




Agenda Item: H-2  
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Continued Item: No

## Board Agenda Item

TO: Air Pollution Control District Board

FROM: Aeron Arlin Genet, Air Pollution Control Officer 

CONTACT: Kalie Bonomo, Air Quality Specialist, (805) 979-8310

SUBJECT: Prescribed Burn Program Update

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### RECOMMENDATION:

Receive and file an update on the District's prescribed burn program.

### BACKGROUND:

The District's Smoke Management Program minimizes smoke impacts from permitted and prescribed burns to communities in Santa Barbara County through implementation and enforcement of state law<sup>1</sup>.

### DISCUSSION:

For clarity, there are two categories of burning that are regulated by the District: permitted burns and prescribed burns.

#### ***Santa Barbara County Permitted Burning***

Permitted burning includes agricultural burning, fire hazard reduction burning, and residential dry vegetation (backyard) burning.

- Agricultural burning is the open outdoor use of fire to reduce waste produced from agricultural operations.

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<sup>1</sup> Title 17 California Code of Regulations, Division 3, Chapter 1, Subchapter 2, Article 1, Section 80102 and Regulation IV (District Rule 401 – Agricultural & Prescribed Burning)

- Fire hazard reduction burning is the burning of cuttings from trees, vines or bushes that have been cut specifically to reduce a potential fire hazard. Fire Hazard Reduction Burning is restricted to “high” and “very high” fire hazard severity zones.
- Residential burning is the burning of dried leaves, weeds, grass clippings, shrubbery, and tree prunings by occupants of one- and two-family dwellings only, and only within northern Santa Barbara County except in the incorporated cities of Solvang, Santa Maria and Lompoc.

Santa Barbara County Fire (SBC Fire) is the agency that issues burn permits. If a burner has been issued a permit, they are allowed to burn on a local burn day in their area. The local burn day decisions are made by SBC Fire based on factors associated with fire danger and can be the same as or more stringent than the daily decision made by the California Air Resources Board (CARB). The District may provide input on local burn day decisions based on potential air quality impacts. These local burn day decisions only apply to permitted burns and are available on the SBC Fire website (<https://sbcfire.com/permit-burning/>) and via a phone message recorded by SBC Fire (805-686-8177).

### ***Prescribed Burns***

The District supports prescribed burning as a vegetation management tool for reducing the risk of wildfires, which produce more harmful smoke and ash for longer durations and at unpredictable times. The District’s Smoke Management Program is designed to minimize smoke impacts to the public by providing early and comprehensive outreach about upcoming burns so that people — especially sensitive groups like children, seniors, and those with heart or lung conditions — can take proactive steps to protect themselves from any smoke impacts. The Smoke Management Program also helps prevent exceedances of federal and state ambient air quality standards.

Prescribed burning is the controlled application of fire to the land to reduce wildfire hazards, clear downed trees, control plant diseases, improve rangeland and wildlife habitats, and restore natural ecosystems. Prescribed burns are ignited under a specific set of environmental conditions that collectively constitute a “prescription.” These conditions include temperature, wind speed and direction, fuel moisture, and relative humidity, but seasonality and other factors may also be included. Prescribed burns are conducted by Land Managers including federal, state, local, or private entities. Throughout our region, the primary Land Managers are SBC Fire and the United States Forest Service (USFS). Other Land Managers include the National Park Service, Vandenberg Space Force Base (VSFB), State Parks, UCSB, and the Santa Barbara Cattlemen’s Association.

Prescribed burns require a Smoke Management Plan, and a daily Ignition Request, both of which must be approved by the District. Prescribed burns are not subject to the local burn day decisions made by SBC Fire as mentioned above regarding permitted burns. Instead, prescribed burns can occur on CARB-approved burn days for our area, and those designations occur more often than the more-stringent SBC Fire local burn day decisions. In 2025, CARB allowed burning in our air basin on 346 out of 365 days.

There are three main types of prescribed burns: pile burns, broadcast burns, and air curtain incinerator (ACI) burns.

- Pile burning is the burning of piles made from the debris or dead vegetation left after fuel reduction projects that involve thinning or cutting of vegetation.
- Broadcast burning is where low-intensity fire is applied across a predetermined area (also called a burn unit). It can vary in size from less than an acre to tens of thousands of acres.
- ACI burning is the burning of wood waste inside an air curtain incinerator, a pollution-control device used to burn wood by blowing high-velocity air over the fire in a box, which is a cleaner and faster alternative to traditional open burning.

### ***Statewide Efforts***

In recent years, prescribed burning has increasingly been prioritized at the state level. In 2018, California Senate Bill (SB) 1260 was enacted. The District has two grant agreements with CARB that are funded through SB 1260: the Prescribed Burn Air Monitoring Equipment Cache Storage Program Grant and the Prescribed Burn Reporting and Monitoring Support Program Grant. As part of the Prescribed Burn Reporting and Monitoring Support Program Grant, staff attend the monthly CAPCOA Prescribed Burn Work Group meetings and the annual CAPCOA-CARB Prescribed Burn training.

In 2021, Governor Newsom created the California Wildfire & Forest Resilience Task Force to enhance coordination among federal, state, local, public, private, and tribal organizations to support prescribed burning. In October 2025, Governor Newsom signed an executive order directing state agencies to reduce red tape and expand tools to safely deploy beneficial fire projects. Earlier this month, Governor Gavin Newsom proclaimed May 3-9, 2026 as Wildfire Preparedness Week — calling on Californians to stay vigilant and prepared year-round for wildfires. Part of that preparedness is the treatment of hundreds of thousands of acres annually through fuel-reduction projects and prescribed burns, reducing the threat of wildfire across the state.

To support these efforts, the District works in partnership with the lead burn agency to ensure the success of a prescribed burn. District staff have dedicated years building relationships with SBC Fire, USFS, and VSFB to plan the prescribed burn season well in advance. Since 2016, Santa Barbara County Land Managers have burned approximately 4,843 acres using prescribed burning.

Below is information detailing the District's thorough process in approving prescribed burns.

### ***Smoke Management Plans (SMPs)***

The first step toward completing a prescribed burn in Santa Barbara County is the submittal of a Smoke Management Plan (SMP). Land Managers submit SMPs through the Prescribed Fire Information Reporting System (PFIRS) for District review and approval. The primary goal of the SMP is to define the ideal prescription for conducting a successful burn while minimizing air quality impacts. SMPs include the following:

- Burn information (e.g., location, acreage, fuel moisture, fuel arrangement, fuel density, tons of fuel/acre, estimated emissions, calculation methodology, elevation, and slope);

- Day-of ignition conditions (e.g., ideal surface wind direction and speed, transport winds, mixing height, temperatures, and relative humidity);
- Identification of smoke-sensitive areas; and
- Smoke mitigation measures (e.g., curing time of fuels, test burns, smoke spotters to evaluate smoke dispersion, ignition methods, burn sequencing to manage smoke dispersion, and mop-up).

Additionally, the SMP includes the Land Manager’s public outreach methods. The District requires a two-step notification process that involves the District and Land Manager issuing a joint news release two-to-three weeks prior to the burn, and jointly issuing a media advisory on the morning of or day prior to the burn.

Lastly, the SMP includes project maps, and any alternatives to burning that the Land Manager has conducted. If an SMP needs to be amended, the District returns it to the Land Manager with comments and the Land Manager addresses the comments and resubmits. Once the SMP is complete, the District approves the SMP and shares it with neighboring air agencies (i.e., San Luis Obispo County, Ventura County, and San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Districts). In conjunction with the SMP approval, a site visit may be conducted if a prescribed burn has not recently occurred at the site, if the terrain is complex, or if it is near sensitive receptors.

### ***Ignition Authorization Requests***

Prior to burning, the Land Manager submits an Ignition Authorization Request in PFIRS for District approval. Prior to authorizing ignition, District staff review the National Weather Service’s (NWS) forecast and the District’s air quality forecast for ozone and particulate matter for the proposed burn date. Staff check forecasted temperature, wind speed, wind direction, relative humidity, and mixing height to ensure forecasted conditions align with the prescription included in the SMP and that they are conducive to smoke lift and dispersion. The primary meteorological consideration for burning is having a good mixing height. A mixing height over 1,500 feet causes smoke to rise and disperse; therefore, reducing ground level impacts from the burn. District staff will also generate a smoke model to predict cumulative impacts of smoke from the prescribed burn, and will review forecasted air quality conditions to determine if a burn has the potential to cause an exceedance. In the days leading up to the prescribed burn, staff discuss forecasted conditions with CARB and NWS and provide input on burn day decisions based on what we may be seeing locally.

After reviewing all available information staff will decide whether to approve an Ignition Request. If ignition authorization is granted, staff will inform the Land Manager of the ideal window for burning based on the forecast and smoke models. Most Ignition Requests are approved by the District; however, Land Managers do not always decide to burn. If weather conditions are not within the identified fire prescription, they will not burn.

Over the past ten years, between April 2016 and April 2026, the District received 352 Ignition Requests. Of these requests, only 18 were denied by the District due to anticipated poor smoke lift and dispersion based on forecasted meteorology, smoke models, and discussion with CARB meteorologists and Land Managers.

### ***Smoke Impact Monitoring***

After approving an SMP and receiving an Ignition Request, staff work to deploy a portable air quality monitor, called an E-BAM, near the prescribed burn, if it is determined that the E-BAM would be a useful supplement to air quality readings from the District's permanent air monitoring network and low-cost sensors. E-BAMs are usually set up at schools or medical buildings, and staff across multiple divisions are trained to handle E-BAM deployment.

For burns that occur near sensitive receptors, staff will be on site, collecting meteorological data, participating in the safety briefing, and sharing the spot forecast and latest available meteorological data with the fire crew. If staff are not on site, they will remain in contact with the Land Manager throughout the burn and check nearby monitors to record air quality readings.

To preempt impacts to the public or the environment, anticipated concerns and/or documented observations are conveyed to the Land Manager in real time for evaluation and response. In rare circumstances, if necessary, due to smoke impacts, staff will work with the Land Manager/Burn Boss to stop the burn; however, it is not always possible to immediately stop the burn and can depend on the terrain, burn type, and other factors.

### ***Complaints***

If the District receives complaints from the public about a prescribed burn, staff contact the reporting party as quickly as possible. Often the reporting party is curious about the smoke but not being affected by it. In these situations, staff explain that a prescribed burn is occurring, let them know approximately how long the burn will last, and point them to the District website to see the District's news release and media advisory for more information. In the last 10 years, the District has only received eight complaints related to prescribed burns in Santa Barbara County.

### ***Prescribed Burn Outreach***

To reduce potential complaints and ensure the public is informed of upcoming prescribed burns, the District prioritizes public outreach. Since 2018, the District has issued more than 193 prescribed burn notifications; the District currently has approximately 2,350 subscribers to our prescribed burns email list and approximately 1,000 subscribers to the prescribed burns text message list, in addition to a comprehensive list of local media. Most of the District's prescribed burn notifications are issued in English and Spanish, and the District also posts information about upcoming burns on our website and social media. Anyone can sign up to receive future email and/or text message notifications about prescribed burns: [www.OurAir.org/subscribe](http://www.OurAir.org/subscribe).

Depending on the size of the burn and proximity to roadways, Land Managers may also use highway signage to share that a burn is taking place. Land Managers also reach out to neighboring properties, such as schools and vineyards, prior to burning. The District and SBC Fire communicate with winemakers throughout the county by proactively engaging in communication with the Santa Barbara Vintners Association. In April, the District was invited to attend a statewide forum, hosted by the Climate & Wildfire Institute and CalFIRE, to discuss the benefits of prescribed burning, smoke models and tools, and the latest research regarding grapes and wildfire smoke. Attendees included vintners, land managers, university researchers, CalFIRE, CAPCOA, CARB, and various air districts. At the forum, the District's Compliance

Division Supervisor helped present on air districts' role with smoke management for prescribed burns.

Continuing in our efforts to keep the public well-informed about prescribed burns, the District is currently working with a vendor to create a Prescribed Burn Map. The map will be available on the District's website and will serve as a one-stop-shop for the public to find smoke management plans, news releases, and other information about burns, all in a mapping tool. Once the map is complete, the District will share it with your Board and the public.

### ***Challenges***

Particularly in Santa Barbara County, Land Managers face various challenges in trying to accomplish prescribed burning. These include dealing with rugged terrain, limited resources to cover large swaths of land (there are approximately 1.75 million acres of land in Santa Barbara County), public perception and smoke anxiety, and meteorology. This includes meteorology that does not meet prescription and weather that stops burns due to concerns about fire hazards. The District strives to work closely with Land Managers to ensure that burns can successfully occur with minimal air quality impacts.

### **FISCAL IMPACT:**

Aside from SB 1260 grant funds for air district efforts to expand prescribed burning, which total an average amount of \$105,000 per year, the District's Smoke Management Program and associated staff time to administer is unfunded. The revenues and costs for the prescribed burn program described above are included in the budget approved by your Board.