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# Community meeting to discuss fuel break in Ukiah's Western Hills

City, county and state officials to attend

By **JUSTINE FREDERIKSEN** | [udjff@ukiahdj.com](mailto:udjff@ukiahdj.com) |

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Officials from the Ukiah Valley Fire Authority, Mendocino County and Cal Fire are hosting a community meeting Thursday evening to discuss plans to "restore and expand" a shaded fuel break at the base of Ukiah's Western Hills.

Kevin Jennings, division chief for the UVFA and the city of Ukiah's fire marshal, said that the meeting is primarily intended for people who live in or near the Western Hills, but is open to all members of the public who wish to attend.

"We love our trees in Ukiah; they make Ukiah what it is. But Ukiah could also become another Paradise," he said, referring to the town in Butte County destroyed by the Camp Fire last month.

To prevent that devastation (or mitigate it, since Jennings said you can't prevent fires completely) he said he is working with Cal Fire and other agencies to improve the fuel barriers in the hills west of Ukiah. Within the city limits, he said, a "shaded fuel break" was created more than a decade ago to prevent a wildfire from blowing down the hills from the west and straight into the valley below.

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"Shaded means you leave the canopy," he said. "And when the last one was done, the intention was that the property owners would maintain it. But that hasn't happened."

So this coming winter, Jennings plans to go "door-to-door" with a "hold harmless agreement" that will allow the city to access people's property to create, and, more importantly, maintain, the fuel break. "Once we have that agreement in place, it is valid until the property changes hands," he said.

Mendocino County officials said the "goal of a shaded fuel break is to thin the surface vegetation, remove dead and down woody material, remove ladder fuels to prevent a catastrophic fire, and prevent the loss of structures. The project involves the use of hand tools and power equipment to re-establish a 100-200 foot wide space, shaded by the mature tree canopy. Width of the break will vary due to slope of terrain and fuel loading.

Other agencies are working with Jennings to create a fuel break not just directly west of the city, but "all along the base of the western hills from Highway 253 to Hensley Creek," and they advise residents that "if your property is included and/or adjacent to the project, it is recommended you attend this meeting. Representatives from the UVFA and Cal Fire will lead a short presentation on the project, and will be available for questions and answers."

The meeting begins Thursday, Dec. 13 at 5:30 p.m. in the Ukiah City Council Chambers at 300 Seminary Ave. For more information about the project, call Jennings at (707) 462-7921.

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**Justine Frederiksen**

# Mendocino County and Ukiah working to improve fire mitigation plans

By Curtis Driscoll | [cdriscoll@willitsnews.com](mailto:cdriscoll@willitsnews.com) |

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Mendocino County announced Wednesday that it and the city of Ukiah are working with Cal Fire and other groups on reviewing, improving, and updating fire prevention and mitigation measures for the Ukiah Valley area, including the western hills that border Ukiah, to strengthen the protection for people in Mendocino County.

The recent Mendocino Complex Fire was the biggest in California history and now stands at 459,123 acres. It destroyed over 150 residences and led to mandatory evacuations and evacuation warnings throughout Mendocino and Lake counties. Mendocino County is also still dealing with the financial effect of the 2017 October fires in Redwood Valley. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and severity of wildfires in California, making the issue key for local government.

To help address the increased risk of wildfires, Mendocino County has applied for a grant to update a Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan with support from cities like Ukiah, Fort Bragg, Willits and Point Arena. The county says that once funding is awarded, this multi-jurisdictional mitigation planning process will seek public input and ultimately identify hazard mitigation strategies which could reduce the risk of future fires throughout Mendocino County.

Outside of the Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan process, the county said it is talking with experts from fire agencies, the University of California Cooperative Extension, and strategic landowners to identify and implement vegetation management practices that will more immediately reduce the risk of wildfires. Once potential resources have been identified and additional information obtained, the county said there would be public meetings for the community and property owners.

County Supervisor John McCowen said, "Recent fires have made clear that we need defensible space for communities, not just individual properties."

Ukiah Mayor Kevin Doble said, "I welcome this opportunity to work cooperatively with the county and other agencies to better protect our community from the devastating impacts of uncontrolled wildfires."

# Before the Fires: Preparing Ukiah's Western Hills for the next large fire

## Jennings: 'It's not a question of if, but when'

By [Justine Frederiksen](#) | [udjff@ukiahdj.com](mailto:udjff@ukiahdj.com) |

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Homes built in the Western Hills above Ukiah come with sweeping views of the valley. But they also come with increased risk of being destroyed by fire.

"This is the high-risk fire zone," said Ukiah Valley Fire Authority Division Chief Kevin Jennings as he drove up Maple Avenue to check on some of the sprawling properties above the Ukiah Valley Golf Course earlier this week. And although this year's fire season was not yet over, he was already gearing up for next year.

"This is a good example of how to prepare your property," said Jennings, standing in Josh Huff's driveway Monday. Huff said he has five acres, and clears the vegetation himself as often as he can.

"He's doing a great job," Jennings said, pointing out that all the vegetation has been cleared to a height of six feet. "So if this grass catches fire, you can put that out with a garden hose. And those leaves aren't a concern – you don't need to rake the forest."

What does concern him, he said, are a lot of the overgrown areas along Doolan Canyon Drive.

"It wouldn't take anything, in the summer months, for that grass to get up into these madrones and create a bigger fire," he said, pointing to a section of the hillside that is outside the city limits. "I'd also like to see area along the roads cleared 13-6," meaning to a height of 13-feet and six-inches, so a fire truck can easily pass. "But I don't know who owns this property, so I'll have to do some research."

Where he does know all the property owners is on Mendocino Place, which snakes up the hillside to a city water tank. On the way up he points to a home owned by a man retired from the U.S. Forest Service.

"He keeps his property immaculate," said Jennings, driving a bit farther to another property with piles of cut brush. "See, they've already started clearing. Hopefully they'll be calling me soon for a burn permit. I give out about 16, 17 a year."

In another area of the hills the vegetation got much thicker, and there were downed trees. "These owners might be getting older and can't do as much anymore," he said. "And I understand that, but then you need to look in the Yellow Pages and find a landscaper who can clear your property for you."

And even if you only have a small front yard with one or two trees, Jennings said you should always be tracking their health and branches.

"Anything dead, cut it down and haul it away," he said. "And we all want trees for shade and beauty. But make sure their branches aren't hanging over your house." Fire, and pests, can travel from vegetation to your house if it is touching the structure, he said.

"We love our trees in Ukiah; they make Ukiah what it is. But Ukiah could also become another Paradise," he said, referring to the town in Butte County destroyed by the Camp Fire earlier this month.

To prevent that devastation (or mitigate it, since Jennings said you can't prevent fires completely, and it is not a question of if, but when, a fire will occur) he said he is working with Cal Fire and other agencies to improve the fuel barriers in the hills west of Ukiah. Within the city limits, he said, a "shaded fuel break" was created to prevent a wildfire from blowing down the hills from the west and straight into the valley below.

"Shaded means you leave the canopy," he said. "And when the last one was done many years ago, the intention was that the property owners would maintain it. But that hasn't happened."

So this coming winter, Jennings plans to go "door-to-door" with a "hold harmless agreement" that will allow the city to access people's property to create, and, more importantly, maintain, the fuel break.

"Once we have that agreement in place, it is valid until the property changes hands," he said.

Jennings is also meeting regularly with at least a dozen neighborhood groups he helped form to discuss ways to improve fire safety overall. For more information about the work on the shaded fuel break, or to request an evaluation of your property, call the UVFA at 707-462-7921.

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## Work progressing on fuel break for Ukiah's Western Hills



Fire breaks in the western hills are coming along, authorities say. Justine Frederiksen-Ukiah Daily Journal

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Ukiah Fire Marshal Kevin Jennings said recently that work to improve the fuel break designed to protect the city from a fire in the Western Hills is steadily progressing.

"I think we'll probably be starting sometime in the late fall or early winter on the shaded fuel break, and the plan will be to be done by next fire season — well before next fire season," Jennings told the Ukiah City Council at its last meeting. "It takes about 90 days to do the whole fuel break, but I don't think we'll need to do the whole fuel break, because there are some property owners who have completed (their sections)."

Jennings said county officials are also planning maintenance work on "the (bull)dozer lines in the Western Hills, essentially from Low Gap Road to Highway 253," and that "the county may be looking at the perimeter of Low Gap Regional Park as a good starting point for public property within the county's jurisdiction."

Jennings said he is also working with Cal Fire, which "is concentrating on the Robinson Creek drainage area (along Hwy 253 between Ukiah and Boonville), and may conduct their first preventative burn this winter, which is expected to cover about 600 acres of vegetation, possibly more."

Jennings said he is also working with residents, and has formed "about six community neighborhood groups, from Maple Avenue to Oak Knoll Road. The topics are not just maintenance of vegetation, but plans for evacuation and gate locks," Jennings continued. "Giornio Avenue has a gate lock on city property, and we have a solution for that, which I think will be well-received."

Jennings said education and personal responsibility are also key.

"Education is a big topic, because while my job is to re-establish the shaded fuel break, it does no good if people don't take care of their own property," he said. "If you have a property in the center of town with six inches of dead leaves on top of your roof, you're just as dangerous there as you are in the shaded fuel break."

"We have quite a few property owners in the Western Hills who have done their job, but we also have quite a few others who are struggling with maintaining their property," said Jennings, adding that he was doing an educational campaign house-to-house, urging people to help their neighbors, and for people who can't maintain their property to hire a landscaper to help remove vegetation.

"For us or an inmate crew to be on someone's property, we have to have a 'Hold Harmless' agreement, and the last one we had was pretty old," said Jennings, explaining that City Attorney David Rapport helped update the city's agreement so crews can begin clearing vegetation. "We can't touch the property until the 'Hold Harmless' agreement is signed, but once it is, we can maintain the property until it sold."

"I'm really glad to see the city being proactive, (because) this is one of the topics I get the stopped the most about," Council member Jim Brown told Jennings, adding that "the next step is to get the word out about the work we're doing."

Call the Jennings at the Ukiah Valley Fire Authority at 707-462-7921 for more information.

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