



Founding Guiding Principle: Public policymakers and the community must address the underlying issues of structural racism and its intersections with class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disabilities, and the political, economic and social structures that creates and perpetuate hunger, homelessness, the lack of decent affordable housing and disinvestment in neighborhoods of color

FIRES ON THE AMERICAN RIVER PARKWAY & OUR UNHOUSED NEIGHBORS: SRCEH ANALYSIS: June 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of fires on the American River Parkway [ARP] has increased from an average of 42 from 2014 – 2019 to 62 in 2020 to 156 in 2021.

However, despite the number of fires increasing in the past two years, the number of misdemeanor citations written by Sacramento County Park Rangers went down from 75 in 2019 to 40 in 2020 and returned to the average of 50 in 2021, while the number of arson arrests remained at 1 in 2019 & 2020 but spiked to 7 in 2021 [more than 3 times the average of 2 annually].

SRCEH then looked at the percentage of infractions, misdemeanor citations and felonies written by the Park Rangers in Fall and Winter between 2017 – May 2022 and found that 89% of the infractions; 62% of the misdemeanor fire citations, while only 21% of felony arson violations were issued by the Park Rangers during Fall and Winter [January 2017 – March 2022].

Clearly, a good case can be made that our unhoused neighbors are lighting fires to stay warm and cook during the fall and winter months, while arson fires are more prominent in the spring and summer months.

Finally, we do not support the Sierra Club's analysis that these increases are due to the county's compliance with the *Martin v Boise* decision, which they argue the increase is due to lack of enforcement by the Park Rangers. SRCEH feels that these increase are due to the dramatic increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness – from 10,000 in 2019 to between 16,500 – 20,000 in 2022 on an annual basis.

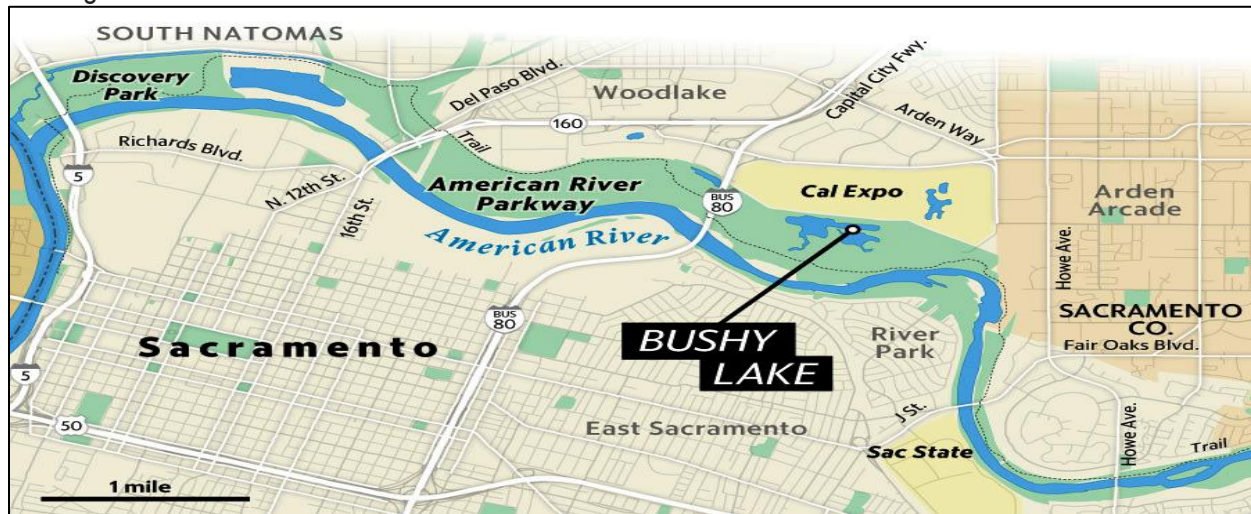
SRCEH proposes a number of fire safety recommendations including recommendations to keep warm and cook with solar panels.

Overview:

American River Parkway:

The American River Parkway [ARP] is a 23-mile strip of greenbelt along the American River that stretches from below Nimbus Dam to where the American flows into the Sacramento River just north of downtown. It is managed by the Sacramento County Park Rangers.

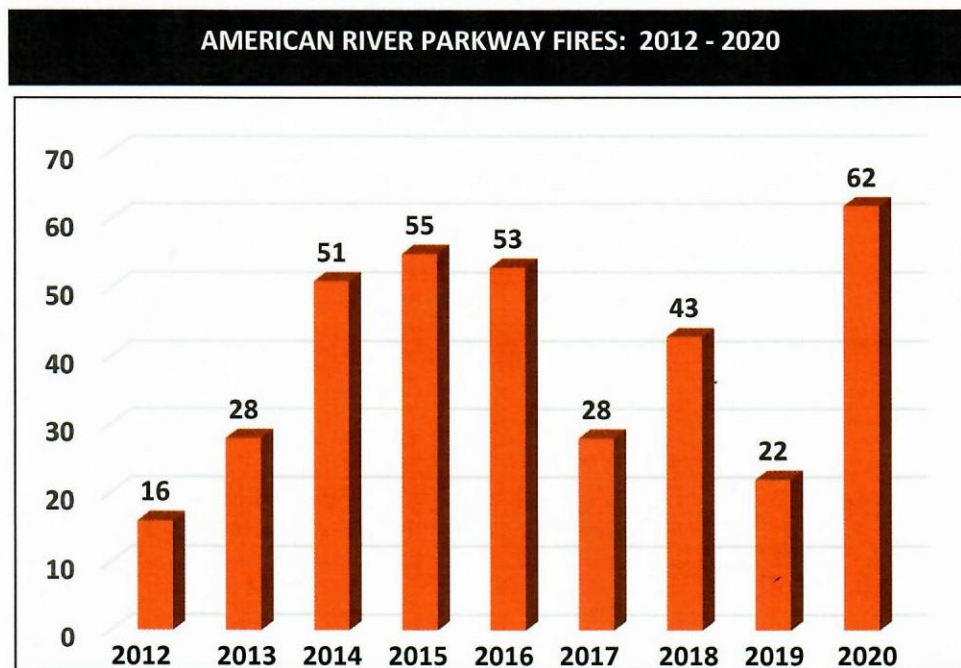
The Park Rangers estimate that as many as 2,000 people experiencing homelessness live along the ARP, a number that has increased during the pandemic, due to lack of shelter bed space and lack of affordable housing.



Fires: Mostly human caused, but not all by our unhoused neighbors:

As Figure 1 below indicates, there has been an increase in fires on the American River Parkway in 2020 compared to the period 2017 – 2019, and slightly higher than the period from 2014 – 2016.

Figure 1: American River Parkway Fires: 2012 - 2020



Source: Sacramento Fire Department

“So we know that they’re human caused, but we just don’t always have the ability to investigate the fires like we would a house fire, come right down to a point of origin or a cause,” said Captain Chris Harvey, Sacramento Fire Department Public Information Officer.

“Have appropriate water on hand, have a shovel on hand or have a fire extinguisher on hand if you can, said Calvin Goodwin, a nearby resident, who also recognizes the fires contribute to negative feeling about the camps and those who live there. The public is very judgmental. They’re like, ‘What idiot would let a person do that,’ but see, it’s not only the homeless that do this. Everyone is prone to mistakes; we’re not all perfect

- “Frequent Fires Along American River Parkway Raise Concerns”, ABC 10, June 23, 2021

Fires: Infractions, Misdemeanors and Felonies:

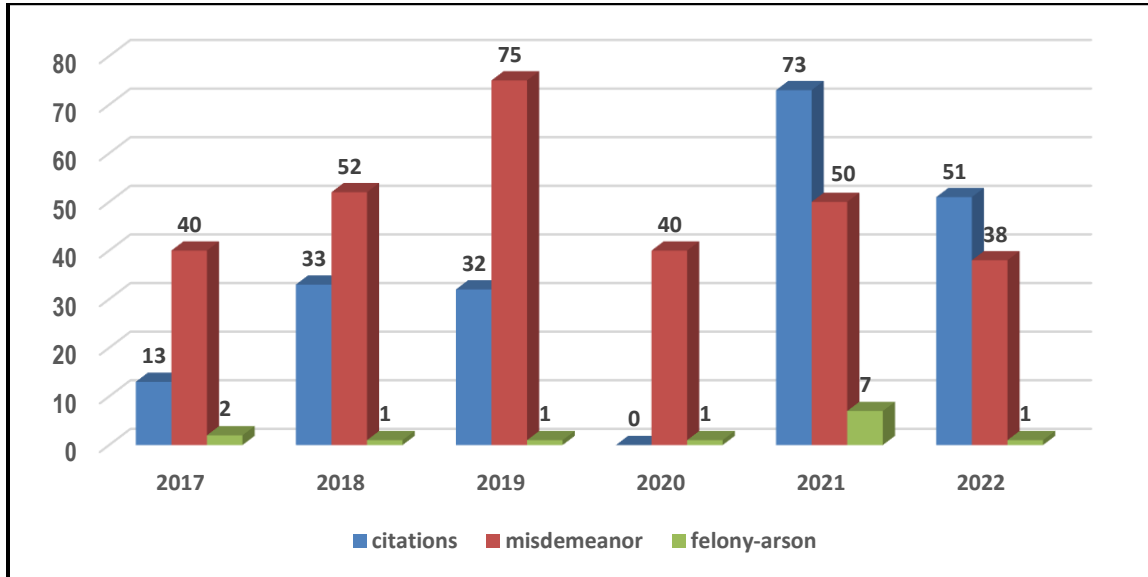
In looking at the County Park Rangers Activity Reports from January 2017 – May 2022, the number of citations that the Park Rangers wrote for infractions and misdemeanors and felony arrests [arson], has remained relatively stable, with the exception of misdemeanors in 2019 [75] and the number of arsons in 2021.

2020: More fires, fewer citations: In fact, despite the number of fires increasing to 62 in 2020, the number of misdemeanor citations went down from 75 in 2019 to 40 in 2020, while the number of arson arrests remained at 1 in 2019 & 2020. [See Table 1 & Figure 2 below]

**Table 1:
American River Parkway: Citations; Misdemeanors; Felonies
2017 – May 2022**

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Average
Citations	13	33	32	0	21	51	31
Misdemeanors	40	52	75	40	50	38	49
Felony [Arson]	2	1	1	1	7	1	2

Figures 2: Citations, Misdemeanor, Felonies: 1/2017- 5/2022



Trying to Survive:

“The folks living outside are just trying to survive...want to stay warm, they want to eat. People have nowhere else to go.”

--- Joe Smith, Advocacy Director, Loaves & Fishes, June 7, 2022

SRCEH then analyzed the percentage of infraction and misdemeanor citations written by the Park Rangers in Fall and Winter between 2017 – May 2022, Table 2 below.

**Table 2:
% Citations; Misdemeanors & Felonies in Fall and Winter
2017 – May 2022**

Year	Citations	Misdemeanors	Felonies
2017	100%	68%	0%
2018	88%	81%	0%
2019	100%	79%	0%
2020	0%	93%	100%
2021	78%	72%	29%
2022	80%	47%	0%
Average	89%	62.5%	21.5

FINDINGS

89% of the infractions and 63% of the misdemeanor fire citations were issued by the Park Rangers during Fall and Winter [January 2017 – May 2022].

Clearly, our unhoused neighbors are simply lighting fires to stay warm during the fall and winter months

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are short term recommendations, recognizing the ultimately the answer for the City and County is to create enough affordable housing, so that people are no longer forced to live outside due to lack of shelter and affordable housing.

SRCEH and other advocates have long argued that keys to reducing fires along the ARP, especially in and around homeless encampments are to:

- Distribute fire extinguishers to encampments and train people experiencing homelessness how to use them;
- The Fire Department should distribute buckets for sand and water; shovels and fire suppressing blankets [which will also keep our unhoused neighbors warm] to the encampments;
- Additionally, the Fire Department should conduct a fire safety program to people in encampments, along the line of the “Tips” below;
- The City and County invest in all season solar cookers at a cost of \$89.00 so that our unhoused neighbors
- Finally, the City and County should outfit all encampments with solar panels that can be used for heating, cooking and charging stations. An example of 21st technology is used in Berkeley, CA that outfitted a homeless encampment with five 250 watt solar panels.

“Tips for People Experiencing Homelessness,” from Taylors Fire and Rescue, South Carolina:

- Make sure fires are in dig out pit, have rocks and other non-combustible materials around the pit to contain the fire. Never leave a fire unattended;
- Keep couches, furniture and other combustibles a minimum of 15 feet away from the fire. Tents, tarps and other inflammable materials should be a minimum of 25 feet away from the fire;
- If you have a kerosene heater or other portable heater – keep a minimum of 3 feet from combustibles;
- Never leave candles unattended;
- Use caution when placing candles. Never place them near curtains, bedding, other combustibles, or where they can be easily turned over;
- Never smoke in bed or leave a lit cigarette unattended;
- Keep several gallons of water and sand/dirt nearby in case of an emergency to extinguish the fire.