

Butte County Wildfire Mitigation Projects

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is proposing to fund three wildfire mitigation projects in Butte County. FEMA is inviting public input on issues that should be examined in the environmental analysis of these projects.

Butte County and the Butte County Fire Safe Council (BCFSC) are proposing wildfire mitigation activities to reduce the risk of wildfire-related impacts on people and property in Butte County, California. The Butte County Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (the Mitigation Plan) (updated in October 2019) ranks wildfire vulnerability in the County as extremely high and ranks the likelihood of future occurrence as highly likely. In Butte County, the fire hazard severity zones are in the northern and eastern portions of the County (see **Figure 1**). A stated goal of the Mitigation Plan is to reduce fire severity and intensity in Butte County and surrounding lands. In addition to the Mitigation Plan, Butte County and BCFSC participate in the Butte County Community Wildfire Protection Plan, which encourages vegetation management to significantly reduce fire hazards. The three projects proposed by Butte County and BCFSC include hazardous fuels reduction, code enforcement, and defensible space clearance (collectively referred to as "the Projects").

Butte County and BCFSC have applied to FEMA through the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) for three grants under FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Cal OES is the direct applicant for the grant, and Butte County and BCFSC are the Subapplicants. The HMGP is authorized by Section 404 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act. The funding would assist Butte County and BCFSC in implementing the Projects, which would reduce the risk of wildfire spread.

The stated purpose of the proposed HMGP Projects is to protect people and property by reducing the risk of wildfire-related impacts within Butte County. Per Butte County and BCFSC, the Projects include hazardous fuels reduction along county roads, code enforcement assistance and education outreach, and creation of defensible space around structures across the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI).

Why is an Environmental Assessment Required?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to review impacts on the natural and human environment before undertaking a federal action and to inform decision-making. Because the three grants would occur during the same time and would address wildfire hazards in complementary ways, there is the potential for effects on the natural and human environment. One Environmental Assessment (EA) would be prepared to cover all three projects per DHS Instruction 023-01 and FEMA Instruction 108-01-1, which implement NEPA.



FEMA



What is an Environmental Assessment?

An EA is completed to determine environmental impacts of the Projects' alternatives and to determine if the Projects require further in-depth analysis. The EA describes the existing environment, analyzes the environmental effects of the Projects and alternative actions, and identifies mitigation measures to avoid significant impacts on the human or natural environment. The EA may conclude that the Projects do not significantly impact the environment or that it may require more detailed analysis that would be described in an Environmental Impact Statement.

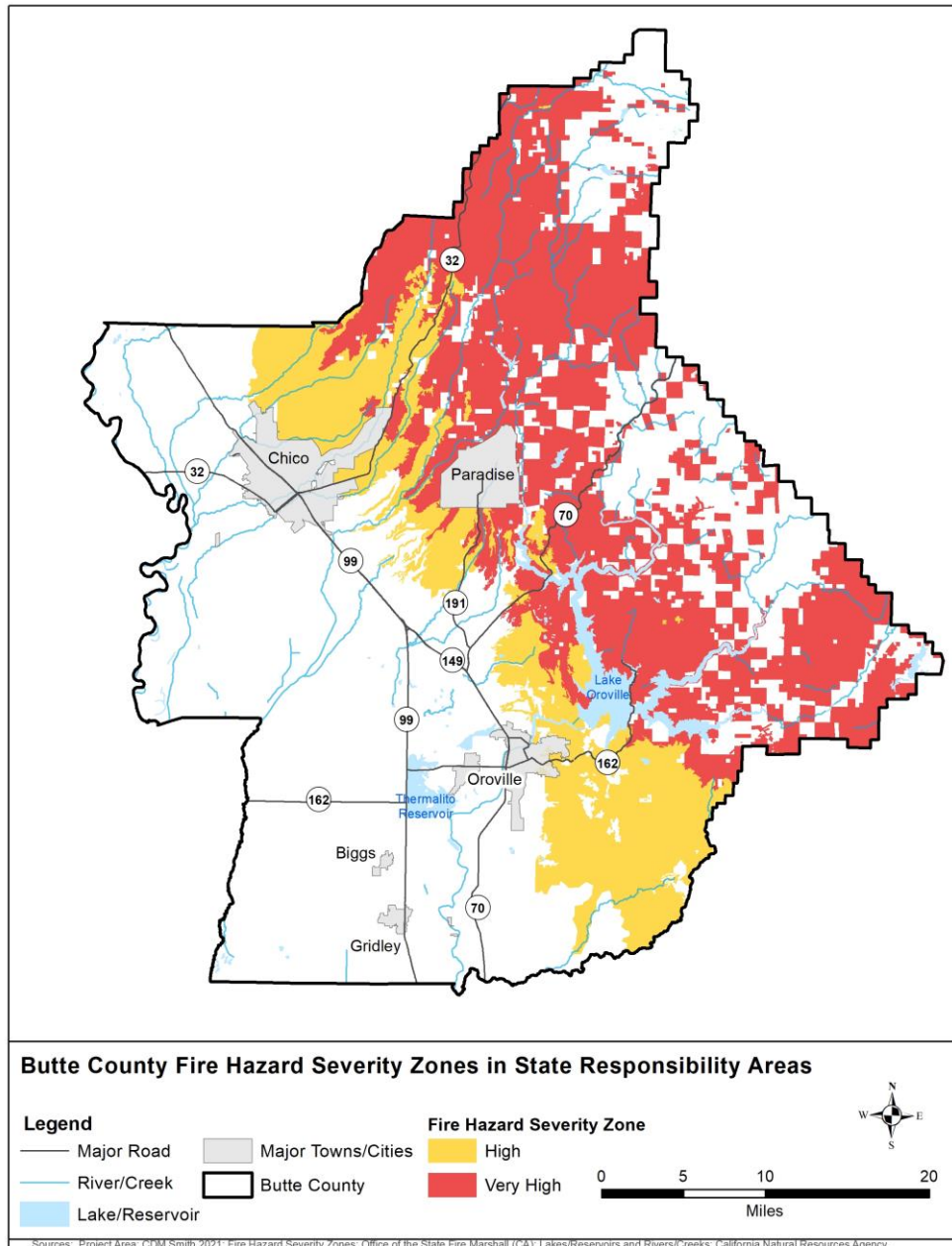


Figure 1: Butte County Fire Hazard Severity Zones

What Key Issues are Associated with the Projects?

- High fuel loads, along with rugged topography, create the potential for catastrophic wildfires in Butte County. Catastrophic wildfire can also result in other hazards such as flooding, landslides and mudflows, and erosion during the rainy seasons following a fire.
- The wildfire vulnerability in Butte County is extremely high according to the Butte County Local Hazard Mitigation Plan. From May to October of each year, Butte County faces a serious wildland fire threat as fires will continue to occur each year in Butte County. The threat of wildfire and potential losses are increasing as human development and population increase and the WUI areas expand.
- In November 2018, the Camp Fire became the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history. In addition to the Camp Fire, Butte County has a history of large fire occurrences. In 1990, the Campbell Fire scorched 131,000 acres. The Poe Fire burned 8,333 acres and destroyed 50 homes in Concow and Yankee Hill in 2001. And in 2008, the Humboldt Fire burned over 23,000 acres and 351 structures near Paradise. Most recently, in 2020, the North Complex Fire burned over 84,000 acres east of Lake Oroville, destroying homes in Berry Creek. The Dixie Fire burned a portion of the Plumas National Forest and threatened Butte Meadows in northern Butte County in 2021.

Alternatives Considered

Under NEPA, FEMA must evaluate a range of reasonable alternatives that address the purpose and need for the Projects. The no action alternative is included as a comparison with the other action alternative options.

Proposed Action

Butte County and BCFSC are proposing three projects with each project proposed to be funded under a separate FEMA grant. The three Projects include the following: 1) hazardous fuels reduction along county roads, 2) code enforcement assistance and education outreach, and 3) creation of defensible space.

1. **Hazardous fuel reduction.** Wildfire hazard is a growing threat to communities around the United States. According to the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) Wildfire Division, in 2018 more than 58,000 fires burned nearly nine million acres across the U.S., with California accounting for the highest number of structures lost that year. According to the U.S. Forest Service's Assessment of Spooner Hazardous Fuels Reduction and Healthy Forest Restoration, hazardous fuels reduction "provides heterogeneity that's been identified as a needed change in forest conditions, to improve ecological health, habitat, forest resilience, and otherwise diminish the undesirable impacts of future uncontrolled wildfires by creating 'speed bumps' for future large wildfires". Butte County proposes to conduct hazardous fuels reduction along 12 miles of Skyway. The project would remove brush and small trees up to 35 feet from the edges of the roads using masticators mounted on excavators. The project would include brush removal, pruning of trees, removal and chipping of understory trees, and thinning of overstory trees. Overall, given the apparent efficacy of this measure, FEMA determined to move forward with an environmental assessment.

2. **Code enforcement activities.** The National Wildfire Coordinating Group, which provides national leadership to enable interoperable wildland fire operations among federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial partners, provides in its Wildland-Urban Interface Wildfire Mitigation Desk Reference Guide a range of actions communities can undertake to become more fire adapted. These actions include adopting or updating codes, covenants, and ordinances to foster development in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) that minimizes fire risk through mitigation measures such as managing vegetation, increasing ignition resistance of structures, and ensuring safe evacuation routes. The proposed Butte County code enforcement project would ensure that structures being rebuilt in the Camp Fire boundary comply with the current ignition-resistant construction standards required in the unincorporated areas of Butte County. The project would provide Butte County with additional staff to handle fire rebuild permit reviews and inspections, public assistance and education, and code enforcement for public safety. This project would last for approximately 3 years and support Butte County through the majority of the rebuilding effort. Overall, given the apparent efficacy of this measure, FEMA determined to move forward with an environmental assessment.
3. **Defensible space creation.** According to the U.S. Fire Administration’s Creating a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, several of the risk factors that make an area susceptible to an interface fire can be mitigated to reduce the level of risk against fire. Such fuel control measures that mitigate fire risk include controlled burns, clearing of dead wood, cutting tall grass and brush, grazing to thin vegetation in particular areas and similar measures. In addition, the NFPA’s Fact Sheet “How to prepare your home for wildfire” recommends performing defensible space treatments up to 100 feet from the building or to the property line to mitigate wildfire and home ignition risk. BCFSC proposes to reduce the risk of wildfire-related impacts by assisting interested property owners with creating defensible space and reducing hazardous fuels at eligible homesites that are both within the WUI area and within 500 feet of a main evacuation route. The WUI is a general term that applies to areas where structures are mixed in with grass, brush, and timbered-covered lands. This project would create defensible space at up to 1,400 homesites and fire hazard tree removal at 1,200 additional sites. Crews conducting defensible space clearance work would hand-cut vegetation, which would then be chipped on-site. For tree removal, a certified arborist and registered professional forester would assess trees 10 inches in diameter and larger to determine whether the trees are a fire hazard. Licensed tree contractors would perform the tree removal. Overall, given the apparent efficacy of this measure, FEMA determined to move forward with an environmental assessment.

Avoidance and minimization measures would be incorporated into the Projects to limit the potential for adverse impacts to resources, such as surface waters and wildlife.

No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, no FEMA-funded wildfire mitigation measures would be conducted in Butte County. Butte County and BCFSC would continue implement the policies of the Butte County Community Wildfire Protection Plan; however, these efforts would likely be implemented in a less coordinated manner than the proposed action. The probability of loss of life and property in the event of a wildfire would not be reduced to the extent that it would be under the proposed action.

Opportunities for Public Comment

The public will have two opportunities to provide comments on the Projects. The first occurs during this scoping phase where the public is invited to comment on the scope of the EA, the proposed action, potential alternatives, and key issues to consider in the EA. After publication of the draft EA, there will be a 30-day comment period. The public will be invited to provide input on the information and analyses in the draft EA.

For more information contact:

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