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Two-day training on prescribed burns gives valuable knowledge to 80 attendees

Cohasset ranch was site of session



Diana Madrigal Kemp, a graduate student in the Chico State Wildland Management program, practices using a water hose during the Cal TREX training session in Cohasset, California on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Jason Halley/Chico State)





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CHICO – The old expression urging people to “fight fire with fire,” according to Merriam-Webster, means to use the same method against the opponent as the opponent uses.

When using fire intelligently and with a lot of planning, fire can provide many benefits to humans and the environment, with relatively few drawbacks.

That was the main lesson from the Butte Cal TREX 2023 training session in Cohasset, about 12 miles northeast of Chico, Saturday and Sunday. It was there that the 80 or so attendees learned that putting “good fire” back into the landscape can result in a healthier ecosystem, as well as greatly reduce the odds for a catastrophic blaze that can destroy homes and – in worst cases – flatten entire communities.



Dan Taverner of Natural Resources Conservation Science, right, instructs participants on how to use the pump of a Type VI fire engine, while Tiffany Perez, left, looks on during the Butte County Prescribed Fire Training Exchange session in Cohasset, California on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Jason Halley/Chico State)

Cal TREX — short for the California Prescribed Fire Training Exchange — is a national-level training system to teach effective methods for using fire to selectively burn off fuels that could otherwise build to the point of becoming dangerous and difficult to control once ignited.

It's an ancient and proven practice, as it also eliminates diseases in the soil and generally contributes to a healthy ecosystem. However, more than a century of fire-suppression policy in the United States — which has emphasized snuffing out fires quickly, to preserve stands of timber — has allowed significant buildup of fuels on the ground in many areas prone to wildfire. When that fire inevitably arrives, there is an enormous amount of easily combustible material awaiting it.

The weekend's event was held at Maple Creek Ranch, a short distance east of Cohasset Road in the community of Cohasset. Weather conditions were cool with moderate humidity, with low winds, making it an ideal setting for practicing setting fires.

How did the attendees pick up skills during the session? Eli Goodsell, Ecological Reserves executive director at Chico State, explained it.

“We connected some big-picture planning. They (the attendees) went out on a landscape where we want to put back prescribed fire, then designed a firing plan to meet particular objectives,” he said. “If you’re managing for what your objectives are, there will be different preparation work for different intensities.”

By “different intensities,” there are areas with low fuels, such as weeds and non-native plants, and larger amounts of fuels such as large buildups of pine needles and other thick coverings of the forest floor.

“We also learned how to use water pumps, and how to contain fire if it gets out of the box,” he said, referring to the containment line every prescribed fire must include. Since fire is, of course, a natural phenomenon, it doesn’t always respect man’s wishes and can get away from the burn crew, even with outstanding planning.

“Everyone understands and gets training in what happens if the fire crosses the containment line,” Goodsell said, “and how to aggressively and intentionally go out and mitigate that fire.”



Franz Lerch, left, and Max Bigelow work on a fire break line during the Butte County Prescribed Fire Training Exchange session in Cohasset, California on Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023. (Jason Halley/Chico State)

Officials from the Butte County Resource Conservation District, the Butte County Prescribed Burn Association participated, along with U.S. Forest Service, Cal Fire, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Students from the fire program at Feather River College in Quincy and the Chico State Ecological Reserves program also attended, in addition to Native American tribal members from Butte, Plumas and Lassen counties.

Some participants came from as far away as the state of Washington, Goodsell said.

“The majority of people going through our training have federal wildland firefighter level-2 training. They have knowledge of mitigation and suppression,” Goodsell said. “Whenever we hold these trainings, we are prepared with resources on site, so if conditions change we can quickly and responsibly mitigate those concerns.”

Private and public landowners, naturally, generally welcome the effort to reduce fire threats, but don’t want the “prevention” to end up being costly mistakes.

Goodsell said working in concert with tribal groups is important in preserving their lands.

“We’re ensuring these fires meet some of their tribal and cultural requirements as well,” he said.

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