

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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Th16a & Th19a

ADDENDUM

July 7, 2021

To: Coastal Commissioners and Interested Parties

From: Statewide Planning Staff

Subject: **ADDENDUM TO ITEMS Th16a and Th19a, PWP-2-VTP-21-0002-2 and PWP-3-VTP-21-0003-1, FOR THE COMMISSION MEETING OF THURSDAY, JULY 8, 2021.**

The purpose of this addendum is make one change to the staff reports and to respond to issues raised in public comments received in opposition to the proposed public works plan (PWP). Public comments are available for review under the correspondence tab for items [Th16a](#) and [Th19a](#).

Within both staff reports, the following changes are made using **bold/underline** for additions, and ~~strikethrough~~ for deletions. The changes are made on page 15 of item Th16a and page 14 of item Th19a, under section C. Coastal Habitats, General Ecological Considerations.:

For the last century, fire suppression, and more recently, **increased fire frequency in some areas and** climate change, have resulted in unhealthy forests that set the stage for disease, pest infestations, **non-native species invasion**, and larger and more intense fires than would naturally occur in the absence of human interventions.

The public comments reflect a misunderstanding of the entirety of the PWP process and its required resource protections, and they mischaracterize the PWP as a vegetation clearance program. The comments mainly focus on some issues related to the Board of Forestry's California Vegetation Treatment Program and the related Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (CalVTP PEIR). For example, some commenters assert that the VTP program does not provide an appropriate fire management regime in certain coastal habitat types and will lead to conversion of, or other damage to, native habitat. While the PWP utilizes the framework of the CalVTP PEIR in order to dovetail with the efforts of other state resource agencies, it includes additional and important protections, related to both public process and coastal resource protection. For example, embedded within the PWP is the concept that early coordination between project proponents and Commission staff will occur. The PWP further requires

Commission review and public hearings for each individual vegetation treatment project prior to authorization, and includes a set of key standards, called the Coastal Vegetation Treatment Standards, or Coastal VTS, that were developed by Commission staff in coordination with San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties and the RCDs, and were tailored to their respective locations to ensure each project is developed in conformance with the coastal resource protections of the Coastal Act. Collectively, this amounts to six levels of review prior to project implementation, including: 1) the early coordination between Commission staff and other agencies, 2) requiring project consistency with the CalVTP, 3) development of the Coastal VTS associated with the respective locality, 4) development and review of the Project Specific Analysis (PSA) for each project, 5) Commission review of the notice of impending development (NOID) for each project, which includes the opportunity to condition the project to achieve consistency with the PWP (including the Coastal VTS), and finally, 6) the opportunity for public comment on the NOID prior to approval.

While the Coastal VTS provides an overarching set of guidelines for projects in the coastal zone, the PSA is where project details will be provided, including proposed treatment types and strategies (e.g., thinning of invasive species, defensible space clearance, prescribed burning) for the particular location and habitat type (e.g., forest, chaparral, grassland). At that stage, appropriate community structure targets reflecting the fire frequencies (i.e. fire-return intervals) on the landscape would be validated considering estimated pre-European settlement conditions as well as future climate change. At that point, Commission staff would evaluate proposed treatment methods in detail to ensure that the least environmentally damaging feasible alternative is selected for implementation.

The Coastal VTS for San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties includes several key protections:

1. **Limits on Habitat Conversion:** The Coastal VTS requires that each of California's sensitive habitat types are not unintentionally converted within the coastal zone. Projects must be designed to retain or restore the appropriate species composition in the plant community with characteristic structure, including vegetation age, height and density. Indicator species and diagnostic species appropriate to the habitat type must be maintained in accordance with the standards (membership rules) set forth by the second edition of the Manual of California Vegetation (MCV2), with the intention of maintaining cover and composition consistent with meeting project ecological goals. Some exceptions are allowed for fire prevention/defensible space projects, though the majority of projects proposed through the PWP are for forest health.
2. **Fire Return Intervals:** The PWP ensures that vegetation management is carried out in a manner appropriate for, and sensitive to, the specific habitat area. Specifically, the Coastal VTS requires each project to be designed to return the area to a vegetation community structure informed by the appropriate fire return interval as identified in the literature or through other technical consultations. In areas with longer natural fire return intervals, vegetation treatment would be required to restore habitats to that longer interval, while in areas with shorter fire

return intervals, vegetation treatment would be required to restore habitats accordingly.

3. **Hierarchy for Vegetation Removal:** The Coastal VTS provides a hierarchy of vegetation removal that focuses projects on the removal of dead, dying and pest-infested trees and shrubs, as well as non-native, invasive species. The Coastal VTS includes a requirement to provide for an appropriate level of downed trees and snags for wildlife use. Removal of healthy vegetation is only allowed when such removal is necessary to achieve the habitat restoration and fire return interval goals of the specific project, or when there is no alternative to providing defensible space to protect existing structures and infrastructure.
4. **Limits on Heavy Equipment:** The Coastal VTS has strict limits on the use of heavy equipment.
5. **Limits on Herbicides:** The Coastal VTS strengthens the existing CalVTP Standard Project Requirements (SPRs) by restricting herbicide use to the maximum extent feasible and imposing strict limits on their use in the coastal zone. Specifically, the Coastal VTS requires that herbicide use be determined to be the least environmentally damaging feasible alternative *and* that such use would not have significant adverse impacts on sensitive coastal resources. These determinations would be made in the context of specific project proposals; the Commission could determine at that point whether a proposed use of herbicides was appropriate, taking into account other feasible treatment methods, the habitat type, and other factors.

Again, each individual project must adhere to the respective Coastal VTS and will be reviewed by the Commission through a public hearing process. Through review and approval of the related Notices of Impending Development (NOIDs), the Commission retains the authority to condition individual projects to ensure consistency with the protection standards of the PWP, including the more stringent, coastal-specific development standards contained within the respective Coastal VTS. Further, NOIDs are subject to public review and comment and a public hearing. A project cannot proceed unless it meets the PWP standards. Applicants for projects that do not fall within the PWP or that cannot meet PWP standards may apply for separate authorization through a Coastal Development Permit.

Moreover, the Commission understands that vegetation treatment is only one tool that is needed to achieve fire resilience in California. Indeed, house hardening, land use restrictions and other measures will absolutely be needed to protect people, property and habitats, especially from wind-driven fires. Nonetheless, forest health projects which restore vegetation to an appropriate mosaic of age, size and class, as well as fire prevention measures such as maintaining defensible space, are based on scientifically sound approaches to reducing wildfire risks. What's more, the PWPs are premised on overall habitat restoration since the majority of affected PWP acreage will be forest health projects, and thus by definition will result in overall ecological enhancement. Even for the minority of PWP acreage that will be the subject of fire prevention projects, these projects are required by the PWP to incorporate ecological enhancement principals as much as possible, and thus the cases where fire prevention projects do not lead to overall habitat enhancement are expected to be fairly limited.

Contrary to the assertions in some comments that the CalVTP does not include strong protection standards, the CalVTP Standard Project Requirements (SPRs) and mitigation measures provide for a robust baseline for coastal resource protection (that is then strengthened through the Coastal VTS). Indeed, the CalVTP includes 71 SPRs and 21 mitigation measures that generally require that projects be designed and implemented to avoid and minimize adverse impacts to sensitive natural resources. These include biological standards requiring data review and site-specific surveys to identify and avoid sensitive species; retention of minimum vegetative cover in riparian habitat to protect habitat integrity; avoidance of type conversion of Chaparral and Coastal Sage Scrub; measures to prevent the spread of invasive species and plant pathogens; and design standards that avoid impacts to wildlife, including during active bird nesting seasons. Further, numerous SPRs ensure that sensitive species and habitats will be protected against water quality impacts, such as through buffers from watercourses and erosion prevention, as well as hazardous materials, including herbicide drift. These and other development standards contained within the CalVTP are strengthened through the Coastal VTS.

Finally, to ensure the proposed PWP is clearly understood, it should be restated that the PWPs are being proposed by the Resource Conservation Districts of San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties, not CalFIRE. In addition, this program is tailored to the specific habitats of these two counties. Although vegetation management is an important component of fire resilience, any PWP or other fire management programs that are developed in other coastal zone regions of the state will be tailored to those specific regions and their coastal resources.

If the action on these PWPs is delayed, the result will be delays on important forest health and fire prevention projects in the Santa Cruz mountains, an area still recovering from a catastrophic wildfire in 2020. Specifically, the vegetation management project at the Girl Scout Camp at Butano Creek in San Mateo County, which will provide important fire risk reduction, including potentially improving conditions for evacuation of campers, may not be able to be conducted in 2021, and grant funding may be lost for the project.