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Smoke, fire welcome in Magalia

Crews conduct 60-acre prescribed burn on ridge



Fire Storm Capt. Dan Slinde makes a line of fire along the ground in Magalia, California on Friday, April 18, 2025. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)



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MAGALIA — The pillars of white smoke in Magalia on Friday could be easily seen by all driving northeast on the Skyway and beyond.

The Butte County Fire Safe Council, in partnership with Terra Fuego and the Paradise Unified School District, conducted a 60-acre burn just off of the Skyway in Magalia on Friday to create a fire break in the forest abutting a large residential area.

In a county that has seen as many destructive wildfires as Butte, smoke has its own grim connotation, as where there is smoke, there's fire. But numerous organizations and local stakeholders have come together to shift that notion of fire to something positive.

“Living in a fire landscape, it’s our responsibility to steward that landscape with fire,” said Bill Jachs, executive director of Terra Fuego. “So that’s really what’s happening here today. We’re stewarding the land with fire to reduce potential energy for future wildfires, ultimately providing the community the greatest resiliency from wildfire in the future.”



Terra Fuego Executive Director Bill Jachs explains the burn operation Friday, April 18, 2025 in Magalia, California. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

Terra Fuego headed the operation Friday, which took place on land owned by the Paradise Unified School District. The span of treated land consisted of a block east of the Skyway from just north of Rosewood Drive up to Snowberry Circle.

Residents in the area could see the flames, many from their own backyards. In the months leading up to the burn, the Butte County Fire Safe Council conducted significant outreach, with many members going door to door.

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Jim Houtman, assistant director of forest health with the council, said communication about this burn has been happening for nine months.

“Before this fire happened, we sent out over 2,000 postcards that had all of the information on them,” Houtman said. “Then we did door knocking yesterday to let everybody know what we were going to be doing. Everybody was very receptive and wanted to have it done. They’ve been looking at this property for a long time, wanting it cleaned up.”

From the large turnout just past Rosewood Drive and east into the forest, crews with torches, hoses and the occasional bulldozer could be found among the undergrowth and pine needles, slowly spreading flames along the ground and closely monitoring them.



A bulldozer drives through smoke during a prescribed burn in Magalia, California on Friday, April 18, 2025.(Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

During the burn, Jachs noted that the smoke itself plays a vital role in the message and overall communication.

“Another thing that we’re doing here is we’re gaining social licensing from the community through education and implementation,” Jachs said. “By putting

Friday's operation

While firefighters dripped small flames onto the dried pine needles in strategic spots, others prepared water pools and hoses.

The plan for the burn was to complete all 60 acres in one day, and the weather on Friday was especially permissive with low winds in the foothills.

"This is a powerful prescribed fire project because it provides the most vulnerable areas the greatest resiliency to wildland fire," Jachs said. "When wildfire eventually does come, which we know is inevitable, this place will have already burned, so there will be very minimal fire behavior in this area. The longer that fire is excluded, the greater the fire behavior."

Though the fire is only brought in for one day, preparations for the burn are significant. Houtman said there are many steps, including permitting, education and working with community partners.



Fire creeps along the ground during a prescribed burn in Magalia, California on Friday, April 18, 2025. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

"We've been working on this particular piece of property for at least five years," Houtman said. "It was originally a roadside fuel reduction project and

Houtman said machinery was also brought in to conduct mastication work on larger fuels.

“We’ve recently been in there with one of the tribes doing some hand cutting and piling of material, clearing around the trees so we don’t hurt those trees,” Houtman said.

Fire Safe Council Executive Director Taylor Nilsson said the project is also meant to help aid the ecosystem, which is already adapted to fire.

“This burn will reduce hazardous fuels, support native plant regeneration, and enhance habitat complexity — ultimately helping forests withstand drought, pests, and climate stress,” Nilsson said. “By lowering wildfire intensity, prescribed fire reduces long-term smoke and carbon emissions, improves the survival of mature trees, and preserves ecological function for future generations.”

Friday’s operation was one piece of a much larger project in introducing fire back to Butte County landscapes. Earlier this month, Butte County entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Fire Safe Council to conduct roadside burns on major escape routes using grant funding.

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