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# Chico conducts annual upper Bidwell Park control burn



Fire Capt. Ed Gonzalez, left, speaks with Chico State Ecological Reserve staff member Lindsav Amundson at the outskirts of a Chico



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CHICO — The crackle of fire and radio chatter floated through the smokey air of upper Bidwell Park on Thursday as crews closely monitored a prescribed burn along the golden hills northeast of Chico.

Minor smoke arose from burn spots around Horseshoe Lake and under Monkey Face along with some ash while the Chico Fire Department, partnered with many other agencies, conducted its annual burn in the park to thin the fire fuel that often spreads along the hillside.

Chico Fire Department Deputy Fire Chief Chris Zinko headed the operation.

“We are conducting a prescribed burn to help eradicate some of the unwanted vegetation and also fuel reduction so we can hopefully make our community safer,” Zinko said. “By burning the vegetation, it creates a safer buffer, so to speak, for the city of Chico because there’s no vegetation to burn. So, it just basically gives the city a buffer from any fires that might start during the summer.”

Much of the focus of Thursday’s burn was placed on star thistle, an invasive plant known for its long, sharp thorns surrounding its flowers.



An example of an invasive star thistle that covers much of the upper Bidwell Park landscape. Crews conducted a control burn on Thursday, June 22, 2023 in Chico, California to help curb the fire fuel. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

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“We try to burn this block every year,” Zinko said. “And part of the reason is, it’s where the park abuts the city so we try to put that buffer between the park and the city.”

In addition to creating a barrier between fire fuels, the prescribed burn doubled as a learning tool for students. Multiple agencies and organizations were invited to upper park to witness and help.

Eli Goodsell, director of the Chico State Ecological Reserves said there were about 15 members of Chico State’s Ecological Reserves staff at the burn.



Chico State Ecological Reserves Director Eli Goodsell talks about invasive flora being burned away at Upper Bidwell Park in Chico, California on Thursday, June 22, 2023. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

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“These are students or recent graduates, graduate students – all wildland firefighter qualified, out here assisting on the burn today,” Goodsell said. “We also have partners from Feather River College up in Quincy and their burn program as well as the Hayfork Watershed and Training Center coming in today to help us burn as well. And this is just one of many burns I’ve conducted this season all over the north state and we pivot resources across the north state to put fire back on the ground.”

Using control burns to reduce fire fuel has become increasingly popular in California. The state recently passed Senate Bill 296 which effectively created a \$20 million fund to cover damages should a burn get out of control.

Goodsell said it’s important for the local communities to see these control burns to demystify them and show why they help combat wildfires.

“We love this burn operation because it is so visible to the community,” Goodsell said. “Right now I can see people teeing off at the golf course on one side of my shoulder, and on the other I see people in Nomex lighting off a meadow for ecological and safety purposes.”

Walking along the outskirts of the burn area, workers could be seen following flames closely, allowing them to spread just far enough to take out brush before going out and restarting. Retardant trucks drove back and forth between the two major burn areas.

Goodsell noted that some of the star thistle plants remained standing among the blackened ground but said they would be dead in the coming days after being exposed to such a high level of heat.

Timing on this particular burn is important. The burn is scheduled for the brief window when star thistle plants have used up most to all of their energy stored in the root system, but before they are ready to go to seed in order to avoid immediate new growth.

“Being able to kill and consume that species at this time of year will help us reduce the density of it throughout these grassland systems which is an important aspect of this project,” Goodsell said.

On site were representatives with MTECH, the Chico company responsible for building some of the equipment and vehicles used in the burn operation as well as other events. The company’s president and owner, Jason Black, said the operation

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MTECH President Jason Black drives one of the vehicles made by his company through upper Bidwell Park in Chico, California on Thursday, June 22, 2023. (Jake Hutchison/Enterprise-Record)

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“We’re not firefighters,” Black said. “We design equipment with input from firefighters. So for us, the most important thing is to see our equipment in use in the real world so that we can listen to the comments that are being made and ask the firefighters what they would improve, what they do like, what they don’t like and take that back to our design team and make those changes.”

Eventually, the two major project sites, one east of the gun club and the other near the observatory merged together to complete the large buffer zone around Horseshoe Lake. Goodsell said operations like the one conducted Thursday that are close to communities will likely be an ongoing trend as agencies continue to use prescribed burns to clear landscapes of fire fuels.

“I think that the more that we can put good fire on the ground next to communities, it’s the best billboard we have for educating the community of the difference between good fire and wildfire and the necessity to continue putting the good fire on the ground,” Goodsell said.

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## **Jake Hutchison | Reporter**

Jake is a reporter by day, musician and craft beer enthusiast by night. He spends his weekends hiking and biking around Chico as well as hanging out with his family and friends.

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