

Portola Valley - Risk Ranking Change for Wildfire

Summary

In the latest (2021) update to the San Mateo County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan, wildfire risk was ranked as medium; however, based on input from the Woodside Fire Protection District, rankings for neighboring and similar jurisdictions (such as Woodside, San Mateo County, Hillsborough, Half Moon Bay, etc.), anticipated significant changes to the VHFSZ map from CalFire and a WFPD initiative on fuels and hazard study, and other factors, this hazard should be ranked as high. While the Town understands that the risk will not be changed within the adopted Plan, this document stands as the Town's definitive position on wildfire risk in the community.

Discussion of Rationale for Ranking Change

1. Risk Analysis/Mapping

According to the USDA/USFS "[Wildfire Risk to Communities](#)" survey, the populated areas of Portola Valley have, on average, greater than a 91% risk to homes than other communities in San Mateo County (and the Nation), and 63% of all communities in California.

According to CalFire's last fire severity zone maps (published in 2007-08), approximately 60% of the town is in a high or very high fire severity zone. Amended maps are expected later this year to reflect increased risk with an expansion of the high/very high fire severity zones to be expanded.

In 2008, the Town commissioned a fuels assessment report that concluded with a number of highly vulnerable geographic areas in Portola Valley (associated with the vegetation that grows well in canyons. This study was included in the 2021 HMP update as substantiation of significant fire risk in Portola Valley.

Portola Valley's efforts at wildfire mitigation were recently recognized in the California Governor's Office of Planning and Research's "[WUI Planning Guide](#)", sharing Portola Valley's recent adoption of a home hardening code as a best practice for other affected California communities.

Portola Valley has been listed since at least 2001 as a "[Community at Risk](#)", according to the State Fire Marshal's Office with CalFire.

2. Woodside Fire Protection District Appraisal

The Woodside Fire Protection District's Fire Marshal, Don Bullard, recently commented (as part of his review of the draft Safety Element) on the current status of the Town's medium risk wildfire ranking:

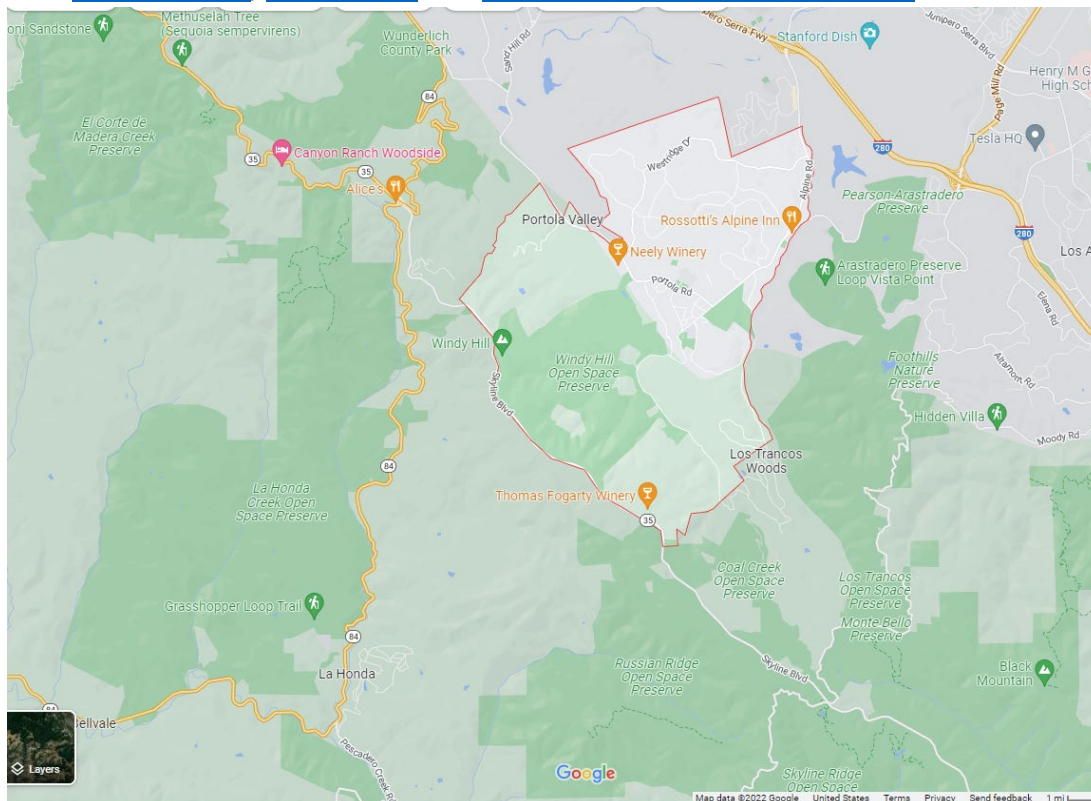
“The district does not agree with the FEMA Hazard and Risk Ranking given for Wildfire for the 2021 MJLHMP for Portola Valley. The district feels that the Town should update the wildfire ranking to be more in alignment with the Fire District and the Town of Woodside. Both the Fire District and the Town of Woodside have ranked wildfire of the highest hazard where Portola Valley has it ranked as medium to almost low hazard. The Town of Portola Valley should update their MJLHMP as soon as possible to reflect the true wildfire hazards faced by the Town.”

It should also be noted that the Town of Woodside was ranked in its HMP as high for fire; Woodside and Portola Valley are immediately adjacent to each other and are very similar in topography, development patterns and vegetation.

The WFPD is currently conducting a fuels/hazards assessment study which is expected to expand the risk as compared to the CalFire maps.

3. Adjacent Risk

The Town contains both [protected open space](#) and large, privately-held parcels. Additional open space operated by the City of Palo Alto at [Foothills Nature Preserve](#) and [Pearson- Arastradero Preserve](#) (to the southeast of Portola Valley’s border (are also very large publicly-held open spaces. Just west of Town are the Midpensinsula Regional Open Space District’s [Thornewood Open Space Preserve](#), [El Corte de Madera Creek Preserve](#), and [La Honda Creek Space Preserve](#), with [Russian Ridge](#), [Los Trancos](#) and [Coal Creek Open Space Preserves](#) to the south.



4. CZU Fire Proximity

The CZU Fire burned to within 6 miles of the Town's southwestern border, and was visible in the evening as a bright red glow.

5. Fire Insurance

Recent years have seen a slew of fire insurance non-renewals, which has led to discussions directly with the State Insurance Commissioner on ways to ensure reliable fire insurance for residents. While some residents have been able to find insurance (typically at a higher rate), others have either been forced to utilize the California Fair Plan (which does not typically cover the full value of a Portola Valley home), or continued without insurance.

6. Evacuations

In 2022, the Town conducted a traffic capacity analysis/study to understand, under various scenarios, what the impact of a large-scale evacuation would be on the Town's roads. Portola Valley has three total exit routes – Portola and Alpine Roads, with Arastradero Road exiting off of Alpine. The unincorporated communities of Los Trancos Woods and Vista Verde utilize these roads.

Should Alpine Road be blocked in an evacuation (which is the Town's highest volume road), the analysis/study shows that if 90% of residents left within one hour, some may experience evacuation times of over two hours.

7. Land Use Focus on Wildfire

Over the last four years, the Town has adopted a variety of measures, programs, and initiatives to reduce wildfire risk and increase wildfire resiliency:

- a. Creation of Wildfire Preparedness Committee
- b. Adoption of ADU ordinance with prohibitions against building ADUs in the Town's most vulnerable areas; also includes a fire safety checklist for ADUs that are permitted for construction within established setbacks
- c. Adoption of Home Hardening Ordinance (with a subsequent update scheduled for October 2022) that requires the entire community to build or renovate well beyond the State's standard of Chapter 7A
- d. "Banning the Flammable Five" – non-native trees that are highly flammable are no longer allowed to be planted in Portola Valley
- e. Prohibition of the use of mechanical devices for gardening, etc., on red flag days
- f. Approximately \$600,000 spend in the last four years on vegetation management in the Town's right of way
- g. Housing Element update that utilized Zeke Lunder of Deer Creek Resources and Community Partner Assistance for Wildfire to review the wildfire-related elements of the update

h. Draft Safely Element reviewed by the same partners as 7g

8. Wildfire Actions in Hazard Mitigation Plan

The 2021 Annex for Portola Valley lists a total of 51 actions, of which 25 are related to mitigation of wildfire issues. This is the number one hazard by total actions.