LOCAL NEWS

Marin fire inspectors use new ‘scoring’ system for risk assessment

Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority inspectors Dominic Pasero, left, Marlon Mejia and Sydney Knudsen head out into a neighborhood with David Glenn, a wildfire mitigation specialist, in San Anselmo, Calif., on Wednesday, July 24, 2024. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)



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Marin fire officials who conduct home fire risk evaluations have a new tool to determine which properties need the most attention.

The Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority has developed what’s called a “dynamic risk scoring” system that it is using this year for the first time, said Mark Brown, executive director of the agency.

It’s a method where each fire hazard on an inspected property is documented and run through a computer fire simulation. The system considers the hazard type, the volume and location of the hazard on the parcel to produce a fire risk score, Brown said.

Those in the top percentile are flagged for reinspection, Brown said.

This year, Marin fire officials conducted about 20,000 initial home inspections. About 2,000 homes, or 10%, met the criteria for reinspection, Brown said. Those followup evaluations began earlier this month and will continue through October, he said.

“Reinspecting every property is not feasible,” Brown said. “This lets us target our reinspection efforts to the properties that need it most, and we can focus the limited grant funding we have to make the most impactful actions.”

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Meg McCabe is executive director of programming for Fire Safe Marin, a coalition dedicated to fire safety education and work.

“I think this is one of the most powerful programs we have in Marin as far as tools for residents,” McCabe said.

“These reinspections shouldn’t be thought of as a citation or anything punitive, but more of a service for the residents,” McCabe said. That has been part of the messaging by her organization that “residents see this as a tool for their own safety,” she said.

With the change in approach, more residents also appear to be taking proactive steps to correct hazards, Brown said. Residents are taking pictures of their work and submitting the images to inspectors through an online portal.

Brown said the fire authority is receiving about 100 uploads a week and is on track to receive about 1,500 before the end of the year. That’s up from 650 submissions when the self-reporting service was first introduced in 2022, he said.

The participation is helping inspectors concentrate on properties and neighborhoods where work is still needed, Brown said.

That’s a good thing, said Kelby Jones, a leader of his Firewise-certified Lucas Valley Homeowners Association neighborhood of more than 500 homes. Firewise is a program where neighborhoods come together to create defensible space around their homes and community.

“Their objective is to have the greatest impact on the highest wildfire risk that they can have,” Jones said.

“The evaluation program is one of the biggest motivators for people to get work done,” Jones said. “In the many years I’ve been involved in Firewise, I’ve never seen more progress since we’ve had the benefit of two inspections. There was a tremendous amount of hazardous vegetation removed.”

The Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority offers grants, funded by Measure C parcel tax revenues, to property owners who seek reimbursement for creating a “defensible space” on their properties or reducing the risks of wildfires igniting their houses or yards. Applicants can be awarded up to $2,500 per parcel.

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Examples of home projects that are eligible for the grant include replacing a combustible fence with a metal one, installing house vents that can block embers and placing gutter guards on the roof. Homeowners also can be reimbursed for the removal of yard vegetation that’s less than 30 feet from the home.

The grant does not pay for homeowners’ equipment, but the funds can reimburse them for hiring contractors. Recipients must provide proof they completed a wildfire defense project before they can be paid. In order to be eligible for grant funding, applicants must first have their home property evaluated by a Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority inspector.

In Novato, property owners can request free fire risk assessments from the fire district. They can also apply for a maximum $1,000 grant for vegetation removal or up to $2,500 for home hardening.

Quinn Gardner, San Rafael’s deputy director of emergency management, said the city has a “direct assistance” program that offers free vegetation removal for residents. She said the program has cleared highly flammable plants such as Italian cypress, bamboo and juniper from more than 500 properties.

Gardner said the city is also developing a proposal for a new abatement program that would enable city fire officials to clear hazards on properties that have failed to comply with corrective citations.

“We can’t change the hillsides around our homes, and we can’t change weather patterns,” Gardner said. “But what we can change is our home and the vegetation around our home, and so that is really what our focus is.”

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