



## MENDOCINO COUNTY FIRE SAFE COUNCIL

*To inform, empower, and mobilize county residents to survive and thrive in wildfire prone environments.*

### **Proposal to Invest PG&E Fire Settlement Funding in Long-Term Fire Mitigation Projects through the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Mendocino County Board of Supervisors is in the process of determining how best to deploy PG&E settlement funds it received as a result of wildfire damage to the County and its residents.

The Mendocino County Fire Safe Council (MCFSC) proposes that the County invest some portion of PG&E Settlement funds in supporting ongoing wildfire-mitigation programs and resources. These proposed investments in critical mitigation needs — all consistent with the County’s wildfire mitigation planning — are described in more detail below. We consider the following worthy of new or continued support:

1. Long-term base funding to maintain the delivery of critical fire-safety programs
2. Defensible-space assistance to income-eligible senior and disabled County residents
3. Ongoing support for MCFSC’s successful Community Chipper Program
4. Purchase of a chipper truck
5. Internal improvements to support the County’s new hazard-abatement ordinance
6. Other important wildfire-risk mitigation projects

Cost estimates are provided for programs described, except for the County’s internal hazard-abatement process. The MCFSC is strategically positioned to manage these programs effectively for Mendocino County based on either year-by-year funding or, preferably, a managed, multi-year approach.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Wildfire will remain an ongoing threat to our lives, property, community and environment for the foreseeable future, and actions and resources required for mitigating existing wildfire risks are substantial. The MCFSC feels strongly that the county needs to direct as much of this available funding as possible toward preparing county residents to survive and thrive in our wildfire-prone environment — which is, in fact, MCFSC’s mission.



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Coincident with the County receiving the PG&E funds is the recent updating of the Mendocino County Disaster Mitigation Plan, which identifies wildfire risk as a major priority. Appropriately, the plan's draft identifies key needs but does not address costs or sources of funding to provide needed mitigation. Because mitigation activities need to continue year after year, as forest fuels are removed and grow back, however, scheduling funding of needed mitigation activities is critical. MCFSC's proposals are intended to support key mitigation objectives by identifying costs and timeframes and creating realistic work scopes for the individual objectives. Our proposals also provide a path for mitigation efforts to occur without adding to the County's workload.

To address the needs cited in the plan, MCFSC brings substantial experience to the table. We have already delivered extensive and effective programs and projects focused on wildfire-risk mitigation, including both delivering bilingual programs that educate the public on safety and preparedness and implementing strategic on-the-ground fuels-reduction projects and programs providing emergency-access improvements. All of these efforts need support in order to continue.

Investing a portion of the PG&E settlement in long-term funding for MCFSC will continue providing the County with an effective, efficient means of delivering crucial wildfire-hazard mitigation activities.

MCFSC proposes that the County consider funding some or all of the following items. Each of these is consistent with both county mitigation needs and appropriate programmatic application of funds from the PG&E settlement. Each could be scaled up or down, and either funded year-by-year or with multi-year support thru upfront funding for specified lengths of time. The managed multi-year approach holds the advantage that money set aside for future years' operations could be prudently invested and potentially extend the duration of related programs well beyond the reach of year-by-year funding. Coupled with project reporting to the County, the latter approach also eliminates the need for repeated annual administration of proposals and funding by the Board of Supervisors.

### PROPOSALS

#### 1) Long-term base funding to maintain the delivery of critical fire-safety programs

Base-operations funding is the most difficult type of grant for a nonprofit operation to obtain. We are very grateful for the County's generous base-funding support for MCFSC in recent years. Stable funding for basic infrastructure and core staff allows us to focus on delivering on our core mission rather than spending time and resources attempting to maintain the organization.

Over the past eighteen months, with the County's support, this approach has proven incredibly



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productive in deliverables for county residents. Stable ongoing operating funds would allow us to continue to roll out vital and often otherwise unfunded activities including on-the-ground road-clearing, chipper days and other services; producing and distributing educational materials (wildfire-preparedness brochures, free online home-hardening videos, the Fire Safe Mendocino radio series, and our English and Spanish PSAs); and to begin contributing to addressing County needs on issues such as improved mitigation planning, abatement ordinances, homeowner fire-insurance policy concerns, fire-break maintenance, prescribed-burn implementation, and fire-fighting water resource development.

Finally, since many government and other grants require a local source of matching funds, fixed funding from Mendocino County could serve as a built-in base of matching funds, which would make it much easier to both attract and fulfill the requirements of additional grant funding.

As currently configured, the MCFSC can operate in a bare-bones mode for about \$120,000 per year, or at its current level of operations for about \$200,000 per year. If the County provided multi-year funding for ten years of base operations for the MCFSC for a total of \$1,200,000, returns on that investment would keep the MCFSC in operation for more than eleven years.

### **2) Support Defensible-Space Assistance for Income-Eligible senior and disabled residents, which is currently unfunded (ref. MCFSC's successful Fall 2020 DSAFIE program)**

Maintaining defensible space around residences is essential in reducing the likelihood of home ignition, while improving evacuation and first-responder ingress. It also involves a lot of hard physical work. Mendocino County has a significant aging population that is less able to do this work, and many seniors cannot afford to hire workers. So maintaining defensible space, despite the State mandate, is simply not getting done on many of these properties, endangering not only residents but their neighbors as well.

Ensuring that income-qualified seniors and disabled residents are able to maintain defensible space will require subsidizing and organization. MCFSC estimates that there are about 2,500 such households in Mendocino County needing assistance in maintaining a safe defensible space. Our DSAFIE program delivers that service for an average cost per household of about \$1,300. Assisting every County household in need of this service would therefore total an estimated \$3.25 million. This need can be addressed rapidly (given adequate capacity) with that total, or more gradually with smaller annual amounts. For example, \$650,000 spent annually over a five-year period would allow MCFSC to assist 500 households/year. Or we could make substantial progress working at a slower pace, by reducing program scope, for instance, to assisting 200 households per year for an estimated \$260,000 annually. Again, prefunding the program for multiple years would provide a return that would extend the program even further.



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### **3) Ongoing support for MCFSC's successful Community Chipper Program**

Community chipper programs leverage community-based donated labor to achieve substantial fire-fuel reduction and improved defensible space. In our current program, property owners and residents do the work of clearing defensible space themselves (or with hired workers or neighborhood work parties) and stack the resulting brush and wood for our crews to chip. This saves residents considerable expense, while providing motivation and deadlines for getting the work done. (A recent poll in Marin found that 86% of chipper program users say they would not have performed the fuel reduction work that they did, if they hadn't been motivated by the community chipper programs.) Chipper days also encourage neighborhood organization – one of our best tools for optimal wildfire preparedness. In addition to decreasing fire-fuel load and fuel ladders, chipping also decreases brush-pile burning, which in turn helps improve air quality.

In 2020, the MCFSC organized over 60 community chipper days, giving us considerable recent experience with this process. Included in these were training and chipping programs with Hopland Pomo Tribe members both on and off the Hopland Rancheria. We are currently implementing an automated system software-driven program for chipper-day management to provide a more powerful tool for significantly expanding this important program.

Chipper days cost roughly \$1,500 per day to organize, publicize, administer and deliver, so 100 chipper days per year would therefore cost \$150,000 annually. \$1 million of prefunding should support that level of the Community Chipper Program for seven or more years.

### **4) Purchase of a chipper truck**

MCFSC's chipper program would benefit from the addition of a chipper truck that can both pull the chipper and contain and haul away chips. This would eliminate the need to either ensure that all residences are prepared to accept chips broadcast on-site on the chipper day, or engage a contractor who can furnish a chipper truck. Currently, when a truck is required, we need to pass off jobs to subcontractors who have their own trucks. Owning our own equipment would both substantially simplify coordination and reduce long-term program costs. The anticipated cost of a viable used chipper truck including taxes, registration and related costs is estimated at \$65,000.

### **5) Internal improvements to support the County's hazard-abatement ordinance**

Although this funding would not be directed to the MCFSC, we also recommend that the County consider investing some portion of the funding to support automation of the internal County process for enforcing its proposed hazard-abatement ordinance. Ideally, the County platform would include a function whereby qualified parties outside of County staff could submit hazard-abatement requests, potentially expanding the reach of the program beyond locations that County personnel can



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personally review. A robust automated process could allow County personnel to document and review candidate properties online in a uniform manner and automatically generate initial homeowner notices. Potential enforcement actions could be prioritized and assigned electronically as well. Such an initial investment could significantly minimize ongoing operation costs of the program over its lifetime.

### 6) Other important wildfire-risk mitigation projects

The MCFSC considers the efforts described above as most essential, but myriad others need attention as well. We would welcome additional funding for any of the following; we also note that (given solid base funding) the MCFSC should have the capacity over time to work on securing other grant funding sources to support projects in these areas:

- Strategically selected roadside-clearing projects and fuel breaks.
- Additional clearing (or creation of) ingress and egress routes.
- Updating the County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) as well as regional CWPPs.
- Developing a robust County network of early-detection cameras.
- Identifying strategic locations and developing a network of emergency fire-fighting water resources.
- Developing more robust early-warning systems and community evacuation plans.
- Developing plans, routines and funding for long-term fire-break maintenance.
- Developing a program to support wide use of prescribed burns.
- Creating detailed mapping to guide out-of-area responders regarding, for instance, rural road networks, water resources and escape routes.

Thank you for recognizing the importance of this work in the past, and for helping us to sustain and continue developing it to better address the County's needs in coming years.

Respectfully, for the Mendocino Fire Safe Council,

A black and white photograph of a handwritten signature, likely of Scott Cratty.

Scott Cratty  
Executive Director

A black and white photograph of a handwritten signature, likely of Joseph B. Zicherman.

Joseph B. Zicherman, Ph.D, SFPE  
Chairman, MCFSC Board of Directors