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MOFD red tags 320 properties for fire code violations

By Nick Marnell

In light of the catastrophic wildfires over the past several years, the Moraga-Orinda Fire District has heightened its enforcement on problem district properties, requiring weed abatement to be in strict compliance with the district fire code. Unlike in previous enforcement efforts, when MOFD only responded to citizen complaints, the district has proactively assessed problem properties in 2019, especially those near district evacuation routes.

The district began its fire code enforcement program in March. Fire inspectors went door to door, with the focus on education, pointing out what violations existed on the properties.

In April, the district returned to the same property owners to see what work had been done. "The numbers were not good. Eighty percent had not done noticeable work," Fire Chief Dave Winnacker said.

With the weed abatement deadline of June 15, MOFD began aggressive enforcement the next day. A staggering 320 properties were red tagged by the district. Owners of those parcels received a five-day notice to correct fire code violations on their property, such as unruly brush, a dead tree or overgrown grasses.

"Some people have just refused to do the work," a frustrated Winnacker said. The chief stressed that the district is more than willing to work with residents, but it is of utmost importance that those who are red tagged contact the district, especially if there is a reason they are unable do the work. MOFD will provide a list of contractors who are qualified to do the weed abatement.

In the event that a resident totally ignores the citation, the district board conducts a hearing, and can authorize a work order for an outside contractor to do the abatement. Contra Costa County advances the district the money to pay the contractor and the county places a lien on the property for the amount of the clean up. The district does not negotiate favorable prices with the contractor on a board authorized work order.

But Winnacker stressed that the time and effort required by the MOFD staff to place a lien on property is last thing the district wants to do. "Our goal is always to achieve voluntary compliance," the chief said.

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