

## Groundskeeping at Sonoma Developmental Center begins after residents worry overgrown vegetation poses increased fire risk



Nathaniel Jellison, an employee with California Conservation Corps, cuts back weeds at the former Sonoma Developmental Center campus in Eldridge Tuesday, April 21, 2026. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

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Work to cutback the overgrown grasses, weeds and other foliage at the Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge began this week following at least a month of unease and concern from surrounding residents about the neglected state of the site and its potential as a fire hazard.

[Local Facebook groups and the local Nextdoor app](#) have been abuzz since the beginning of April with complaints from Eldridge residents and others across the Sonoma Valley about the SDC property.

As fire season approaches, many called for some kind of effort to tame the overgrown, dry grasses and secure the neglected buildings, as well as information about when service to disabled fire hydrants on the property would be restored.

Josette Brose-Eichar, a 23-year resident of Boyes Hot Springs, said she drove past the grounds at 15000 Arnold Drive earlier this month and noticed the overgrowth.

She added that she also hiked around the area and saw a number of open doors, broken windows and the overall lack of maintenance of the unoccupied buildings on the property.

“There is no monitoring or police presence of the buildings or the grounds that are the campus area,” she said. “I noticed doors and windows broken and open that truly anybody could access.”

She said area residents are not only worried about a potential fire on the property, but also that this month’s rains could cause flooding or the accumulation of standing water that could lead to a hazardous materials leak.

The Sonoma Developmental Center was established in 1891 by Julia Judah and Frances Bentley, both parents of disabled children. Since its founding, it had served under various names as a facility for people with developmental disabilities until its closure in 2018.

In 2019, the California Department of General Services took over management and oversight of the facility’s 180-acre core campus.

[Eldridge for All](#), a grassroots organization advocating for the mindful redevelopment of the property, in its April 9 newsletter, highlighted the need for better management of the site.

“Sadly, the once beautifully manicured grounds are quickly turning into an enormous fire hazard,” according to the group’s newsletter, which is curated by Glen Ellen activist Alice Horowitz.

Multiple calls from by The Sonoma Index-Tribune to the state Department of General Services to find out about the property's upkeep have not been returned.

While members of the California Conservation Corps, a youth workforce development program within the California Natural Resources Agency, pruned the grass at the property on Tuesday, April 21, it is unclear how long the work will take or whether that agency will handle periodic maintenance of the site moving forward.

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chair Rebecca Hermosillo whose district includes the Sonoma Valley said that the center is "state-owned land" which means the state is responsible for the property's upkeep.

"They started mowing on Monday in the rain and I support them being actively engaged in making sure that things that are broken are repaired as quickly as possible and they continue to do fuels reduction that keeps our community safer," she said earlier this week.

In a recent news release, the Sonoma Valley Fire District acknowledged that the property remains in violation of Sonoma County's Fire Code.

SVFD Chief Steve Akre said his office learned that fire hydrants on the property had been disabled due to a water main break. It is unclear when that water main break occurred, how long the fire hydrants have been out of service or when they would be restored.

"As soon as we were made aware that hydrants were out of service ... we immediately changed our water deployment," he said, adding that there is a plan in place to get water to the site in the event of fire.

He said the fire district would use three additional water tenders to substitute for the out-of-service hydrants on the property.