

El-Cerrito – Kensington Fire Chief Report

1. What is a Red Flag Day? Describe how it has various levels.

1. 1) What “Red Flag days” are

- a. “Red Flag day” is common shorthand, but the formal National Weather Service products are a **Fire Weather Watch** and a **Red Flag Warning**. These are used when **dry fuels plus dangerous weather** create the potential for extreme fire behavior—things like **strong winds, very low humidity, dry thunderstorms, lightning, or a dry frontal passage**. Local criteria vary by forecast office, because each NWS office sets them with local fire and land-management agencies based on local fuels and fire behavior. Final authority to issue the watch or warning still rests with the NWS.
- b. **Who declares them, and when?**
 - i. The **National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office** issues them. A **Fire Weather Watch** is generally used when there is a **high potential** for a Red Flag event **18 to 96 hours in advance**. A **Red Flag Warning** is issued when critical fire weather is **impending or already occurring**, usually when there is high confidence the criteria will occur **within 48 hours or less**.
- c. **Why they are declared**
 - i. They are declared to give fire agencies time to **staff up, reposition resources, and prepare for rapid fire growth**, because under those conditions even a small ignition can become difficult to control and threaten life and property.

2. 2) What a PDS is

- a. A **PDS** stands for **Particularly Dangerous Situation**. In California fire weather, a PDS is **not a separate warning product**. It is special wording placed **inside a Red Flag Warning** by NWS offices to highlight a fire-weather event that is **rare, exceptional, and especially dangerous** to the public and the firefighting community.
- b. **Who declares a PDS, when, and why?**
 - i. Again, the **NWS Weather Forecast Office** issues it, typically after coordination with affected agencies. It is used when Red Flag conditions are not just present, but are **greatly exceeded** or are expected to be **near record levels**—in other words, when officials want to clearly communicate that this is an **unusually severe, high-consequence fire weather event**.

3. 3) Why winds over 45 mph can trigger “leave early” guidance

- a. Winds over 45 mph are the one common element to catastrophic fires that have permanently changed communities.
- b. This part is important: **45 mph is not a universal national “leave early” rule**. It is better understood as a **local risk-management trigger** used by some agencies

and communities in wildfire-prone areas. In Berkeley and El Cerrito, for example, the Fire Department's **Extreme Fire Weather** concept is tied to an NWS forecast of **very fast winds and very low humidity during a Red Flag Warning**, and the City recommends residents make plans to **leave the hills during those periods** because fires under those conditions can become catastrophic very quickly.

c. **Why 45 mph matters operationally**

- i. Winds in that range are strong enough to create **serious compounding problems** even before they meet the higher National Weather Service "high wind" thresholds. Related wildfire-safety frameworks in Alameda County/PG&E use **sustained winds above about 25 mph and gusts above about 45 mph** as one factor for Public Safety Power Shutoff decisions, because high winds can cause **branches and debris to hit power lines**, damage equipment, and start fires. Separately, the NWS notes that **40–50 mph winds can cause isolated wind damage**, and even **45 mph gusts** are enough for many offices to issue a **Wind Advisory** because they can blow around unsecured objects and make driving difficult.
- ii. In addition, the fire service typically loses its ability to use aircraft in a fire attack when winds are above 45 mph. During a wildland fire in our area, aircraft are our primary response tool.

d. **The practical reason for "leave early" at that point**

- i. In hillside communities with limited roads, the goal is to move people **before** an ignition happens under wind conditions that can cause **fast fire spread, ember cast, falling branches, blocked roads, outages, and stalled evacuations**. That is why local "leave early" guidance is often set at a more conservative level than formal NWS high-wind warning criteria.

4. Provide your recommended directions for agencies in Kensington in response to Red Flag Days. Specifically, the County Library, Public School, and KCC Classroom activity.

1. **Recommended Direction for Agencies in Kensington During Red Flag Days:**
2. During standard **Red Flag Days**, the recommendation is for agencies to **closely monitor weather and fire conditions**, remain in communication with public safety officials, and be prepared to adjust operations if conditions worsen.
- 3.
4. During **Particularly Dangerous Situations (PDS)** and **Red Flag events with sustained winds exceeding 45 miles per hour**, the recommendation is to **close public buildings and suspend public activities**, including the **County Library**,

Kensington Hilltop School, and KCC classroom activities. This approach is intended to reduce risk to the public and limit exposure during conditions that could rapidly threaten life safety and hinder evacuation.

5. Describe fire presence for red flag days.

1. Fire department presence on Red Flag days varies depending on whether the **California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES)** recommends upstaffing for local fire agencies. On a lower-level Red Flag day, there may be **no additional staffing**, and the fire department may operate under its **normal staffing model** while closely monitoring weather and fire conditions. During more severe Red Flag events, particularly those involving **extreme winds**, Cal OES may recommend that local agencies **upstaff additional resources**, with that added staffing funded through Cal OES. Those recommendations are generally based on a combination of **wind, humidity, and fuel conditions**. The El Cerrito Fire Department makes every effort to follow Cal OES upstaffing recommendations. If Cal OES does not recommend upstaffing, but local conditions still present a significant threat, the department may choose to **increase staffing on its own** based on operational need.

2. Describe police presence for red flag days.

- a. **Police presence on Red Flag days depends on the severity of the event.** On a standard Red Flag day, no additional police staffing may be necessary beyond normal operations. However, during a **Particularly Dangerous Situation (PDS)** or a Red Flag event with **sustained winds exceeding 45 miles per hour**, it may be appropriate to place **all available police personnel on duty**. This allows the department to support potential evacuations, manage traffic and access control, and provide security in neighborhoods that have been evacuated or where residents have chosen to leave early, helping to protect public safety and deter looting.

3. Parking restrictions on red flag days. When, where and how?

- a. **Parking restrictions on Red Flag days are intended primarily to support emergency access, not evacuation modeling.** As such, they will largely be

treated separately from the Kensington–El Cerrito evacuation study. The purpose of these restrictions is to ensure that fire engines and other emergency vehicles have an unobstructed path through Kensington’s narrow roadways during periods of elevated fire danger. The goal is to avoid situations where responding fire apparatus are delayed or blocked by parked vehicles while traffic is also moving downhill on constrained or one-way streets.

- b. These Red Flag parking restrictions would be implemented on any **Red Flag Warning day declared by the National Weather Service for Weather Zone 508**, which includes Kensington. Notification would be provided through posted signage, whether permanent or temporary, identifying the streets subject to restriction. In practice, Red Flag days in Kensington are **relatively rare**, typically occurring only a few days per year, if at all.

4. Recommendations for marked evacuation routes.

- a. We should **not** establish permanently marked evacuation routes in Kensington. Marked evacuation routes are generally most appropriate for areas facing **predictable, location-specific hazards**, such as tsunamis or volcanic events, where the direction of travel is more consistent and known in advance. Kensington’s primary hazards—**earthquakes, wildfires, and landslides**—are different. These incidents can rapidly change road conditions, block access, or make previously safe routes impassable. In those situations, predesignated evacuation routes could unintentionally direct residents **toward the hazard** or into a **dead-end or blocked roadway**.
- b. For that reason, evacuation in Kensington should remain **flexible and incident-driven**, based on real-time conditions, situational awareness, and direction from emergency personnel.

5. Provide your recommendations on a coordinated effort to provide methods in notifying residents of how to prepare for red flag days and where to turn for information, i.e., social media, handouts, etc.

1. Make CWS the primary life-safety alert channel.

Contra Costa’s Community Warning System (CWS) should be the primary source for urgent, protective-action messaging because it already sends alerts by phone call, text, email, website, social media, and sirens when there is an immediate threat. Residents

should be urged to register all cell and VoIP numbers, and to save the CWS callback number so alerts do not get ignored as spam.

2. Use a “single message, many channels” approach for Red Flag preparedness.

Once the National Weather Service issues a Fire Weather Watch or Red Flag Warning, the same plain-language message should be pushed through: City/District websites, City/District social media, school email/text systems, library notices, KCC class notices, and email newsletters. Kensington Fire already directs residents to know their evacuation zone and monitor CWS, Nixle, and Watch Duty, while El Cerrito already uses red flags at fire stations when NWS extreme fire weather warnings are in effect.

3. Build a standing annual education campaign before fire season.

Each year, before peak fire weather, agencies should distribute a simple Red Flag Ready handout through schools, the County Library, KCC classrooms, newsletters, and community events. That handout should explain: what a Fire Weather Watch and Red Flag Warning mean, how to sign up for CWS, where to check official fire weather, what to do on Red Flag days, how to prepare a go-bag, and why residents with mobility or timing needs should consider leaving early. Kensington’s existing preparedness materials already emphasize CWS registration, go-bags, loaded vehicles, multiple evacuation routes, and early evacuation when needed, and the District already has a recurring community publication in The Fire Plug that can support this effort.

4. Assign clear agency roles so the messaging stays consistent.

I recommend that the district own the preparedness message and Red Flag readiness guidance; Police own urgent warning, evacuation, and access-control messaging; and Public Works support roadside signage and any traffic or access notices. This aligns with the City’s Emergency Operations Plan, which assigns Police responsibility for emergency public warning and alerts and evacuation operations, while Public Works supports warnings, traffic movement, and access restrictions.

5. Give residents one simple “Where to Turn for Information” box on every notice.

Every flyer, social post, school email, library notice, and KCC announcement should end with the same box:

- CWS = official life-safety alerts and evacuation messages
- NWS Fire Weather = official weather watches/warnings
- Kensington Fire / El Cerrito websites and social media = local readiness guidance and operational updates
- Watch Duty / Nixle = secondary situational awareness tools

This reduces confusion and reinforces one consistent public-information structure.

Bottom line: residents should not have to guess where to go for information. A coordinated program should use CWS as the official emergency alert system, NWS as the official weather trigger, and local agencies, schools, the library, and KCC as amplifiers of the same message. That combination gives the community both the official warning and the practical preparation guidance they need.

6. Reenergize CERT. Recommendations for the format, i.e., 501C3? Reports to?

- a. CERT in Kensington would benefit from a more formal organizational structure, beginning with the designation of a **CERT Area Coordinator** and the establishment of a **501(c)(3) nonprofit partner** to support administration and fundraising. Under the Area Coordinator, the program should include **three deputy coordinators** to assist with training, operational readiness, and the coordination of objectives during major incidents.
- b. CERT serves a critical role in the community during disasters and large-scale emergencies. While it is not a substitute for the fire department, it functions as an organized **community emergency response resource**, consistent with FEMA's CERT model, by providing trained volunteers who can support preparedness, communication, and neighborhood-level response.
- c. At present, the El Cerrito/Kensington Fire Department provides **basic CERT training** for interested community members. However, there is currently **no formal CERT structure in Kensington** that allows the group to apply for grants, receive or manage funds, or coordinate with the Fire Department in a formal and sustainable way. Establishing this structure would strengthen community resilience and improve CERT's ability to support the community during major events.