

**STATE OF CALIFORNIA
REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD
CENTRAL COAST REGION**

Staff Report for Regular Meeting of July 18-19, 2019

Prepared on June 13, 2019

ITEM NUMBER: 10

SUBJECT: CAL FIRE Priority Fuel Reduction Projects in the Central Coast Region - Update

STAFF CONTACTS:

Alexandra Coblentz, 805-542-4786, alexandra.coblentz@waterboards.ca.gov

ACTION: Information / Discussion

SUMMARY

This staff report summarizes Central Coast Water Board staff's (staff) involvement in the protection of water quality during the implementation of California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Wildfire Fuel Reduction Projects in the Central Coast region. In response to Governor Newsom's Executive Order N-05-19, CAL FIRE identified 35 priority areas – eight of which are within the Central Coast – for fuel reduction projects to protect vulnerable communities. Executive Order N-05-19 suspends State environmental regulations as necessary to implement the priority fuels reduction projects, including those adopted pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act. CAL FIRE is working with over 40 government and non-government agencies to incorporate environmental protection into project design. CAL FIRE is receiving support from the State and Regional Water Boards to evaluate potential impacts to watersheds and identify water quality best management practices (BMPs) to implement during fuel reduction projects. For each of the eight fuel reduction projects in the Central Coast Region, staff reviews project details, identifies risks of pollution to 303(d) listed impaired waterbodies and sensitive watersheds, recommends BMPs to minimize and mitigate water quality impacts, and conducts site inspections as needed.

Representatives from the Santa Barbara County Fire Department¹ and South Coast Habitat Restoration will be present at the Board Meeting to provide additional information and answer questions about fuels reduction projects and post-fire restoration activities in Santa Barbara County.

¹ The Santa Barbara County Fire Department is a Contract County, contracted by CAL FIRE to provide wildland fire protection and response on State Responsibility Areas within the County.

DISCUSSION

Background

On January 9, 2019, Governor Gavin Newsom issued [Executive Order N-05-19](#), directing CAL FIRE to prepare a written report outlining recommendations for immediate, medium-term, and long-term actions to minimize wildfire impacts. The Executive Order prompted collaboration between CAL FIRE and other State agencies and departments to identify areas at high risk for wildfire impacts. Wildfire impact risk assessment considered locally developed and vetted fire plans and socioeconomic factors (i.e., poverty levels, age, mobility, access to a car, language barriers) at the community level to prioritize areas for fuel reduction based on vulnerability.

In response to Executive Order N-05-19, CAL FIRE prepared a [Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report](#) dated February 22, 2019. The recommended actions in the Report include methods to quickly deploy personnel and resources into priority areas to perform fuel reduction management; CAL FIRE identified 35 potential project areas for immediate fuel reduction management, including dead tree removal, vegetation clearing, creation of fuel breaks and community defensible spaces, and creation of ingress and egress corridors.

Citing extreme peril posed by wildfire risk, the Governor issued a [Wildfire State of Emergency Proclamation](#) dated March 22, 2019. The Emergency Proclamation suspends State environmental statutes, rules, regulations, and requirements to the extent necessary to expedite priority fuel management projects for public safety. Suspension of regulations is at the discretion of the California Environmental Protection Agency and Natural Resources Agency and includes suspension of regulations pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act. To minimize and mitigate environmental impacts, CAL FIRE has coordinated with various government and non-government agencies to incorporate environmental protection measures into the design of each project such that they comply with applicable requirements without having to go through potentially time consuming permitting processes.

Water Board Participation

To minimize and mitigate impacts to local watersheds, staff from the Central Valley Water Board and State Water Board provided CAL FIRE with recommendations on BMPs to implement during fuel reduction projects. Recommended BMPs supplement CAL FIRE's standard BMPs and are specific to the following project activities: watercourse protection, mechanical operations, hand thinning, prescribed fires, existing roads, new roads, inspections, maintenance, and monitoring.

Central Coast Water Board Participation

Central Coast Water Board staff is providing CAL FIRE with localized guidance on water quality protection for projects occurring within the Central Coast Region. Eight projects occur in the counties of Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Barbara (Table 1). Staff reviews project details, identifies any sensitive water quality issues, communicates concerns and recommendations to CAL FIRE project leads, and

conducts project inspections as needed. Staff generated maps to identify 303(d) impaired watersheds and other sensitive waterbodies within or downstream of project boundaries (Figures 1 through 4). Table 2 summarizes 303(d) Listed waterbodies and pollutants associated with fuel reduction projects in the Central Coast Region.

To date, staff has reviewed two projects in Santa Cruz County, two projects in Monterey County, and one project in San Benito County. Staff provided CAL FIRE project leads with review documents that outlined project-specific concerns for water quality and requested mid-project field visits to verify implementation of BMPs for protection of water quality during fuel reduction projects. The review documents included maps identifying 303(d) impaired waterbodies and other sensitive waterbodies in the project region.

Staff relies on CAL FIRE project leads and field crews to evaluate BMP implementation and effectiveness and has met with CAL FIRE project leads via teleconference to discuss CAL FIRE's approach to water quality protection with respect to each project. CAL FIRE informed staff that vegetation clearing will be performed primarily with hand tools rather than heavy equipment and few trees will be removed. Pile burning will be prioritized over broadcast burning. Project boundaries will be clearly marked and any excursions outside those boundaries by work crews will be reported. Maintenance of vehicles will be performed offsite and vehicle fueling will occur in designated areas using protective mats. CAL FIRE and staff identified sediment as the highest risk pollutant and mobilization of sediment via roads as a priority concern for all fuel reduction projects. Staff also provided a copy of the Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report to Central Coast Salmon Enhancement, so they could independently evaluate the priority projects considering risks to salmonid species and related habitat.

To date, no field work has been initiated for fuel reduction projects in Region 3.

CONCLUSION

Staff will continue to coordinate with CAL FIRE to identify risks to water quality for the remaining projects as information becomes available. Staff has requested to be notified at project milestones to evaluate progress and determine if site inspections are warranted and will remain involved with each project through termination.

Table 1 – CAL FIRE Wildfire Fuel Reduction Projects in the Central Coast Region

Project Name	Acres	Affected Population
San Juan Canyon Fuel Reduction	2,277	54,067
Santa Barbara Foothill Community Defensible Space	1,960	127,516
Painted Cave Community Defensible Space	1,742	84,232
San Marcos Pass	3,096	84,342
Aptos, Buzzard, Hinkley, Ridgetop and Roadside	1,036	112,505
Palo Colorada Fire Access Roads	6,843	9,556
Laurel Springs-Hennicksons Ridge	4,368	5,933
Palo Corona Fuel Reduction	10,428	59,585

Table 2 – Central Coast Fuel Reduction Projects in 303(d) List Waterbodies

Project Area	303(d) List Waterbody	303(d) List Pollutant	TMDL Approved*
Aptos Buzzard Hinkley	Soquel Creek	Fecal coliform/indicator bacteria	No
Aptos Buzzard Hinkley	Aptos Creek	Fecal coliform/indicator bacteria	Yes
Aptos Buzzard Hinkley	Trout Gulch Creek	Fecal coliform/indicator bacteria	Yes
Aptos Buzzard Hinkley	Rider Creek	Sediment	Yes
Aptos Buzzard Hinkley	Corralitos Creek	Turbidity, fecal coliform/indicator bacteria, and pH	Yes, for indicator bacteria only
Palo Laurel Springs	Tularcitos Creek	Chloride, sodium, and fecal coliform/indicator bacteria	Yes, for indicator bacteria only
San Juan Creek	San Juan Creek	Turbidity, toxicity, fecal coliform/indicator bacteria, nitrate, and dissolved oxygen	Yes, for nutrients, dissolved oxygen, and indicator bacteria
San Marcos Painted Cave Foothill	San Jose Creek	Water temperature, chloride, sodium, specific conductivity, fecal coliform/indicator bacteria, and pH	No
San Marcos Painted Cave Foothill	Maria Ygnacio Creek	Turbidity, fecal coliform/indicator bacteria, sodium, and pH	No
San Marcos Painted Cave Foothill	Mission Creek	Toxicity, dissolved oxygen, fecal coliform/indicator bacteria	No

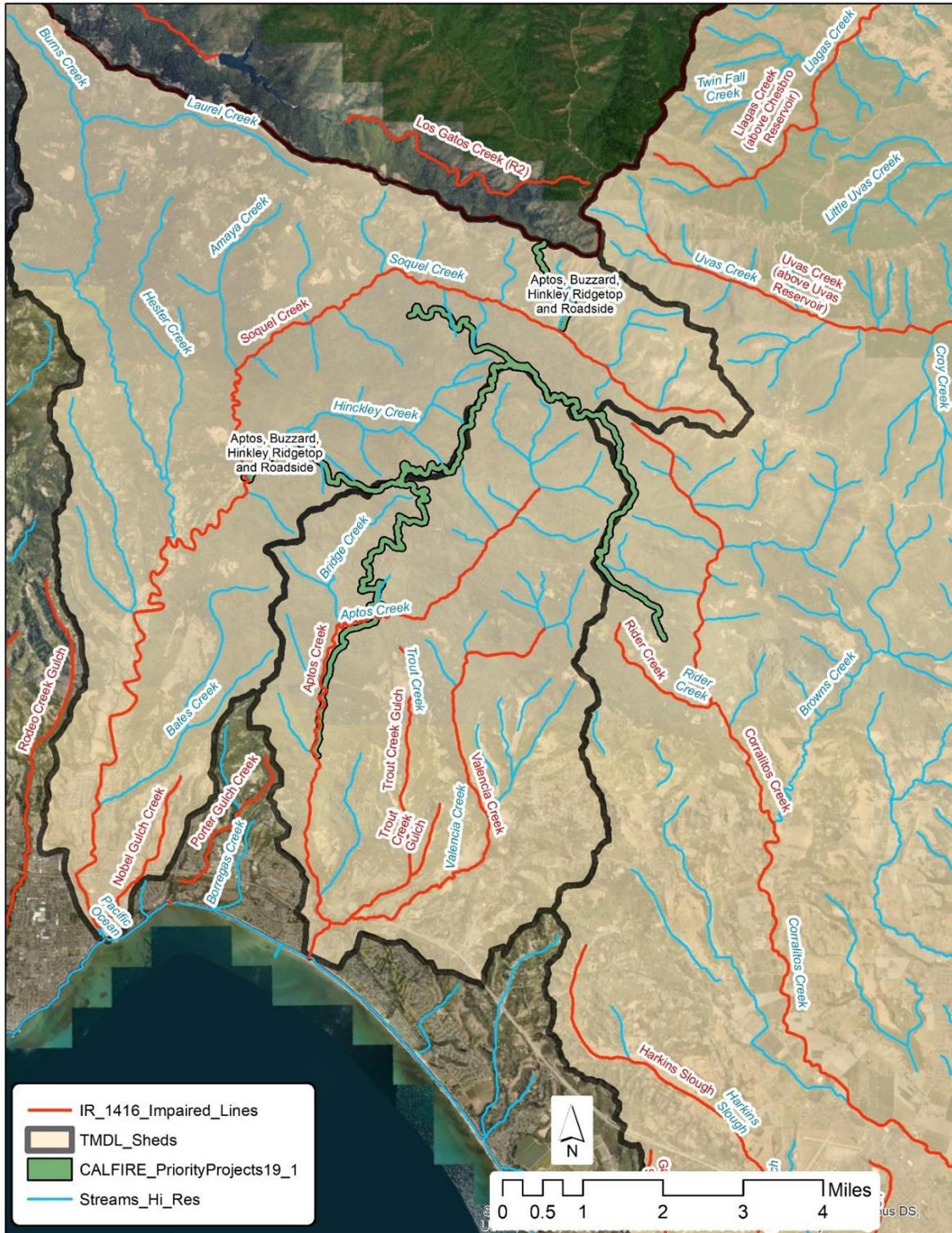


Figure 1 - Map of Aptos, Buzzard, Hinkley, Ridgetop and Roadside Project Area and 303(d) List Waterbodies

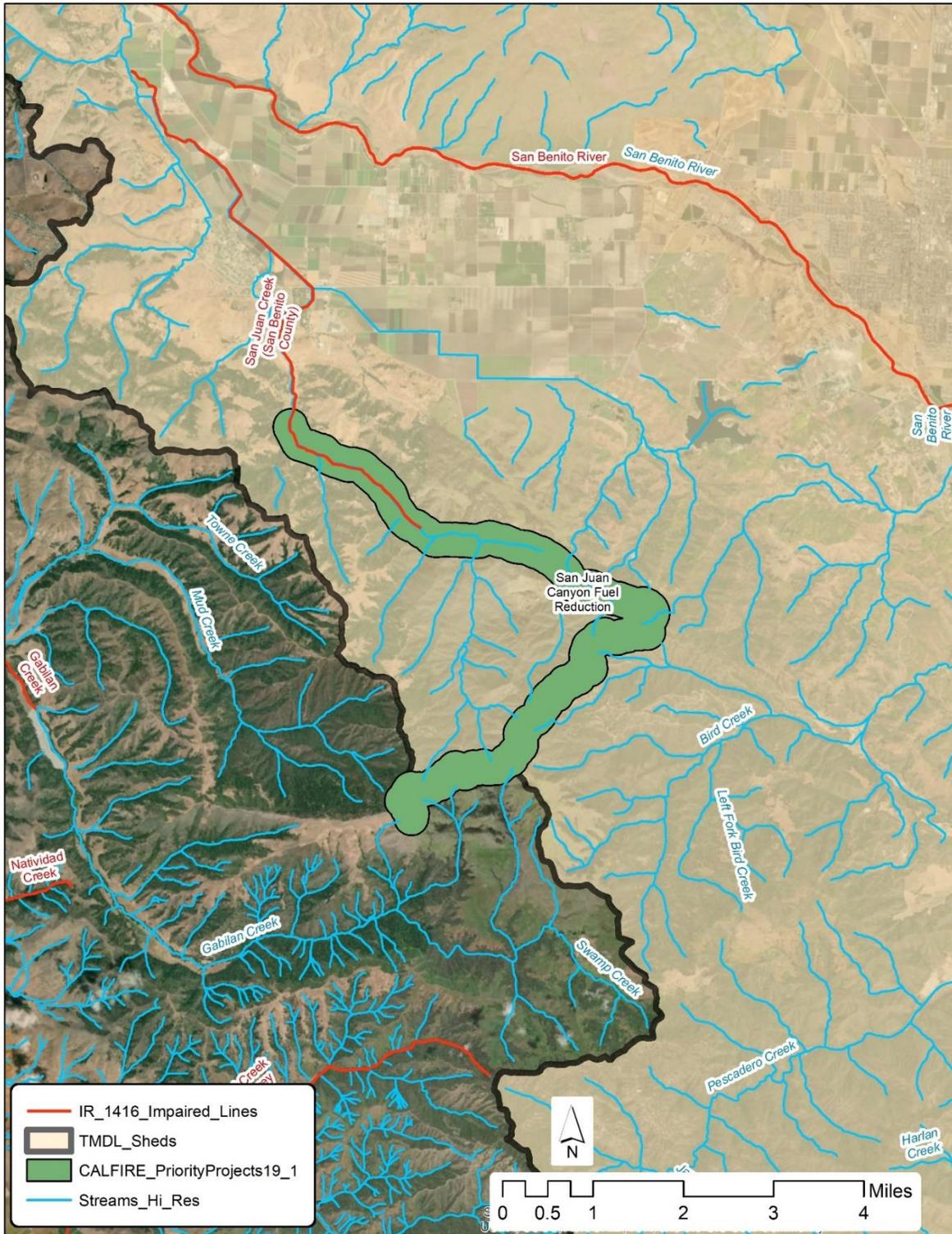


Figure 3 - Map of the San Juan Canyon Project Area and 303(d) List Waterbodies



Figure 4 - Map of the San Marcos Pass, Painted Cave, and Santa Barbara Foothill Community Project Areas and 303(d) List Waterbodies