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## Tuolumne County

### Cal Fire grants \$10M for forest resilience projects

By GIUSEPPE RICAPITO  
*The Union Democrat*

Cal Fire is giving a combined total of about \$10 million for projects in Tuolumne County aimed at advancing forest health and resilience.

"I think the biggest thing is this will go a long way to protect our communities and restore the health of the forest from catastrophic fire," said Liz Peterson, deputy county administrator.

In a news release on Thursday, the state agency announced \$160 million in grants for "landscape-scale management projects intended to maintain healthy forests throughout California while enhancing carbon storage."

About \$5 million was designated to Tuolumne County and Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions, a local collaborative working group of industry and environmental interests, which Peterson said will involve the installation of fuel breaks within the Stanislaus National Forest to slow or contain potential fires within that region.

"The project is going to take place over many years," said Patrick Koepele, executive director of the Tuolumne River Trust. "This funding is going to be a first phase of work to establish fuel breaks."

Koepele said the YSS is not a nonprofit organization, so the county applies for the loans and the YSS partners with them as project managers. The Tuolumne River Trust is the fiscal agent for the YSS.

The project is considered the first phase of the SERAL project, or Social and Ecological Resiliency Across the Landscape, a collaborative thinning and burning project with the U.S. Forest Service, which is billed as the largest forest management project in Stanislaus National Forest history.

"The SERAL Project by the YSS and the forest service is an example of how to do a lot of work with the least amount of controversy," Koepele said.

The plan essentially involves creating internal cells, called Potential Operational Delineations (PODs), which will hopefully facilitate containment if a fire breaks out. The fuel breaks leave some trees, but reduce the density of vegetation so it can't spread as easily.

The plan is intended

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to reduce the possibility of another destructive wildfire like the 2013 Rim Fire, which burned more than 400 square miles of the Stanislaus National Forest, private Sierra Pacific Industries lands, other private properties, and Yosemite National Park.

The Stanislaus National Forest covers more than 1,400 square miles in parts of four counties, including 42% of the land in Tuolumne County.

The SERAL project area is north of Highway 108, between Cedar Ridge and Strawberry in the South and Middle Fork Stanislaus River watersheds, Koepele added.

The SERAL landscape is about 114,000 acres, with 16 areas of PODs.

The county is prioritizing fuel management in PODs 1 through 5 with the Cal Fire grant, most of which are scattered northeast of Long Barn, which total 7,075 acres of fuel breaks.

A master stewardship agreement between the county and forest service grants the county authority to oversee and do forest treatment projects on federal forest lands.

Peterson said the work is expected to begin around next spring. Though they have until 2025 to complete this project, they plan to finish before that, she said.

The county is awaiting the conclusion of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures that have to be done in advance of forest treatment projects in the Stanislaus National Forest. A botanist hired by the county is doing surveys on forest lands and in Tuolumne County to prepare for the projects.



Courtesy photo / Chantz Joyce

Previous work from the American Forest Foundation in Butte County shows fuels reduction, or a similar objective in Tuolumne County.

Peterson said the forest service is seeking an emergency decision on the NEPA results in order to get the work started as soon as possible.

The funding provided to Tuolumne County and the YSS totals \$4,999,847.

Cal Fire described the project as the highest priority fuel management features in the first phase of SERAL, which will be followed by thinning and prescribed fire.

The funding also provides for forest health treatments, including thinning, prescribed fire and reforestation on the Murphy Ranch, a 640-



acre property owned by the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk.

The Murphy Ranch is about 120 acres and will receive fuel reduction and applied fire, as well 40 acres of reforestation.

Koepele said about \$250,000 will be designated to the Murphy Ranch project.

While the county focus is on private land, the other approximate half of the grant will be funded through a Washington, D.C.-based conservation organization called the American Forest Foundation, which works with private landowners on forested land on resilience and fire safety.

The funding provided to the foundation totals \$4,999,999.

Cal Fire described the project and the development and execution of a cross-jurisdictional treatment plan in the "Martinez Fireshed" east of Sonora, to protect against up to moderate fire levels with private landowners across 5,000 acres.

A part of the project will evaluate the financial value of avoided loss by the treatments and to seek private sector investors in additional fuel reduction, Cal Fire said.

"The biggest push for us is that healthy forest concept," said Chantz Joyce, California conservation manager for the foundation. "We love to hear from landowners. We want to be able to build something that works for them. Whether it's an email or phone call, we just love to hear from them and see if we can

design a program that can benefit and be useful for them."

The foundation does not have a specific program to apply to the landowners, Joyce said, but will seek their guidance on the best course of action. That work could involve fuel breaks or large scale fuel mitigation, he said.

The foundation has historically contracted directly with forestry firms or fire safe councils and works with local contractors or businesses that have a stake in, and knowledge of the area, he said.

Joyce said the Martinez Fireshed was about 245,000 acres, which covered a large portion of Tuolumne County and a little bit of Calaveras.

A fireshed is an area mapped to model where fire could impact if one started there.

The foundation currently has a project called My Sierra Woods, which was funded through Cal Fire in 2019 in 12 counties north of Tuolumne County.

Joyce said they hoped to apply the lessons of that project on how to engage with small landowners to collaborate with agencies public and private, as well as reduce costs.

The foundation typically works with landowners down to 10 acres in size. They haven't started any outreach at this time, he said, though they hope to begin operations either in the fall or spring.

The funding comes from \$536 million provided through Senate Bill 85, which was signed by

Gov. Gavin Newsom in April to accelerate forest health, fire prevention and climate resiliency projects, Cal Fire stated.

The Cal Fire projects span 27 counties, from Siskiyou County to San Diego County.

The plan is part of an overall goal outlined in the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan, which provides guidance on priority regions and the efforts to protect communities and the forests that surround them.

The Cal Fire grant program funded 37 projects in total.

Twenty of the awards and about \$81 million were through the Forest Health Early Action Direct Grant Awards, 17 awards and about \$72.5 million were provided through Forest Health Early Action Solicitation Grant Awards and four awards for a total of just under \$6 million were provided through Forest Legacy Grant Awards.

The funding in Tuolumne County was provided through the Forest Health Early Action Solicitation Grant Awards.

Cal Fire expects to award up to an additional \$123 million for fire prevention projects and \$2.3 million for forest health research projects within the next month, according to the release.

Contact Giuseppe Ricapito at [gricapito@uniondemocrat.net](mailto:gricapito@uniondemocrat.net) or (209) 588-4526.