

How prescribed fire can mitigate disaster

By [JAKE HUTCHISON](#) | jhutchison@chicoer.com | Chico Enterprise-Record

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PARADISE — On an overcast day earlier this week, just before the heavy rain began, small smoke plumes arose over the ridge in eastern Butte County.



Terra Fuego Executive Director Bill Jacks explains pile burning outside of Magalia, California on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024.

(Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Those driving over the Magalia Reservoir dam got the best view of the smoke and maybe even saw the glow of one or two small piles of organic debris set aflame by a Terra Fuego crew of skilled professionals that specialize in prescribed burns.



Small burning piles burn along a hillside near Magalia, California on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Fighting fire with fire, so to speak, isn't anything new. Last winter, members of the Mechoopda tribe did a demonstration of prescribed burning at the Chico State campus. Tribes have used these means of keeping fire at bay for thousands of years. However, given the deadly and destructive wildfires Butte County has faced over the past six years, fires of any kind can bring a feeling of unease to residents.

“This is a strategic project,” said Terra Fuego Executive Director Bill Jacks during Tuesday’s burn near the reservoir, “because it is right in the town of Paradise and right next to a major highway and thoroughfare for escape routes like Skyway and also around these communities next to canyons. The canyons here in Paradise are really difficult to manage the fuels in, and really only prescribed fire can continually steward the landscape to maintain a fuel reduction that minimizes catastrophic fire likelihood.”

Terra Fuego is a non-profit organization that treats overgrowth, particularly surrounding towns with high fire risk, with prescribed burns. The organization was brought in by the Butte County Fire Safe Council. Tuesday’s burn covered about 12 acres of land, but the overall project this winter is expected to cover more than 100 acres.

A force of nature

Many of the concerns that came up after the Camp Fire involved vegetation management. A combination of weather conditions and a near-endless supply of natural fuels gave the Camp Fire the exact edge it needed to scorch through multiple communities and wilderness.

These conditions have been seen repeatedly since the Camp Fire to the more recent Park Fire earlier this year. Fire itself, as Jacks says, is a fact of nature.

“Fire is going to happen,” Jacks said. “There is no permanently excluding wildfire. It’s nature. And the trees here have adapted to fire over millions of years — and then, some time 10,000 years ago, or time immemorial, Native Americans came on the scene on this continent and quickly realized that stewarding the land with frequent fire increased the benefit of the fire in the fire-prone landscape and decreased the destructive nature of wildfires when they did occur.”

Smoke rises over the hillside during a prescribed burn on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024 north of Paradise, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)



Bill Jacks talks about areas around Paradise, California that could see prescribed burning in the future on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Jacks went on to say that, over time, prescribed fires became significantly less frequent, allowing for the buildup of overgrowth.

“So then some time about 150 years ago, around the turn of the century, immigrants to the land decided that we didn’t need fire in the environment, and so that’s when we started excluding fire from the environment and the trees and plants that depended on fire and encouraged fire,” Jacks said. “It allowed the fuel to build up.”

Part of the challenge has been in changing the way fire is viewed. Jacks said he hopes to eventually change the attitude toward prescribed fire to be more positive and viewed as a means to protect communities. This is especially needed when burns occur close to towns and communities to create fire breaks.

“When we burn close to the communities, we provide the greatest resiliency for our most vulnerable areas,” Jacks said. “And so, when we live next to these canyons, we need to get to a place where we’re able to burn out the entire canyon in a prescription to provide the community with the greatest resiliency from devastating, out of control wildfires.

“Frequent prescribed fire is a critical ecological stewardship process that forests and communities depend on.”

Conditions for burns

Terra Fuego’s burn on Tuesday occurred at what could be considered peak conditions. A storm was moving in, the humidity was higher, the wind was minimal and the temperature had dropped.

One of the challenges for getting a prescribed burn a green light is minimizing any chance of losing control of the fire.

Cal Fire-Butte County Public Information Officer Dan Collins said a lot goes into planning a burn. This can include considerable logistics such as requesting resources, having supervisors on hand and creating an action plan.

“It’s a very coordinated and controlled effort,” Collins said.

Cal Fire, though it does conduct prescribed burns, has to function differently from other organizations because, unlike the U.S. Forest Service, it does not have its own land to protect. It frequently works with other government agencies like the Forest Service and the California Department of Water Resources, but oftentimes for Cal Fire to run a controlled burn, it is on private property and requires permission from owners.

“A big part of this process and why it can take so long is getting property- and land owners in agreement and on the same page,” Collins said. “One of the challenges we run into as a state organization is identifying projects and getting land owners’ permission or buy-in to do those projects.”

Prescribed burning through Cal Fire has ramped up considerably over the past decade.

“Our goal is to create some type of buffer to protect a community and create a fuel break so that way, when there’s a fire, we know that area exists and we can get in and start extending those lines and begin staging,” Collins said.

The Plumas National Forest has been conducting some larger scale burns recently with projects throughout the service’s scope. Public Information Officer Tamara Schmidt said the storm pushed some work back past Thanksgiving this year, but the projects are expected to continue when weather permits.

“We’ve been doing a lot on the east side of the forest in the Beckwourth Ranger District,” Schmidt said. “Conditions still weren’t quite at prescription on the west side of the forest, but hopefully we can make some progress there as well.”

The service conducted roughly a 40-acre burn on Wednesday as part of a larger 150-acre project.

“In terms of priorities for us, we’re increasing treatments in the Challenge area, Brush Creek, Concow and the Magalia area,” Schmidt said.

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