

## **ATTACHMENT C**

### Notice of Exemption

## **ATTACHMENT C: CEQA NOTICE OF EXEMPTION**

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**TO:** Santa Barbara County Clerk of the Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Rob Hazard, Santa Barbara County Fire Department

The project or activity identified below is determined to be exempt from further environmental review requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of 1970, as defined in the State and County Guidelines for the implementation of CEQA.

**APN:** Not applicable.

**Location:** Approximately 70 acres located in the San Antonio Creek area in the foothills of Santa Barbara.

**Project Title:** San Antonio Creek Community Defensible Space Grant.

**Project Description:** The project consists of 10 shaded fuel reduction treatments totaling approximately 70 acres located in the San Antonio Creek area in the foothills of Santa Barbara. The project will utilize hand crews to reduce flammable fuel volume by removing dead material, reducing ladder fuels, and selectively thinning standing vegetation. The existing fuel is predominately mature oak woodland with scattered chaparral and stands of Eucalyptus. Mature trees will be limbed and pruned of dead branches. The cut material will be chipped and spread uniformly on site. The shrub dominated areas will be treated with a residual mosaic approach, leaving scattered shrubs and islands of intact formation comprising approximately 50% of the original cover. No mature trees will be removed. No work will occur within 50 feet of a riparian corridor. The project will greatly increase the defensible space around the community and also protect the open space wildland from a fire starting from the surrounding residential developments. The project will also involve maintenance of both Via Regina Park and Tuckers Grove Park by removing overgrown vegetation and ladder fuels that create fire hazard for neighboring residents. No heavy equipment is authorized under this document. A query of the National Diversity Database will be performed for each treatment to check for the presence of endangered plants and/or animals. DFW will be consulted for input as necessary. Chips will not be deposited within the standard width of a watercourse or lake protection zone.

The project includes these treatment areas:

- **San Antonio Creek Shaded Fuel Break-** This treatment consists of 9 acres that parallel the residences on the east side of San Antonio Creek Road from Creek Lane north to Hwy 154. The treatment area averages 100 feet in width and 2500 feet in length. The existing fuel bed is mature Coast Live Oak and mixed chaparral interspersed with open grass fields. The project will utilize hand crews to limb lower dead branches from mature trees, reduce ground ladder fuels by 50%, thin chaparral stands by 50%, and weed whack cured annual grasses. This is a pre-existing fuel treatment that has been maintained for decades.

- **Shadow Hills Shaded Fuel Break-** This treatment consists of 3 acres that parallel the Shadow Hills Residential Development located at the north end of Via Chaparral. The treatment area averages 80 feet in width and 950 feet in length. The existing fuel bed is mature Coast Live Oak, mixed chaparral, and sage interspersed with open grass fields. The project will utilize hand crews to limb lower dead branches from mature trees, reduce ground ladder fuels by 50%, thin chaparral stands by 50%, and weed whack cured annual grasses. This is a pre-existing fuel treatment that has been maintained for decades.
- **Camino Del Rio Shaded Fuel Break-** This treatment consists of 4.6 acres that parallel the residences on the west side of Camino Del Rio and encompassing the Fire Access road off Camino Del Rio and a portion of the existing San Antonio Creek Trail. The treatment area averages 100 feet in width and 1400 feet in length. The existing vegetation is mature Coast Live Oak and mixed chaparral interspersed with open grass fields. The project will utilize hand crews to limb lower dead branches from mature trees, reduce ground ladder fuels by 25%, and thin chaparral stands by 25%. The project will also remove several drought killed oak trees near the public trail, and conduct annual trail maintenance consisting primarily of weed whacking annual cured grasses to reduce fire ignition potential. This treatment was originally completed in 2016.
- **Tuckers Grove Defensible Space-** This treatment consists of 6 acres that parallel the residences along Via Los Padres, north of the developed portion of Tucker's Grove Park. The treatment area averages 150 feet in width and 1000 feet in length. The existing vegetation is mature Coast Live Oak interspersed with open grass fields. The project will utilize hand crews to limb lower dead branches from mature trees, reduce ground ladder fuels by 50%, and weed whack cured annual grasses. This is a pre-existing fuel break that has been maintained for decades.
- **Via Regina Park-** This treatment consists of 3.9 acres of open park land located on Via Regina north of Cathedral Oaks Blvd. The existing vegetation is primarily mature oak with mixed chaparral and grass understory. The project will use hand crews to reduce dead material and lift/limb ladder vegetation to reduce fire spread then chip and spread material across the area. Chaparral will be selectively cut by approximately 50% to create a shaded fuel break but no mature oaks will be cut. This is a pre-existing fuel treatment that has been maintained for decades.
- **Via Regina WUI Treatment-** This treatment consists of 9.1 acres of undeveloped land owned by Santa Barbara Flood Control that is located on the south side of Maria Ygnacia Ln. The existing vegetation consists of mature oak, stands of eucalyptus, and mixed chaparral understory. The project will use hand crews to selectively reduce chaparral by 50% and lift/limb ladder fuels to reduce fire spread. The project will also reduce fuel loading by removing some of the large jackpots of down and dead eucalyptus that exists in some of the treatment area.
- **La Espada Shaded Fuel Break-** This treatment consists of 3.9 acres that parallel the residences on the north side of La Espada Drive. The existing vegetation is primarily mature oak with mixed chaparral and grass understory. The project will use hand crews to reduce dead material and lift/limb ladder vegetation to reduce fire spread then chip and spread material across the area. Chaparral will be selectively cut by approximately 50% to create a shaded fuel break but no mature oaks will be cut.
- **HQ Shaded Fuel Break-** This treatment consists of 17 acres surrounding the Santa Barbara County School Administration building and the Santa Barbara County Fire Department Headquarters.

The existing vegetation consists of mature eucalyptus forest with understory vegetation dominated by sage and annual grasses. The project will remove any dead trees, limb and prune the green trees, and thin the understory vegetation by 50%. Immature eucalyptus will be removed in areas where it is encroaching on native Coast Live Oaks and chaparral. Portions of this treatment have been maintained for decades.

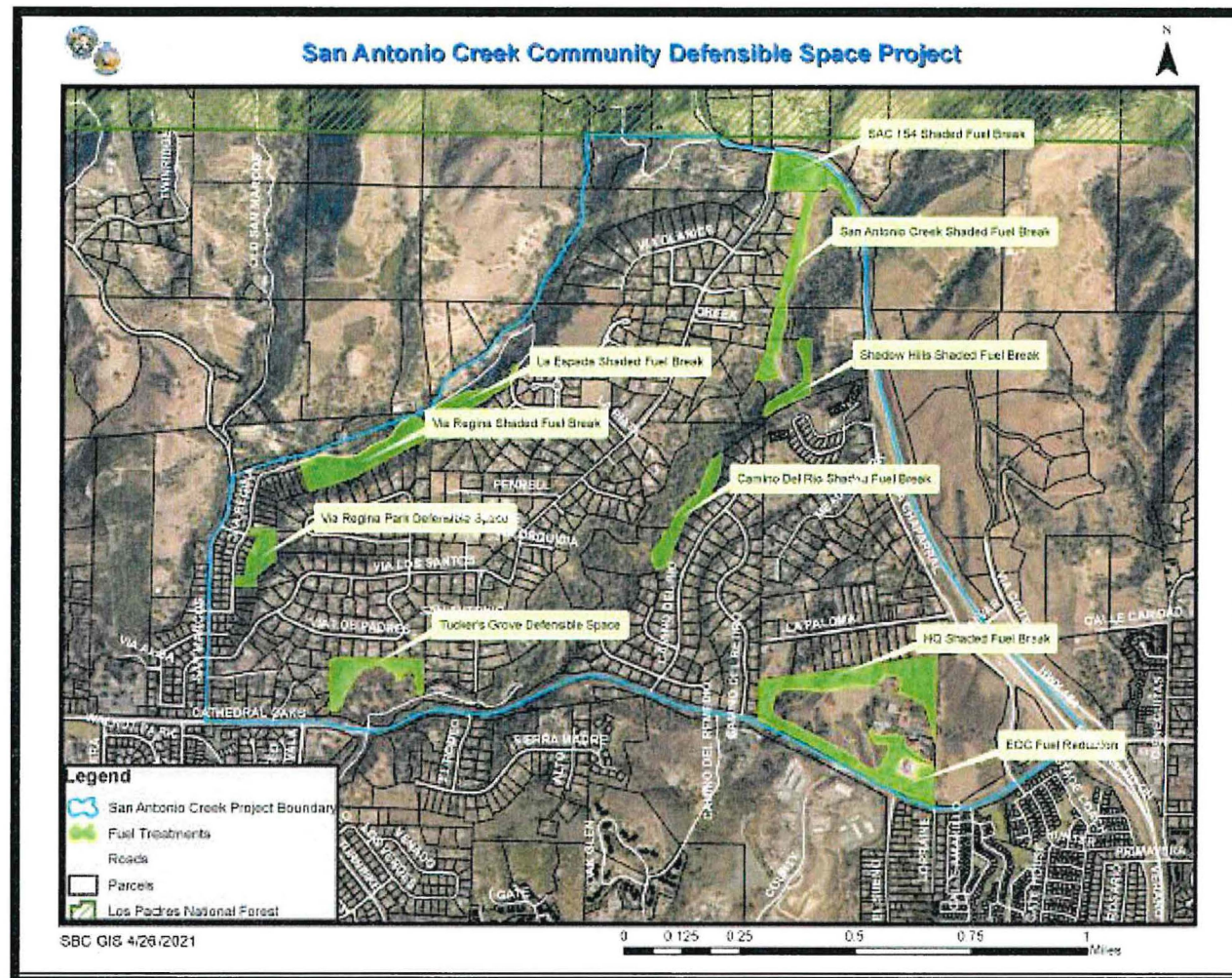
- EOC Fuel Break- This treatment consists of 7 acres surrounding the Santa Barbara County EOC building. The existing vegetation is primarily annual grasses and sage. The project will use hand crews to mow annual grasses to provide ignition prevention and defensible space. This is an existing fuel treatment that has been maintained since the construction of the County EOC building in 2011.
- SAC 154 Shaded Fuel Break- This treatment consists of 5 acres at the intersection of San Antonio Creek Road and State Highway 154. The existing vegetation is primarily mature oak with mixed chaparral and grass understory. The project will use hand crews to reduce dead material and lift/limb ladder vegetation to reduce fire spread then chip and spread material across the area. Chaparral will be selectively cut by approximately 50% to create a shaded fuel break but no mature oaks will be cut.

Eight of the fuel treatments are located on Santa Barbara County owned parcels; six designated as Parks, one as Recreation Open Space, two as Vacant, two as Flood Control, and one as Pasture/Grazing. Two of the treatments are located on private land. The project area encompasses the 118-acre San Antonio Creek Open Space. San Antonio Creek flows the length of the area and is a major creek watershed. No project activities will occur within 50 feet of the creek and soil disturbance will be avoided to minimize erosion and siltation of the streambed. A developed park, Tucker's Grove, is located on the south end of the open space area and a public access trail, San Antonio Creek, traverses the length of the open space from Tucker's Grove to State Hwy 154. This trail receives high use from the public including hikers, mountain bikers, equestrian users, and local youth camps. The area contains several access roads into the interior used by the Santa Barbara County Flood Control, the Santa Barbara County Fire Department, and the Santa Barbara County Parks Department. These roads are not open to public vehicular access. The open space area contains a large flood control debris basin on the San Antonio Creek which is managed by the Santa Barbara County Flood Control District. The area is also traversed by several utilities including Edison power lines, County Parks water lines, Goleta Water District water mains, and County Flood Control storm channels.

The area is surrounded by dense residential communities on the west, south and east sides including the San Antonio Creek neighborhood, the Via Los Padres neighborhood, the Camino Del Rio neighborhood, and the Shadow Hills Retirement Community. There are 650 homes total in the immediate vicinity of the open space. The area has a significant fire history including the 1990 Paint Fire and the 2009 Jesusita Fire. The Paint Fire burned through the entire open space area and most of the residences in the above-mentioned communities were destroyed (600 plus). The fire completely consumed most of the vegetation in the area including the many large mature Coast Live Oaks and stands of dense chaparral. The vast majority of structures have been rebuilt. Approximately 256 of these residences are considered to be at high risk from a wildfire threat due to the significant fuel loading adjacent to their property lines in the open space area. Another 358 homes are at moderate



risk from a wildfire threat. The 2009 Jesusita Fire burned through the northern portion of the open space area and damaged several homes along San Antonio Creek Road. The entire area lies within the Sundowner Wind corridor. These local offshore winds can create extreme fire weather conditions with the potential to create extreme fire behavior with very rapid rates of spread, very high flame lengths, and intense Energy Release Component values. It is the goal of the project to provide additional protection to the surrounding neighborhoods by reducing fuel volume to lower the intensity of future fires and reduce ladder fuels that can transport fire to the tree crowns.



**Name of Public Agency Approving and Carrying Out Project:** County of Santa Barbara

**Exempt Status:**

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Ministerial  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Statutory Exemption  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Categorical Exemption (Sections 15301, 15304 & 15308)      |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Emergency Project  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | No possibility of Significant Effect (Section 15061(b)(3)) |

**CEQA Guideline Sections:** 15301 [Existing Facilities]; 15304 [Minor Alterations to Land]; 15308 [Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment]

**Reasons to support exemption findings:**

CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 [Existing Facilities], a Class 1 exemption, states that a project is exempt from CEQA if the project “consists of the operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.” A listed example includes “[m]aintenance of existing landscaping, native growth...” “The project consists of the minor alteration and maintenance of existing landscaping and native growth. There will be no expansion of existing or former use. The project will minimize soil disturbance by utilizing hand crews to cut only standing vegetation. Material will be carried to a chipper. Duff and leaf litter will remain in place. The chipper will be towed only on existing hard surface trail easement. Wood chips will be broadcast when possible to provide additional soil cover.

CEQA Guidelines Section 15304 [Minor Alterations to Land], a Class 4 exemption, states that a project is exempt from CEQA if the activity consists of “consists of minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry and agricultural purposes.” Examples include fuel management activities provided that the activities will not result in the taking of endangered, rare, or threatened plant or animal species or significant erosion and sedimentation of surface waters. The project consists of fuel management activities that do not involve the removal of health, nature, scenic trees, and will not result in the taking of endangered, rare, or threatened plant or animal species. No mature living trees will be felled. No living vegetation with a diameter over three inches will be cut.

CEQA Guidelines Section 15308 [Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment], a Class 8 exemption, states that a project is exempt from CEQA if it “consists of actions taken by regulatory agencies, as authorized by state or local ordinance, to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment where the regulatory process involves procedures for protection of the environment.” Numerous Coast Live Oaks have died in the area as a result of the long-term drought. These dead trees have begun to fall and represent a significant danger to the numerous hikers who frequent the trail and open space in general. The project will include removing these trees where they represent a danger to the public. As such the project will result in a positive impact on public recreation. The project will benefit the environment by reducing wildfire severity and preventing fire ignitions. The work being completed is being done to reduce fire spread and increase defensible space around the San Antonio Creek neighborhood. This reduction in fuels will increase fire department’s ability protect homes in the community and extinguish fires before they cause more damage.

There is no substantial evidence that the proposed project involves unusual circumstances, including future activities, resulting in or which might reasonably result in significant impacts which threaten the



environment. The exceptions to the categorical exemptions pursuant to Section 15300.2 of the State CEQA Guidelines are:

- (a) Location.** Classes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 are qualified by consideration of where the project is to be located -- a project that is ordinarily insignificant in its impact on the environment may in a particularly sensitive environment be significant. Therefore, these classes are considered to apply all instances, except where the project may impact on an environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern where designated, precisely mapped, and officially adopted pursuant to law by federal, state, or local agencies.

This exception is not applicable to CEQA Guidelines Section 15301. For the purposes of Sections 15304 and 15305, the project will not have an impact of any environmental resources of hazardous or critical concern. The project does not involve removing any mature oak trees, and will improve the health of existing trees by thinning the chaparral and reducing the competition for ground water. The project site was checked against the current CNDDDB and only one plant species, Mesa Horkelia, was listed as potentially occurring in the general area around the project site. The project treatment areas were surveyed for the presence of Mesa Horkelia and none was found. The project treatment sites were found to have several wood rat nests. These will be left in place and undisturbed. The treatment areas will be surveyed weekly for the presence of bird nests. As standard Best Management Practice, crews will be instructed to survey their work sites each operational period before cutting for the presence of nesting birds. Areas with nesting activity will be left undisturbed. A biological assessment was conducted and concluded that no listed species will be adversely impacted by project activities. To provide additional protection, the Department will retain a biologist to monitor each site before treatment. Crews will perform work out of bird nesting season or if work occurs during nesting season, a biologist will be on site to flag sensitive species and nesting birds to reduce any impact to nesting birds by preventing work in the area of nests. As standard Best Management Practice, crews will be instructed to survey their work sites each operational period before cutting for the presence of nesting birds. Areas with nesting activity will be left undisturbed. Therefore, this exception to the exemption does not apply.

- (b) Cumulative Impact.** All exemptions for these classes are inapplicable when the cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place, over time is significant.

It is not reasonably foreseeable that successive projects of the same type in the same place will occur or that they would be significant. Additionally, the project will benefit the environment by reducing wildfire severity and preventing fire ignitions. Therefore, this exception to the exemption does not apply.

- (c) Significant Effect.** A categorical exemption shall not be used for an activity where there is a reasonable possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances.

There is no substantial evidence that the proposed project involves unusual circumstances, including future activities, resulting in or which might reasonably result in significant impacts which threaten the environment. Therefore, this exception to the exemption would not apply.

- (d) Scenic Highways.** A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may result in damage to scenic resources, including but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway. This does not apply to improvements which are required as mitigation by an adopted negative declaration or certified EIR.

Portions of the project may be visible from Highway 154, an eligible but not officially designated scenic highway. The project consists of reducing flammable fuel volume by removing dead material, reducing ladder fuels, and selectively thinning standing vegetation and will not result in damage to any scenic resources. Therefore, this exception to the exemption would not apply.

- (e) Hazardous Waste Sites.** A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project located on a site which is included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.

The project will not take place on a site designated or listed as a hazardous waste site. Therefore, this exception to the exemption would not apply.

- (f) Historical Resources.** A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.

Fire Dept. staff surveyed the site for evidence of archaeological resources. There are Native American grinding sites outside the treatment areas. None were found within the treatment area boundaries. The project as designed will result in very minimal soil disturbance thus no impact on archaeological resources is anticipated. The entire area receives significant and mostly unregulated public use far eclipsing the impact of the project. The project will not take place on a site with historical resources and it is not reasonably foreseeable that the project would cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource. Therefore, this exception to the exemption would not apply.

Lead Agency Contact Person: Rob Hazard, Division Chief/ Fire Marshal

Phone #: (805) 681-5554



Department/Division Representative

9/9/2021

Date

Acceptance Date (date of final action on project): \_\_\_\_\_

Date Filed by County Clerk: \_\_\_\_\_