

City of Piedmont
COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

DATE: October 5, 2026

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Rosanna Bayon Moore, City Administrator

SUBJECT: Informational Report on the Alameda County Fire Chiefs Association
Draft Extreme Fire Weather Approach

RECOMMENDATION

Receive an informational report on the Alameda County Fire Chiefs Association draft Extreme Fire Weather Approach, a proposed countywide framework for community protective actions and fire department readiness when the National Weather Service forecasts extreme fire weather. This item is informational only; no Council action is requested.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The public has grown accustomed to frequent “Red Flag” warnings issued by the National Weather Service when conditions could hasten the growth and spread of wildfire. However, extreme weather conditions occur very rarely but have resulted in catastrophic loss of life and property such as during the 1991 Tunnel Fire and the 2025 Palisades Fire. To emphasize the need for the public to take protective action during such weather, fire departments and emergency managers have been working with the National Weather Service to fine tune the forecasts and messaging on those days.

On May 20, 2026, the Alameda County Fire Chiefs Association adopted a draft model framework, the Extreme Fire Weather Approach, for a regional “Leave Early” approach to be implemented for the 2027 fire season. The framework establishes a common trigger for action, a common method for identifying the areas where protective actions apply, a common set of instructions to the community, and template public messages that fire agencies in Alameda County can use when extreme fire weather is forecast. Chief Brannigan presented the framework to the Piedmont Public Safety Committee on September 24, 2026 who provided initial feedback and questions.

This report introduces the framework to the City Council. It summarizes the conditions the framework is intended to address, the prior experience it draws on, its main components, its current status, and it identifies items the City may consider as it participates in the regional process.

BACKGROUND

Wildfire Hazard and Response Limitations in the East Bay Hills

Wildfire is a recurring part of the East Bay Hills ecosystem. Fire behavior in the area is shaped by topography, fuel, and weather, and the local fire season typically peaks in late October. Prevailing winds normally come from the Bay and are cool and moist. Diablo winds come from the east, are dry, and travel at high speed. Topographical features in the hills can channel these winds and contribute to rapid fire spread.

Unfortunately, there are several conditions that limit the ability to control a wildland-urban interface (WUI) fire during extreme fire weather. Wind-driven embers can start multiple spot fires ahead of the main fire. High winds can ground firefighting aircraft. Ground crews may not be able to keep pace with the rate of spread. At the same time, residents evacuate under stress and sometimes with limited coordination. Evacuees and responders share the same roadways, which can slow response, and firefighters may be redirected from fire suppression to rescues. The 1991 Oakland Hills Fire burned under these conditions, and 25 people died.

Risk during a wildfire evacuation varies by location and household. Residents in areas of higher fire hazard, residents on streets with only one way in or out, and households that need outside help to evacuate face greater difficulty leaving once a fire has started.

Prior Experience with East Bay Extreme Fire Weather Declarations

In Alameda County, the Berkeley Fire Department began using Extreme Fire Weather procedures in 2018. Berkeley recommended that residents leave the Berkeley Hills in advance of forecast conditions in 2019 (in association with a PG&E Public Safety Power Shutoff), in October 2020, and in October 2024. In each case, actual weather did not reach the forecast extreme levels. This led to confusion with some residents leaving, others wondering if they should, and others upset at the false alarms. Reinforcing the concept that fire weather alerting needs to be coordinated across multiple jurisdictions, in October 2024, the Keller Fire occurred on a Red Flag day in Oakland, which led to the evacuation of approximately 500 people. Fire related messaging overlapped Berkeley's messaging about leaving early due to the weather, causing confusion and coordination challenges.

Alternative Approach - Australian Model

The practice of leaving early due to extreme fire danger weather has over a decade of use in Australia. On February 7, 2009, the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria involved approximately 400 ignitions over 12 hours and the mobilization of more than 10,000 responders. The fires burned approximately 1.1 million acres, destroyed more than 3,500 structures, and resulted in 173 deaths. The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission found that approximately 90 percent of those who died were in or immediately outside their homes.

Following these fires, Australia adopted a national Fire Danger Rating System. The system includes a "Catastrophic" rating, which is typically forecast a few times per year nationwide, and in many years it is not forecast at all. When a Catastrophic rating is forecast, residents of designated bushfire risk areas are instructed to leave early, before the fire weather arrives and before any fire starts. The instruction is triggered by the forecast rather than by an ignition. Australian fire service

leaders have shared their experience with this approach with Alameda County fire agencies, informing the development of this new framework.

Trigger for Action: Particularly Dangerous Situation Red Flag Warning

The National Weather Service (NWS) typically issues a Red Flag Warning up to 24 hours before hazardous fire weather begins, often preceded by a Fire Weather Watch 24 to 72 hours in advance. NWS products are intentionally conservative. Red Flag Warnings are issued relatively often, can be triggered by moderate conditions, and may also be issued when conditions are near the threshold and community activity, such as the Fourth of July holiday, adds to the hazard. A single Red Flag Warning designation therefore covers a wide range of conditions and does not by itself distinguish moderate fire weather from severe fire weather.

While it's been used for years in tornado forecasts, a Particularly Dangerous Situation (PDS) designation is a tag the NWS can now add to a Red Flag Warning. It may be included when the warning is issued or added later as the forecast becomes clearer. The NWS Monterey office, which serves Alameda County, applies the PDS tag only when all of the following conditions are forecast:

1. Annual grasses have cured.
2. No wetting rain (greater than 0.10 inch) has fallen in the past 24 hours.
3. 10-hour fuel moisture is 6 percent or less.
4. Sustained winds of 30 miles per hour or more for 8 hours or longer.
5. Daytime minimum relative humidity below 9 percent and nighttime maximum relative humidity below 31 percent.

In addition to these thresholds, the NWS must have a high level of confidence in the forecast before applying the PDS tag. Conditions meeting these criteria have an estimated annual likelihood of less than 5 percent. The NWS issued a PDS Red Flag Warning before the 2025 Eaton Fire in Los Angeles County, and the framework notes that the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire burned under conditions that would now meet PDS criteria.

Under the proposed framework, a Fire Chief should declare extreme fire weather for the jurisdiction when the NWS issues a PDS Red Flag Warning for a forecast zone that covers all or part of that jurisdiction. Using the PDS designation as the trigger relies on an established, objective NWS standard rather than on judgments made by individual agencies during an event and is expected to result in fewer extreme fire weather declarations than prior local practice.

Areas Where Community Protective Actions Apply

For communities that have Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ), as mapped by CAL FIRE or adopted locally, the framework uses those to identify where protective actions apply. For jurisdictions such as Piedmont, determination of where protective actions apply will necessitate a risk assessment approach as determined by the jurisdiction. However a jurisdiction designates the affected areas, each jurisdiction is expected to adjust these areas to match its local evacuation zones or, where evacuation zones are not established, major roads and recognizable

Community Protective Actions

The framework sets out the following actions for residents when extreme fire weather is declared:

- **Leave Early areas:** Leave and stay elsewhere before the extreme fire weather window begins and until conditions improve.
- **Get Ready areas:** Be ready to evacuate quickly. This includes reviewing the household evacuation plan, packing the car, keeping a go-bag by the door, parking facing out, keeping a phone on to receive alerts, and checking on neighbors who may need help. Residents should consider leaving early if their street has only one way in or out, if they would need outside help to evacuate, or if they prefer not to be part of an emergency evacuation.
- **All other areas:** Sign up for AC Alert and download the Genasys Protect app, avoid travel into Leave Early and Get Ready areas during the extreme fire weather period, and consider offering a place to stay to friends and family who live in Leave Early areas.

Operational Readiness

When extreme fire weather is declared, affected fire departments and their communities may take the following readiness actions:

- Additional leadership coordination.
- Staffing changes and hiring.
- Flying fire weather flags.
- Restrictions on community activities that could produce heat or sparks in high-risk areas.
- Restrictions on parking in evacuation routes or narrow streets.
- Requesting activation of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

Mass care and sheltering for residents who leave early has been identified as a gap that is not yet addressed. The framework notes that the use of objective standards is expected to support requests for regional and State resources, including sheltering support.

Public Messaging

Effective implementation of the Extreme Fire Weather Approach will require coordinated public communication before and during extreme fire weather events. The regional framework includes shared talking points and message templates for use at key trigger points. Urgent alerts would be distributed through established emergency communications tools, including AC Alert and Genasys Protect, with supporting information provided through each jurisdiction's own communication channels.

The more significant communications work will occur before an extreme weather event. Asking residents to leave based on a weather forecast – before a fire has started – represents a significant shift from traditional evacuation messaging. Successful implementation will require coordinated regional public education in advance of the 2027 fire season to build understanding of extreme fire weather, establish public buy-in for the Leave Early approach, and familiarize residents with the

framework's terminology and protective actions.

Piedmont's Communications Division will work with Fire Department staff and regional public information partners to adapt the messaging framework for local use and ensure public education and emergency messaging are clear, consistent, and coordinated.

Supporting Tools Under Development

Piedmont's regional partners in fire and emergency management agencies are developing tools to support implementation, including an activation guide for emergency services staff, initial EOC objectives, a fire department general order, a list of potential law enforcement activities, template alerts for AC Alert and Genasys Protect, and a community fire weather and evacuation planning tool. Piedmont will participate in the development of these tools and also be selective about which make sense for our city.

Status and Next Steps

The Alameda County Fire Chiefs Association has shared the draft framework with regional partners to gather feedback, including the Contra Costa County Fire Chiefs Association (September 10, 2026), Alameda County Emergency Managers (September 21, 2026), the East Bay Wildfire Coalition of Governments (September 30, 2026), and the Alameda County Chiefs of Police and Sheriff's Association (October 1, 2026). As noted, Chief Brannigan presented the framework to Piedmont's Public Safety Committee on September 24, 2026. Over the following three months, the Association intends to refine the approach, identify additional support tools, and identify partners not yet involved and any legislative changes that may be needed. The Association plans to return with a final draft for adoption within the County by January 2027, for use in the 2027 fire season.

Items for Consideration in Piedmont's Participation

The framework is a draft, and the regional process is ongoing. As the City participates, the following items remain open and may be considered:

- Whether and how the City would apply the framework locally, especially in defining any Leave Early or Get Ready areas.
- How any such areas would align with Piedmont's existing evacuation zones.
- Fire Department and Police Department operational readiness procedures, including staffing, during an extreme fire weather event.
- Sheltering options for residents who leave early, which the framework identifies as an unresolved gap.
- Coordination of public messaging and alerting with Alameda County and neighboring jurisdictions, including Oakland.
- Public education and outreach before the 2027 fire season.

Staff will return to Council when the Alameda County Fire Chiefs Association finalizes the framework for consideration of implementation in Piedmont.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with this informational report. If the City later participates in implementing the framework, operational readiness actions during a declared extreme fire weather event, such as increased staffing, would result in costs that depend on the number and duration of events. Based on the NWS PDS criteria, such events are expected to be infrequent.

CITY ATTORNEY REVIEW

The City Attorney has reviewed the staff report.

By: Dave Brannigan, Fire Chief