

Success Story

Grant-funded Fuel Treatments Bring More Than Wildfire Protection to Communities

The state of California encompasses a variety of ecosystems in which fire is a natural process. Hundreds of thousands of acres burn annually in wildland fires in California. Hundreds of homes are burned every year in California when wildland fires impact the wildland urban interface (WUI). The California Fire Safe Council (FSC) was established in 1993 to mobilize Californians to protect their homes, communities and environment from wildfires. The Council accomplishes its mission through public education programs and by motivating communities to undertake fire safety projects. Local Fire Safe Councils are established and organized by community members motivated to save lives and property from wildfire. Today there are more than 150 active councils in California.

Funds are awarded to organizations in California for fuel reduction and outreach projects through grants from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service. The Forest Service awarded 33 million dollars for grants in 2009 and the BLM awarded 1.6 million. In 2009, over 100,000 acres were targeted for fuels treatment. The California FSC operates a grants clearinghouse and provides grant-writing workshops to aid community organizations apply for grant funding.

The fuel treatments accomplished with grant funding are catalyzed by multiple stakeholders.

Collaboration between Fire Safe Councils, government agencies, universities and private organizations enhances the effectiveness of each group's individual fire hazard reduction efforts. When all of the stakeholders are invited to the planning process, then everyone has buy-in, and goals are accomplished with a high degree of cooperation. Communication between the various land owners/stewardship agencies ensures fuel treatment continuity across property lines.

Community wildfire protection fuel treatments are catalyzed by multiple stakeholders

North of Santa Clarita, within the matrix of the Los Padres National Forest, the Mount Pinos Communities FSC is a model of multiple-stakeholder collaboration. The Mount Pinos Communities FSC completed a grant-funded fuel treatment to create an escape route for Camp Condor, which houses hundreds of elementary school-age children during the summer months. Camp Condor is located in a wildland setting with high fire hazard. Only one narrow access road leads to the camp.



The Mount Pinos Community FSC masticated fuels along this access road, reducing potential fire behavior enough to allow the camp residents to escape should a wildfire occur. This treatment also gives fire suppression resources a foothold, would they need to respond to a fire in this area.



The Mount Pinos Community FSC, the Forest Service and the Kern County Fire Department personnel communicate regularly. Each group plans activities that will interact synergistically with the others. The mastication along the road to Camp Condor compliments and extends fuel breaks completed by the Forest Service and Kern County. The organized group effort of the Mount Pinos Community FSC, the Forest Service

and the Kern County Fire Department ensure maximum efficiency of area fuel treatment and fire hazard reduction efforts.

In the past, fire hazard reduction in the WUI had the connotation of being solely fuels reduction completed around homeowners' properties. Today, fire safety projects are more comprehensive. Efforts by Fire Safe Councils and local agencies may include improvements to infrastructure and pre-attack planning. Improving roads and adding areas where emergency response vehicles could turn around can make the difference between a community being defensible or not during a wildfire. Creating water sources and improving signs also aid in the defensibility of homes.

Today, fire hazard reduction efforts are more comprehensive.

The Mount Laguna FSC has not only completed fuel reduction work, but has improved infrastructure and emergency preparedness in their community. The Mount Laguna FSC program to remove dead and dying trees was supported by grant funding. In addition to fuel reduction work, the Mount Laguna FSC posted maps of homes on roadside displays at the entrance of each neighborhood. Members of this Mount Laguna FSC also participate in Ham radio training and have a network of radio operators prepared for emergency incidents when phone service is interrupted. The Mount Laguna Observatory, a partner of the Mount Laguna FSC, acquired a submersible pump, generator, hydrants and built a parking area that is suitable for a staging area for fire

suppression vehicles. These improvements, in conjunction with hazardous fuel reduction projects, greatly enhance the ability of firefighters to undertake wildfire suppression in or around this community.

Fire Safe Council efforts rely on social networks and community organization to help plan and implement fire hazard reduction projects. As communities become organized to prepare for wildland fire, they open communication channels and build trust among homeowners. The community organization and communication network forged during Fire Safe Council activities carry through to other challenges the community may undertake.

Social networks and community organization help fuel treatment efforts, and are also products of community-wide fuel treatment efforts.

The grant-funded fuel treatments orchestrated by the Angeles Forest Valleys and Lakes FSC drew a loose group of homeowners into a tightly knit community. Prior to their efforts, these separate neighborhoods lacked a sense of community. Preparing for wildfire gave members of this community a common goal and motivation to achieve this goal. This motivation has persisted beyond fire hazard reduction into other areas such as general disaster preparedness. The community members now share their success at wildfire preparation and have a strong network in place to continue fuel treatments or other projects benefitting the community.

Fuel Treatments Tested by Wildfires

The Jesusita Fire started on May 5, 2009, burned 8,733 acres and destroyed 160 structures in and around Santa Barbara. Prior to the fire, the Santa Barbara Botanical Gardens received a grant to treat 30 acres of the Garden's 85 acres. The garden is situated in a canyon with abundant wildland fuels, and surrounded by homes.

Although only half of the treatment acreage was completed by the time of the Jesusita Fire, some important buildings were saved. Twenty-five foot tall vegetation was cleared around the library annex as a part of the fuel treatment efforts. This clearing allowed fire engines the room to position themselves by the library and defend the building, saving the Gardens' rare book collection. On the east side of the garden, several acres of fuel were cleared next to the seedbank which allowed firefighters to save this building. The seedbank houses rare seed including 35 of the rarest central coast species, some of which have only one or two individual plants left in the world.

The clearing of surface and ladder fuels on garden property also helped fire suppression forces locate and extinguish spot fires efficiently. The Santa Barbara Botanical Garden's fuel treatment efforts were appreciated by neighbors in lower Mission Canyon, whose homes were not burned in the fire.

Uphill of Santa Barbara, embedded in the Los Padres National Forest, the Wildland Residents Association FSC organizes projects to protect small communities in the vicinity of San Marcos Pass from wildfire. The Wildland Residents Association FSC received a grant to complete

fuels reduction work and maintain access routes for fire suppression.

Fire suppression personnel noted the road cleared with grant funds was critical in controlling the fire before it overran the community of Painted Cave.

The first activity they accomplished with grant funding was to clear brush from an old road downhill from the community of Painted Cave. The Jesusita Fire occurred just two weeks later. Fire suppression personnel noted this road cleared with grant funds was critical in controlling the fire before it overran the community of Painted Cave.



View of Painted Cave community from Jesusita Fire.

Summary

In California, hundreds of homes burn every year in the WUI. Fire Safe Councils organize communities to protect lives and property from fire. Federal agencies supply funding through grants to support community-based hazardous fuel reduction projects. These fuel treatments are enhanced when Fire Safe Councils interact with multiple stakeholders in their area. Communities can prepare for fire by improving infrastructure and emergency planning, in conjunction with fuel treatments. By organizing and forming social networks to complete grant-funded fuel treatments, communities find themselves better prepared to accomplish other goals.

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