is highly flammable. Eucalyptus leaves in a wildfire can spread embers over a mile away. Pine trees in particular are unfortunately abundant in town.

By officially banning the flammable five, both residents and licensed landscapers will be informed of their dangers. The ASCC and town planners can also condition new construction approval based upon the exclusion of these highly flammable plants. An official ban will also enable a formal marketing program around the Flammable Five that will encourage removal of these highly flammable species.

Additionally, the Committee recommends removal of the following two types of high-risk vegetation: Coyote Brush and Broom. But neither of these two non-native invasive are intentionally planted and therefore do not require an official ban.

The remaining two recommendations (i.e., funding vehicle for financing town cleanup, and cleanup of Right of Way (ROW) through clearing target hazard trees and underbrush) will be addressed in a separate memorandum.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no perceived fiscal impact associated with the recommendation of the Chair of the Wildfire Preparedness Committee.

ATTACHMENT

1. 2020 Ad Hoc Wildfire Committee Recommendations, October 2020 Committee Meeting