

Hazardous Vegetation & Abatement Inspections 2020

for the Bennett Ridge & Bennett Valley Area

Bennett Ridge & Valley Neighbors,

Mildly put, it can be confusing to keep track of our county's multiple, firefighting and prevention agencies, departments, and local stations, discern what duties they each have, and which ones are responsible for our community. After thorough research, here is what we learned...

Most critically: Sonoma County Fire District (SCFD) is the "Authority with Jurisdiction" over our area and they will conduct our fire inspections this fire season. (Map of SCFD area: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c410b97e17ba33a2b0053ef/t/5eb9bf4f3c5001729453fddd/1589231455167/SoCoFD_July2020.pdf) Additional inspectors were hired this year to implement more inspections.

Neither CAL FIRE, nor the Fire Prevention Bureau in the Sonoma County Permit Dept., conduct hazardous vegetation inspections our area. For our area, CAL FIRE assists with fire suppression, and the SoCo Fire Prevention Bureau oversees the county's free-chipping program.

Additionally, this past June, the SoCo Board of Supervisors voted to strengthen Ordinance 13A, which comprises part of the county's fire abatement requirements.

Warren Davis, our Bennett Ridge community member (and Fire Captain of the Berkeley Fire Department) noted the most significant changes in Ordinance 13A., and made the below, list of inspection protocols, which he corroborated with our Fire Marshal, Cyndi Foreman.

Most pertinent for our community are these two changes to Ordinance 13A:

- eliminated the prior exemptions from 13A regulations for parcels greater than five acres.
- increased the number of hazardous vegetation and abatement inspections to be conducted each year from 35,000 to 70,000.

The hope is residents will view inspections as an opportunity to learn about how to reduce wildfire risks by implementing defensible space regulations.

Fire Marshal, Cyndi Foreman, wrote:

“Remember you are not just protecting your property by being responsible with your vegetation management, you are helping to protect your neighbors and the community at large!”

Feel free to contact me if you have questions.

Kathie Schmid

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A property inspection would transpire as follows:

1. At the driveway:

- Are there reflective house numbers at the roadside on a post? (This is for homes *not* near the road, as homes near the road would have numbers on the house that are visible from the road.)
- Is the property 10' within of the roadway free of dead/dying trees and all flammable vegetation. Are trees branches pruned to at least 6' above the grounds, and is the grass below 4" ?

2. At the house:

- Are there house numbers clearly visible?
 - Are they 4" high on a contrasting background?
 - Can personnel on the fire engine see the numbers as the engine approaches?
- Are the roof and gutters clear of all debris – leaves, conifer needles, branches, etc.?
- Is there a spark arrestor on the chimney, and is the wire mesh ½" or less?
- Are all trees branches at least 10' from the chimney/stovepipes un all directions?
- Have all dead, tree branches that overhang the structure been removed?
- Have climbing vines on trees or structures been removed?
- Is the area underneath decks free of all combustible items?
- Is firewood stored away from the house?
- Within 30' of the house:
 - Is all grass below 4" ?
 - Are all shrubs maintained (free of dead material)?
- From 30' to 100' of the house:
 - Is all grass below 6" ?

3. On the property:

- Are all dead/dying trees, shrubs, and other vegetation removed from the entire property?
- Are all trees limbed up 6' from the ground, to break up the fuel ladder?
 - Do any branches sag below 6' from the ground?

Other factors to remember:

- Access roads (and long driveways) need to be clear for fire engines, AT ALL TIMES, as required by the Fire Code (but not mentioned in 13A).

Notes:

- All the above requirements are now for improved parcels of all acreage sizes.
- The inspector can require *additional* defensible space outward to the 100' (from structures) zone, if the added requirements are justifiable. For example: for a hillside of shrubs below a house, an inspector could require additional thinning to reduce the fuel load, as fire travels more rapidly uphill.
- Unimproved parcels must:
 - Within 10' of roadway frontage and neighboring structures:
 - Cut grass to less than 4"
 - Remove dead/dying trees and all flammable vegetation
 - Prune all trees branches to at least 6' above the ground
 - Remove combustible material from the property.
- Ordinance 13A allows (among other things):
 - a resident to be charged for attorney's fees that the county spends to sue a resident into compliance.
 - a citation to be written as either misdemeanor or criminal.
 - inspectors to enter a property.

- SCFD states:

Property owners who do not clear their property in accordance with legal requirements face significant financial liability. They are responsible for:

- Inspection and non-compliant citation fees up to force abatement (in certain cases) from the Fire District and/or the County of Sonoma.
- All damage to the person and/or property of others as a result of a fire that originates on your property.
- Total cost incurred by any/all emergency responders dispatched to put the fire out and provide medical and/or law enforcement assistance

SCFD Hazardous Vegetation Online Complaint Form:

As per Fire Marshal, Cyndi Foreman, for concerns regarding vegetation in need of attention on a particular property (13A requires removal of *all* dead/dying vegetation), the best way now to file your concern with the SCFD and alert their inspectors, is to fill out the new form on their website: <https://www.sonomacountyfd.org/vegetation-weed-complaint-form> The names of persons filing concerns are kept anonymous to all but the SCFD.

Berkeley Fire Captain Warren Davis (and Bennett Ridge resident) explains the hazardous vegetation & abatement regulation system for our area:

- The above inspection list is all from Ordinance 13A, except for firewood next to buildings and storage under decks. Those requirements can be found in other documents, such as the California Fire Code, and the “Maintain Defensible Space” page on the Sonoma County Fire District website.
- Ordinance 13A – as explained on the Fire District website – is Sonoma County's addition to the California Fire Code and California Public Resource Code.
- The State Fire Code is the minimum standard, and local jurisdictions place additional, extra emphasis on certain issues.
- Think of the California Fire Code and the California Public Resource Code as the cake, and SoCo Ordinance 13A being the frosting. All together they comprise the county’s fire mitigation requirements.

SOURCES:

Sonoma County Fire District (Authority with Jurisdiction over our area):

<https://www.sonomacountyfd.org/>

Map of the Sonoma County Fire District:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c410b97e17ba33a2b0053ef/t/5eb9bf4f3c5001729453fddd/1589231455167/SoCoFD_July2020.pdf

All the SoCo Fire Departments:

<http://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Public-Safety/Fire-Departments/>

Within the county’s permit department (PRMD) – Permit Sonoma:

Fire Warden/Fire Marshal James Williams
Fire Prevention
Permit and Resource Management Department
County of Sonoma
<http://sonomacounty.ca.gov/PRMD/Fire-Prevention/>

Cal Fire:

<https://www.fire.ca.gov/>

2019 California Fire Code:

<https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/CAFC2019/cover>

Public Resource Code 4291:

http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=PRC§ionNum=4291

Sonoma County Ordinance 13A:

https://library.municode.com/ca/sonoma_county/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CH13AABHAVECOMA

“Maintain Defensible Space”

<https://disastersafety.org/wildfire/defensible-space/>