

Working together



Guy McCarthy / Union Democrat

Nic Molinelli of High Sierra Timber Management works Friday in a fuels reduction project area intended to protect the wildland urban interface where the Sierra Outdoor School and Old Oak Ranch Conference Center are on or near Stanislaus National Forest lands that have not burned in decades.

Tuolumne County and stakeholders group collaborate to push fuels reduction projects

By GUY McCARTHY
The Union Democrat

Representatives of Tuolumne County's government and Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions are touting collaborative fuels reductions projects intended to protect communities in and near the Stanislaus National Forest, including Cedar Ridge and Big Hill.

Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions has secured \$23 million in grants over the past five years, Patrick Koepele, executive director of Tuolumne River Trust and a member of the YSS group, said Friday in Sonora.

Another recent grant for \$1.5 million to \$1.6 million secured by Tuolumne County has helped pay for creating defensible space for about 160 homes occupied by people age

65 and older, and for fuel reduction along major entry-exit routes in fire prone areas like Big Hill and Phoenix Lake.

"It's a CCI grant, for California Climate Initiative," Ryan Campbell, the elected county supervisor for District 2, said Friday standing near a home with newly-created defensible space on East Brookside Drive in Cedar Ridge. "It's intended to help people comply with PRC 4291. This work was done last week."

Public Resources Code 4291 is the law that requires people who live in wildland areas to maintain a minimum 100 feet of defensible space around their homes. It was signed into law 17 years ago by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, increasing minimum defensible space requirements from 30 feet to 100 feet.

When Schwarzenegger signed PRC 4291 into law in September 2004, California was recovering from one of its most traumatic fire seasons on record, which included the Southern California firestorms of October 2003.

Properties with newly-created defensible space on East Brookside Drive appeared clean and tidy with ample, open, fuel-free spaces.

Elsewhere in the same neighborhood, other homes were situated in densities similar to East Brookside Drive — on roughly quarter-acre lots — yet the homes appeared more crowded together, in part because nowhere near 100 feet of defensible space was being maintained on those properties.

In the yards of homes on Quar-

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ter Horse Drive and other winding residential streets, grasses, shrubs, and small trees grew close to larger trees with limbs that touched the sloping roofs of homes, porches, and garages.

The defensible space work on East Brookside Drive is close to a larger fuels reduction effort called the Cedar Ridge Master Stewardship Agreement Project, county administrative analyst Simi Kaur said Friday in Cedar Ridge. That project is intended to help protect an especially vulnerable wildland urban interface where the Sierra Outdoor School and Old Oak Ranch Conference Center are on or near Stanislaus National Forest lands that have not burned in decades.

A recent \$3.6 million grant is helping Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions, Tuolumne County, and the Stanislaus National Forest pay for the year-long project on 2,300 acres above and east of Cedar Ridge. Work began on the project last week, and people with Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions hope the work will be completed by October 2022.

Wes Brinegar, owner of High Sierra Timber Management of Twain Harte, and employee Nic Molinelli worked on the ground Friday on a slope in the fuels reduction project area. Molinelli and a helper felled standing dead trees on the slope. Brinegar worked in a Bobcat at times and supervised another employee driving an excavator with a boom-mounted, multi-bladed masticator to cut through brush, shrubs, and trees.

Smaller projects underway this month in Tuolumne County are unrelated to the larger Stanislaus National Forest projects focused on reducing fire threats in the South Fork Stanislaus and Middle Fork Stanislaus



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(Clockwise from top) A home with newly-created defensible space on East Brookside Drive in Cedar Ridge. Wes Brinegar, owner of High Sierra Timber Management of Twain Harte, talks Friday about a fuels reduction project area. Brinegar watches work under way Friday in the project area

watersheds, to protect densely-populated towns and seasonable cabin communities along the Highway 108 corridor between Soulsbyville, Pinecrest, and Kennedy Meadows.

"Firewise, Highway 108 is a death trap," Jamestown resident Kenny Ayers told the county Board of Supervisors in August when the board was discussing how to spend about half of \$5.3 million of federal COVID-19 relief funds. The federal American Rescue Plan Act stimulus funding for the county is expected to total about \$10.6 mil-

lion.

Fuels reduction projects are not on the county's wish list for spending the federal COVID relief funding. Pre-funding fire and code enforcement staff and equipment with up to \$350,000 and spending up to \$800,000 on fire apparatus funding were listed as priorities by county staff's interpretation of the board's input in August.

The onus for funding fuels reduction projects like the ones underway this month on Big Hill and Cedar Ridge will continue to fall on county staff, collaborative partners with

Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions like the Tuolumne River Trust, and other groups like the Highway 108 Fire Safe Council.

"The problem is so big that no one group of people can tackle it all by themselves," Campbell said Friday afternoon back in Sonora. "By working together, we can try to bring the forest back to a more natural state and a more fire-safe state, and help protect some of these communities in the wildland areas."

Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions is billed as a group of diverse stakeholders,

including conservationists and timber industry representatives, working together to help the U.S. Forest Service, federal Bureau of Land Management, Yosemite National Park, and private land managers achieve sustainable, healthy forests and watersheds, and continue recovery efforts from the 2013 Rim Fire and other areas in need of rehabilitation.

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