

Permits ‘mostly’ not needed to reduce brush

■ Local wants emergency declared over wildfire risk

By CHRIS COUNTS

BECAUSE FIRE prevention work and environmental regulations often clash, several residents of fire-prone neighborhoods wondered aloud at a meeting of the Big Sur Multi-Agency Advisory Council two weeks ago if permits are required to do state-mandated vegetation clearance around their homes.

In response, county official John Dugan said the county faces “a balancing act” when weighing the concerns of wildfire safety and the protection of endangered species and suggested that “sometimes consultation is necessary” — which led some to believe that permits, which can be costly and time-consuming to get, would be required to reduce vegetation that encroaches on their homes.

Not needed, but ...

After the meeting, Dugan and another county official, Carl Holm, said residents don’t need permits to reduce vegetation — if they follow guidelines.

“As long as the work is done with an ecological interest in mind, it doesn’t need a permit,” Holm explained.

Unfortunately, some property owners cut back too much vegetation, which can cause erosion, or simply cut down oaks or redwoods they don’t want, Holm said.

“Limbing up a tree is fine, but if you want to cut down a live tree, you need a permit,” he said.

While state law requires those who own or live in homes “in or adjoining a mountainous area, forest-covered lands, brush-covered lands, grass-covered lands, or land that is covered with flammable material” to “maintain defensible space” no less than 100 feet from a structure, Holm also said people can extend their fuel reduction work beyond 100 feet — as long as the work is done with restraint.

A growing threat

Holm said his agency is in a tough spot as it tries to find a balance between protecting homes and doing the same for sensitive species.

“The county is caught in the middle,” Holm explained. “I hear the public’s concern — we’re trying to bridge the gap.”

On the day of the meeting, several large wildfires were raging throughout the state, underscoring the timeliness of the topic. Just days later, the United States Forest Service announced Extreme Fire Danger restrictions are in effect throughout Los Padres National Forest until at least the end of the year.

Big Sur resident Mike Caplin, who lost his home in the 2016 Soberanes Fire, has long pushed for more permissive regulations that would allow people leeway to protect their homes.

At Friday’s hearing, Caplin urged the county to ask Gov. Gavin Newsom to declare an emergency so efforts to

reduce vegetation can proceed with less hindrance, oversight and expense.

Just three years after the Soberanes Fire destroyed 57 homes in the Palo Colorado area, many residents in rural communities are keeping a watchful eye on the dense and dry vegetation that surrounds their homes — and they’re also concerned how much scrutiny their fuel reduction efforts will attract due to the concerns of the California Coastal Commission and environmental groups, which are trying to protect endangered or threatened species.

Because clearing brush is time-consuming and often arduous or expensive, some residents are critical of anything that could add more money or time to their efforts to create defensible space around their structures.

While he isn’t advocating for clearcutting properties with trees, Caplin said residents should be able to thin them out if they are spaced too closely together — and he said Cal Fire’s guidelines recommend doing so. He said such work shouldn’t require permits.

“Vast areas in Monterey County are unnaturally and hazardously overgrown,” Caplin said. “This has been acknowledged by state and federal officials for decades. Monterey County should be asking people to thin woodlands to a density that more closely approximates what the area would look like if fires weren’t suppressed. If this isn’t done, we’re setting the stage for another catastrophe.”