

**FY 2023-2024 BUDGET QUESTION**  
***Response to Request for Information***

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DEPARTMENT(S): Citywide

CBQ NO.: 021

REQUESTED BY: Alter (D10)

DATE REQUESTED: 05/23/2023

DATE POSTED: 07/31/2023

REQUEST: Please provide a detailed accounting of departments throughout the organization that are contributing budgetary investments related to wildfire prevention and mitigation and please provide correlating descriptions with each investment.

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**RESPONSE:**

Austin Energy (AE):

Austin Energy is committed to providing safe and reliable electric service and will continue to fund line inspections, maintenance and upgrades, emergency management, vegetation management, grid modernization, and insurance policies, with approximately \$46 million included for these areas in the FY 2024 proposed operating budget. Austin Energy has also created a Wildfire Mitigation Program Manager role. The incoming employee will begin in this position at the end of July 2023, focusing on advancing and promoting wildfire mitigation best practices for the utility.

In addition, Austin Energy's FY 2024 proposed capital budget includes \$6.0 million, and a 5-year total of \$46 million for grid modernization that will assist with wildfire mitigation. Finally, Austin Energy continues to collaborate with Austin Fire Department, Austin Code, Austin Water, and other City of Austin departments on joint efforts to address the serious threat of wildfires.

Austin Fire Department (AFD)

AFD's Wildfire Division budget currently totals \$3.6 million. Personnel salary and benefits total \$2.5 million and the non-personnel budget totals \$962,000.

Included in non-personnel funding is an on-going \$650,000 for the City of Austin's wildfire risk reduction efforts – contracts to remove vegetation, brush collection, and support for community education efforts. The budget also includes funding for wildfire related training at Wildfire Alliance meetings, emergency preparedness fairs, symposiums, and neighborhood risk assessments.

AFD's Wildfire Division's FY 2024 spending plan for wildfire risk mitigation funding focuses on cooperative agreements with Parks & Recreation for shaded-fuel breaks, Emergency Services District 4 brush collection utilizing Austin Resource Recovery services, Austin Water storm debris cleanup, and the Homeland Security Emergency Management Department's educational campaigns. Other planned expenses include support for the Parks & Recreation Department's Austin Civilian Conservation Corps (ACCC) and updating Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

Wildfire also plans to spend approximately \$360,000 for Situational Awareness/Evacuation software to support the emergency management mission.

In FY 2021, the Fire Marshal's Office adopted the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) code and added 11 positions (\$1.0 million) to review and inspect properties to ensure WUI code requirements are met. Implementation of the WUI code is ongoing and AFD estimates FY 2024 revenue generated by this program is \$1.0 million annually.

#### Austin Water (AW):

Austin Water Wildland Conservation Division (WCD) works to reduce wildfire risk on the Water Quality Protection Lands (WQPL) and Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) through vegetation management, public education, and wildfire prevention.

Boundary fuel mitigation efforts in the Wildland Urban Interface were initiated in 2006. Further analysis of wildfire risk to structures on and adjacent to WCD properties was conducted in 2019 by identifying any structures within 150 feet of the property boundaries and prioritizing those areas based on fire intensity models produced by the Texas A&M Forest Service. This is consistent with the risk analysis conducted by the Austin Fire Department (AFD) within the city limits.

AW's proposed FY 2024 budget includes \$814,000 to support wildfire mitigation efforts, including the following ongoing and proposed items:

##### Dedicated wildfire program staff (2 FTEs):

- WCD has an Environmental Program Coordinator and a Forestry Specialist tasked with wildfire mitigation and prescribed fire planning and implementation on lands managed by WCD. Salary and benefit costs for these positions total approximately \$190,000. WCD repurposed one Forestry Specialist position to address WCD's supervisory needs in FY 2023 and will propose a second Forestry Specialist be added to the staff in FY 2025. Some wildfire-related duties have been transferred to AW Operations staff to implement the wildfire mitigation strategies recommended for AW facilities. Other Wildland Conservation Division staff also support the wildfire mitigation and prescribed burn operations, which are conducted in collaboration with staffing resources from partner agencies.

##### Boundary fuels treatment conducted on WQPL and BCP properties:

- To expedite wildfire mitigation efforts in the WQPL and BCP, AW has continued an allocation of \$350,000 for fuel mitigation work in the FY 2024 budget. Contract specifications were prepared for a five-year project to construct 21.7 miles of new shaded fuel break on BCP and WQPL.
- Winter Storm Mara caused significant impacts to existing shaded fuel breaks, and we are evaluating options for mitigating these impacts as well as future implementation of this practice.
- Each fencing project on the BCP and WQPL includes an 8 to 12-foot cleared area along the boundary which also improves wildfire preparedness.

##### Broadcast fuels treatments on WQPL properties:

- Roughly 400 acres of juniper cutting and shredding are budgeted for FY 2024, at a cost of \$200,000.

Other fuel treatment activities:

- A recurring annual contract for mowing of fire breaks around WQPL structures and boundaries with neighborhoods is in place. The FY 2024 budget includes \$74,000 for mowing along WQPL boundaries.
- Prescribed burning is a land management tool for restoration but also helps reduce fuel load in a controlled manner. A total of 10 prescribed burns totaling 368 acres have been completed since January 2023.
- Funding will be sourced from the WQPL budget.

Utility assets wildfire mitigation:

- WCD, in partnership with other AW Divisions and the AFD Wildfire Division, completed an analysis and list of recommendations for wildfire preparedness of critical AW infrastructure. As part of its Enterprise Resiliency efforts, Austin Water developed a workplan to implement these recommendations beginning in FY 2023 and expected to continue into future years. Initial focus has been on addressing the highest priority recommendations, such as shaded fuel breaks at the Ullrich and Davis Water Treatment Plants. This workplan is currently being updated to incorporate impacts Winter Storm Mara had on vegetation. Funding for most of the workplan recommendations is expected to be absorbed within AW's facilities and infrastructure maintenance budget, consequently no additional funding was included in the FY 2024 Proposed Budget.

Infrastructure management and other partnerships:

- WCD works with electric utility providers on wildfire preparedness on the WQPL and BCP with current staff. The Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan Secretary is also working with electric utility providers on pre-approved vegetation maintenance plans to expedite vegetation clearing on rights-of-way within the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve.

Parks and Recreation Department (PAR):

PAR partners with the Austin Fire Department, who provides some financial support, while PAR staff implements and manages wildfire protection projects, such as, shaded fuel breaks. The FY 2023 budget includes ongoing funding in the amount of \$382,944 along with 2.0 FTEs, temporary staff, and contractuels and commodities that was reallocated in FY 2021 for land management activities, which are inclusive of wildfire protection projects. Additionally, the PAR anticipates Council consideration of a land management plan in August 2023. This plan outlines strategies to create a more fire resilient landscape.

The FY 2024 Proposed Budget includes additional funding in the amount of \$505,472 for land management that is anticipated to support the implementation of wildfire prevention and mitigation strategies as recommended by the plan.

The chart below outlines the proposed additional budget specific to PARD land management.

Description	Ongoing/One-Time Funding	FY2024 Proposed Budget Allocations	Total
One temporary staff position, contractals for ecological restoration activities, related materials, and staff training to reduce wildfire risk	Ongoing	\$319,662	<b>\$319,662</b>
installation and/or maintenance of shaded fuel breaks on parkland	Ongoing	\$0	<b>\$0</b>
Equipment and vehicles	One-Time	\$185,810	<b>\$185,810</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$505,472</b>	<b>\$505,472</b>

Watershed Protection Department (WPD):

WPD does not have dedicated funding included in the budget for wildfire prevention.