

Tuolumne coalition takes on mega fires

Work would produce jobs, lumber for new homes

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A potentially game changing effort to prevent megafires is rolling out in the woods up past Sonora.

The federal government granted \$55 million in April for prescribed burning, selective logging and other work in and near the Stanislaus National Forest.

It grew out of a consensus among local business and environmental groups that the trees and brush have become unnaturally dense.

They hope to create hundreds of jobs in the mountains and modestly boost the lumber supply for housing in Stanislaus County and beyond. They also could enhance part of the watershed for farms and cities in the Northern Sa n Joaquin Valley.

The project could run until 2030, including funding not yet granted from state and federal sources. It could protect about a quarter of the roughly 1 million acres of public and private land within the national forest boundary.

The planners talked about it during a May 20 tour of recent fuel-reduction projects and the general area where the new federal money will go. It was led by Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions, a coalition concerned with both the national forest and adjacent national park.

At a tour stop just off Highway 108 near Strawberry, a crew was wrapping up one of the last prescribed burns of the season. It mimicked the gentle fires sparked for millennia by lightning and Indigenous people.

Northwest of Twain Harte, the visitors saw how a machine called a masticator chips up woody material to enhance a fuelbreak for several hundred homes. At a third stop, burning and logging had thinned out the landscape in the Crandall/dry Creek area, popular with off-roaders.

“We’re trying to get these forests to look much more like they did (before) EuroAmerican influence, with these tall trees, these open understories,” said Byron Krempl, headwaters program director for the Tuolumne River Trust.

This nonprofit is part of the coalition, which formed in 2010 and worked to bring the \$55 million to Tuolumne County. It is part of the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package signed by President Joe Biden in November.

Rim Fire looms large -

The coalition also includes county government, recreation and other environmental and business members. Among them is Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns two sawmills in the county and about 90,000 acres of timber amid the national forest.

Environmental groups had long resisted logging because it took too many big trees. They came around as SPI revamped its mills to use smaller pines, cedars and firs. The coalition has one central goal: Keep anything like the Rim Fire of 2013 from happening again. It burned across 257,000 acres of public and private land in the Tuolumne River watershed.

At the time, the Rim was the largest fire ever recorded in the Sierra Nevada. It has since been far outpaced by the Dixie Fire, which covered 963,000 acres in the northern part of the range last year.

The upcoming work is in the Stanislaus River watershed, which has had some large blazes but no megafires. It aims to reduce fuel on about 41,000 acres, leaving a mosaic that slows fires in a 245,000-acre zone between the Columbia and Strawberry areas.

The project started this spring with the first of the fuelbreaks that will divide the zone into about 20 “pods.” These strips will still have large trees but much less of the dense understory vegetation that can burn intensely and shoot embers a mile or more.

Each pod will then get a specific set of measures, such as prescribed burning, logging, mastication or pruning of lower conifer branches.

The fuelbreaks will connect with others already created by SPI and other parties, which in turn mesh with those at Calaveras Big Trees State Park to the north.

“We’re working hard to try to break (the fuel) up,” said Brian Wayland, timber manager for SPI in the county. “We recognize that fire is the biggest threat that we have to wildlife habitat as well as our private forest and the Forest Service.”

More wood for building homes-

The upcoming thinning will sharply increase the forest’s annual timber sales. But it will have only a minor effect on the construction industry because the wood goes into a national market. Lumber prices have shot up over the past year, aggravating the housing shortage in the Valley and elsewhere.

Wayland estimated that the thinning will add 50 million to 60 million board-feet a year to the 35 million now sold off the Stanislaus.

A board-foot is a piece of wood 1 foot wide, 1 foot long and 1 inch thick. About 10,000 are in a typical house, so up to 6,000 could be built each year with the expected output from the coalition.

“Every little bit helps,” Wayland said.

SPI employs about 300 people at the two local mills. About the same number work for logging and trucking contractors who get the raw material to the plants.

The county’s timber industry launched around 1900 and employed a few thousand people at its peak. It has declined since the 1980s due to environmental rules. Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions hopes to create new jobs as it takes on the over-dense conditions. Some will be on fire crews, doing controlled burns from fall to spring so the summer wildfire season is not so scary anymore.

The county also has a company, Pacific Ultra-power, that burns wood chips to generate electricity in Chinese Camp. About three miles to the southwest, American Wood Fibers turns lumber shavings into animal bedding and other products.

“We have the markets to do those things,” said Mike Albrecht, an industry forester who co-founded the coalition. “Without the markets, all we can do is talk about this stuff.” Albrecht co-owns Sierra Resource Management, which does logging and related work in the county. He noted that a typical tree takes up about 100 gallons of soil moisture daily. Removing some trees will help the others survive drought.

More runoff to Valley

Fewer trees sucking up water could also mean more running off toward reservoirs. The gain could be as much as 10%, according to a 2020 study at UC Merced’s Sierra Nevada Research Center.

The coalition’s work is in a watershed that supplies most of Tuolumne County’s drinking water. Down below, it spreads across close to 120,000 farmland acres in the Oakdale and South San Joaquin irrigation districts. The Stanislaus River also supplements city wells in part of SSJID’S territory and contributes to the federal Central Valley Project. The mountain effort could get another \$20 million in federal money for roads and other needs in the project area, coalition member John Buckley said. He is executive director of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, based in Twain Harte. Buckley said the project should build on, rather than replace, the work funded earlier through the U.S. Forest Service.

“It is adding value to something we all agree needs to be done at a pace and scale far more than what we’re doing now,” he said.