



# Wildfire Protection

## EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT

### Preparing for 2020 Fire Season

**L**ong-range forecasts are predicting that this year will be especially dry, so East Bay Regional Park District's fire department is gearing up for a potentially dangerous fire season.

Fire Chief Aileen Theile cites two factors in particular. Weather forecasters are predicting more frequent, dry offshore breezes. And although this was a relatively dry winter, late spring rains stimulated more growth by already tall grasses.

Firefighters used to think in terms of a "fire season." However, with climate change, the fire season is now virtually year round. And so is the work of the fire department.

To combat fires, Chief Theile leads 16 fulltime firefighters and some 34 on-call staff – Park District employees with other primary job duties, but who are also fully trained firefighters available when needed.

A new and important component of the fire department is an eight-member fuel reduction crew. This crew works throughout the year to enhance fire safety by clearing brush away from trails, trimming trees to remove ladder fuels, and piling the resulting vegetation for disposal by burning "strategically and where appropriate," as Chief Theile said. They fight wildfires too, when needed.

Fire headquarters are at Station 1 in Tilden Regional Park near Berkeley. Seven other stations throughout the Park District are staffed as circumstances demand. All have engines and other equipment in place.

A dispatch center operates 24 hours per day in support of the District's firefighters and police. During a fire, the Park District's two police helicopters serve as observation platforms to determine fire location and speed, and best access for ground crews. The helicopters are equipped with Bambi Buckets to fight fire from above with 250-gallon water drops.

Of course, the coronavirus pandemic has dominated the news in recent times. In that regard, Chief Theile noted that it was easier for the firefighters to observe the new protocols, because they are accustomed to wearing protective gear anyway.

Their additional safety measures include assigning specific, separate crews to each engine, allowing only assigned personnel in the stations, and designating one firefighter to approach and assess a victim in an emergency situation, before committing the entire crew. Post-incident decontamination is accomplished as appropriate.

There are major ways in which the public can help the Park District reduce fire hazards. It should be noted that smoking, including vaping,

is not permitted in the regional parks. And during any emergency, park visitors need to cooperate with all instructions from firefighters, police, or park rangers.

If you see a fire while in a park, call 911, try to report the fire's location, size, direction of burn, and any structures threatened, then leave immediately.

Beyond that, Theile said, "We ask people to take a hard look at fire safety in their own backyards."

"It's not just one neighbor doing it, but the entire neighborhood," she added.

"Thirty feet of lean, clean and green" is the motto. This means reducing the fuel load by mowing. From 30 to 100 feet out should be a second zone of thinned vegetation. Detailed information on defensible space is available at the CAL FIRE website, [fire.ca.gov](http://fire.ca.gov).

It's also important to have an evacuation plan in case of an approaching fire. "Don't wait to be told," Theile said, "and don't block the road so that fire engines can't get in."

To sum it up, "Be informed and be prepared," Chief Theile said.



*Regional Park District firefighters mopping up a wildland fire.*



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### Oakland Hills Fire – More Prepared Today

The Park District's most challenging event was likely the Oakland Hills firestorm of 1991.



It began on Saturday, Oct. 19, with a small fire on private property in the Oakland hills. The cause has never been conclusively determined.

Oakland firefighters extinguished the blaze with mutual aid from Park District crews and the state.

However, smoldering embers reignited the next morning. Fanned by strong easterly winds, the fire soon became an inferno.

Responding to mutual aid calls from the Oakland Fire Department, virtually every available firefighter and public safety officer in the Park District, as well as many other Park District staff and volunteers, helped to fight the fire or assist evacuees. Other firefighters responded from all over California.

Some 60 Park District firefighters and 48 police officers were involved at one time or another. Among the District firefighters were two current Park District board members, Dee Rosario and Dennis Waespi.

Working in concert with other fire departments and citizen volunteers, District crews were able to save dozens of homes from destruction.

By the time the fire burned out, it had consumed 2.5 square miles of mostly residential neighborhoods. Twenty-five people were killed and 150 injured. The

fire destroyed 3,469 homes and apartment units and 2,000 automobiles. Ten thousand people were evacuated. The fire burned portions of two regional parklands: Claremont Canyon and Lake Temescal.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimated the fire cost at \$3.9 billion in damages.

The blaze did provide a strong impetus for establishment of the Hills Emergency Forum (see *Inter-Agency Cooperation* story to the right), and for extensive improvements in already existing mutual aid agreements.

In the years since the Oakland Hills Fire, all the Park District's firefighting equipment has been upgraded.

The District currently is well prepared for emergencies, in terms of both equipment and personnel. It has four Type 3 engines that can each carry 500 gallons of water and four firefighters, seven Type 6 engines with 300 gallons and two firefighters, two water tenders with 1,800 gallons each, two off-road ATV-style rescue vehicles for back country medical emergencies, one horse rescue trailer, and a Type 1 engine designed for structure fires and heavy rescue. And the District's two helicopters are equipped with Bambi Buckets that can drop between 144 and 250 gallons of water on fires.

All the District's firefighters, both fulltime and on-call, have received state-approved training and certification. An ongoing training program keeps them current and up-to-date.



### Inter-Agency Cooperation

Besides its own personnel and equipment, the Regional Park District has mutual aid agreements with CAL FIRE, the California Office of Emergency Services, and every fire department within Alameda and Contra Costa counties. This enables rapid response to emergencies both within and outside the parklands.

And the Park District is a founding member of the Hills Emergency Forum (HEF), which was established after the 1991 Oakland Hills fire. This is a consortium of fire departments and public agencies working together to prepare for and respond to fires in the East Bay Hills. One of its important accomplishments was increased standardization of equipment and radio frequencies among the various agencies.

Another feature of fire preparedness in the hills is the District's fuel break, a zone of thinned vegetation between regional parklands and adjoining residential neighborhoods, which extends from Richmond south to Castro Valley.

It serves two purposes: slowing the spread of fire in either direction between open space and adjacent neighborhoods, and providing firefighters with a place to make a stand.

The District's fuel reduction crew works on keeping the fuel break in order. And the District contracts with a company that grazes goats selectively to reduce the vegetation within the break. One advantage of goats is that they are undeterred by poison oak, and in fact will eat it.

Another District program with fire suppression benefits is cattle grazing, which helps keep grasses and other potential fuel at a manageable level. The District operates grazing leases with a number of East Bay ranchers. Their operations are closely monitored by park supervisors and a District grazing manager.

As part of fire weather prediction efforts, a network of ten Remote Automated Weather Stations (RAWS) is in place in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The Park District monitors four of them that are within regional parks: at Del Valle near Livermore, Black Diamond Mines in Antioch, Briones Regional Park near Martinez, and Las Trampas in San Ramon.

These automated stations provide information on temperature, wind speed and direction, and vegetation moisture level, all to help firefighters determine when red flag conditions exist.