

Wildfire Preparedness Audit Follow-Up



Objective

The objective of this special report was to follow up on the City's actions to implement recommendations from the 2019 Wildfire Preparedness audit.

Background

In October 2019, we issued an audit of the City's wildfire preparedness. The objective of that audit was to determine whether the City of Austin was effectively working to prevent wildfires and adequately prepared to respond to wildfires. We had two findings and issued four recommendations.

Finding 1. The City has taken steps toward addressing the destructive impacts of wildfire through efforts that align with the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, but needs to improve collection of wildfire mitigation data to more accurately reflect current efforts.

Finding 2. Opportunities exist to improve proactive efforts to reduce wildfire threats to Austin and the region. These include adopting a Wildland-Urban Interface code, drafting land management plans for at-risk City properties, and defining consistent guidance for the prescribed burn permitting process.

Summary

This is a special report as part of a series following up on recommendations made in previous audits.

We issued four recommendations through our 2019 Wildfire Preparedness audit. Three recommendations were addressed to the Austin Fire Department (AFD) and one recommendation was addressed to the Parks and Recreation Department (PARD). We verified that AFD management implemented the three recommendations and the recommendation addressed to PARD is underway.

For the recommendations that were addressed to AFD, management:

- created a unified and consistent reporting tool to give all stakeholders consistent and timely information on the mitigation efforts
- identified cost impacts related to the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Code and provided this information to Council
- incorporated key elements of the WUI Code in the City Code
- created guidance for the prescribed burn permitting process

While PARD management developed a land management plan to reduce wildfire threats, this plan has not been finalized. Management indicated that they are planning to present it to City Council in July 2023 for adoption.

The City implemented 3 of 4 wildfire preparedness recommendations

Recommendations addressed to AFD



Recommendation 1



Recommendation 2



Recommendation 4

Recommendation addressed to PARD



Recommendation 3

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Implementation Status of Issued Recommendations

Recommendation	Status
<p><u>Recommendation 1:</u> The Fire Chief should ensure that Wildfire Division staff receives and reports complete and accurate information about wildfire risk mitigation efforts, including fuel treatments, conducted in the City. This information should be updated and reported publicly at regular intervals.</p>	<p><u>Implemented:</u> The City has made efforts to create a unified and consistent reporting format. Specifically, the Austin Fire Department (AFD) collaborated with key stakeholders to create the Austin Area Wildfire Hub data portal. This data portal acts as a central repository of all mitigation efforts inside the City. It facilitates information sharing, cross-agency initiatives, and coalition among key stakeholders.</p> <p>The portal provides stakeholders with real-time data regarding the status of key wildfire mitigation metrics and initiatives including treated land or those requiring treatments, lands not requiring treatment, and those categorized as untreatable.</p>
<p><u>Recommendation 2:</u> The Fire Chief should ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) all cost impacts related to WUI code requirements are identified and clearly communicated to City management and Council during the code adoption process and b) key elements of a WUI code are represented in Austin’s WUI code or remain in place as part of another City code. 	<p><u>Implemented:</u> AFD identified the cost impacts and communicated them to Council. The WUI Code was adopted by Council and the key elements of this code are reflected in the City’s Land Development Code.</p>
<p><u>Recommendation 3:</u> The Director of the Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) should ensure that land management plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) are drafted for Parks and Recreation properties, with a priority on high-risk properties; b) address wildfire risk areas; and c) are implemented to reduce the threat of wildfire. 	<p><u>Underway:</u> The City developed a land management plan. However, this plan is still in draft form and has not been implemented. Currently, it is undergoing reviews and revisions. PARD has requested two full-time employee positions in the FY2024 budget to help implement the plan.</p> <p>The land management plan includes a vision and goals, social equity considerations, an ecological framework, and a climate vulnerability analysis.</p>
<p><u>Recommendation 4:</u> The Fire Chief should ensure the Austin Fire Department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) creates defined policies and procedures for the Austin Fire Department’s prescribed burn permitting process that ensure safety and align with industry guidance; b) considers and issues prescribed burn permits according to these policies so that a cost-effective land management tool is available to help reduce the risk and severity of wildfires; and c) creates guidance related to the prescribed burn permitting process and makes this guidance available to its partner organizations and stakeholders. 	<p><u>Implemented:</u> AFD collaborated with other key stakeholders to create policies and procedures for the prescribed burn permitting process as well as guidelines for partner organizations. For example, AFD developed the Prescribed Fire Application Form, Prescribed Fire Permitting Guidelines, and a Prescribed Fire Handbook. According to AFD management, these documents create a framework and define the roles and responsibilities for prescribed fire to be used as a wildfire mitigation and land management tool within the City.</p>

Source: OCA analysis of the City’s actions to address the 2019 Wildfire Preparedness Audit recommendations, April 2023