

Protecting a community: Clearing at Plumas-Eureka

By Victoria Metcalf

Staff Writer

By the end of October, more than 2,500 homes were destroyed by wildfires in Southern California communities.

Plumas County residents called friends and relatives learning more about narrow escapes and disasters.

Others learned that loved ones were just awaiting word to join those already evacuated.

Chaparral and the Santa Ana winds are among the conditions causing fires to grow and sweep through the mountains.

And while Plumas County residents consider the destructive force of those fires, they might take the time to check around their own homes and take steps toward their safety.

Plumas Eureka Estates homeowners are among those who are doing just that.

Bordered by national forest lands, the association approached the Plumas Fire Safe Council for support in fuels reduction.

The project was funded by the Plumas County Board of Supervisors and Resource Advisory Committee, explained Jerry Hurley, a coordinator with the Fire Safe Council.

A separate grant was obtained by the Plumas Eureka Volunteer Fire Department to educate homeowners about the value of reducing fuels.

Threat

Wildfire is a part of the ecosystem. In nature, fires once created their own thinning process on a regular basis.

Overtime, wildfires were suppressed in order to protect timberlands and the growing number of homes spreading into forested areas.

When wildfire was cur-

tailed, years of accumulated leaves, pine needles, dead and dying branches, downed trees and overgrowth replaced the natural cycle. Where low-burning fires would have once kept forested areas clear of buildup with little or no damage to the major stand, fuels were allowed to build up that produced hot and devastating fires.

With communities, such as Plumas Eureka Estates building into areas where the threat of wildfire is high, homeowners are beginning to look for answers to that threat.

Process

Receiving funding to have Beckwourth Ranger District fire crews take fuel reduction steps in September, was just part of the process.

According to Hurley, Beckwourth Ranger Sue McCourt had to take the project through the environmental impact process.

The district hydrologist examined the streams, the archaeologist examined the area for historic sites, and sensitive plants, birds and animals were considered.

With specific sensitive areas identified and protected, two engine crews from the district began thinning timber and reducing fuel hazards.

Initially the entire area was marked off and flagged with various colors to indicate what was needed in two strips of 20 and 14 acre parcels.

Because homeowners were anxious to reduce the forest fuel levels behind their homes, Beckwourth Ranger District Fuels Management Officer Alec Lane said the crews initially concentrated on clearing 100-foot sections behind the homes.

In this process, saplings, clusters of trees with bases 6-

inches or smaller, and ground fuels were concentrated on.

As crews worked, they cut down the small trees and thinned out saplings. These were stacked in piles that would be eliminated when weather conditions favored burning.

When the areas are burned, not only will the slash piles be eliminated, but the forest floor will be cleared of thick layers of pine needles and debris.

And as crews work they are able to knock off lower dead limbs on the healthy trees chosen to remain.

"We want to get it so the fire stays on the ground," Hurley said about the process.

When not fighting fires, the two engine crews have been able to expand the initial 100 foot clearance behind homes, to depths of 300-500 feet in chosen areas.

In late October, early November, the crews were called away to fight fires—one going to Southern California, the other sent to the Widmore fire in Shasta.

When they return, Lane said the crews would continue where they left off. If for some reason they were kept away, he could hire other crews to take their place on this project.

Funding for the project goes to pay for the additional work the fire crews are handling.

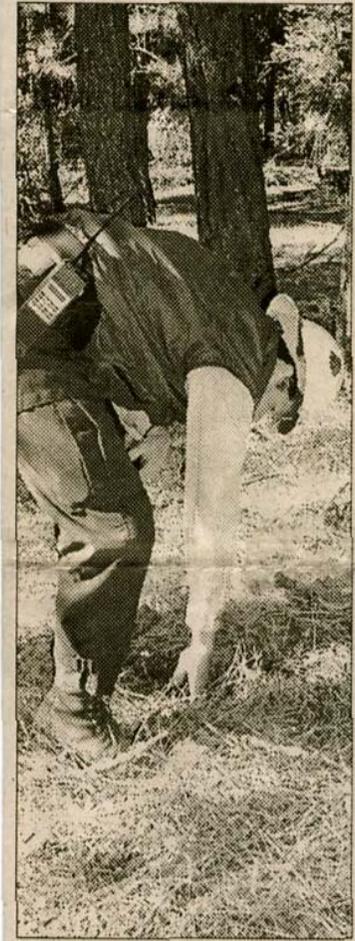
"All the communities need this type of work around them," Hurley explained. Plumas Eureka isn't an isolated case where forest fuels were allowed to build.

The treatment process is also planned for 350 acres in Long Valley, 50 acres around Indian Falls, 17 acres in the Quincy area drainage, and 50 acres near Camp Layman.

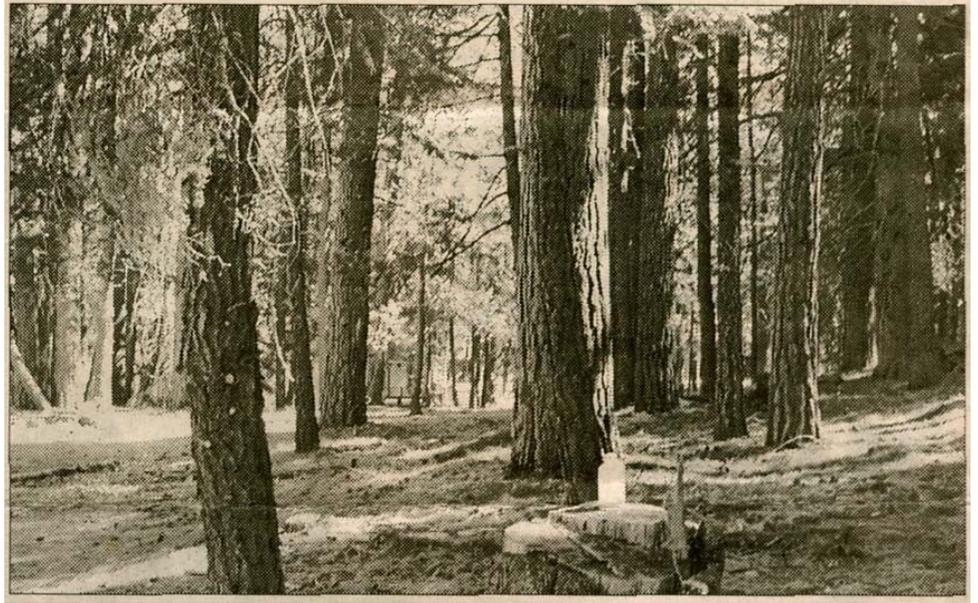


Photos courtesy Beckwourth Ranger District

Two engine crews are busy thinning timber, limbing and piling brush around Plumas Eureka Estates. Homeowners approached the Plumas Fire Safe Council requesting help protecting the community from wildland fire. Here, Jason Marshall uses a chain saw to trim dead branches and cut pine trees. The emphasis is to eliminate highly flammable fuels by thinning the forest behind the community. In this effort, the fire danger is lessened and the remaining larger trees are allowed to grow even bigger and are more resistant to disease and bug damage.



Alec Lane, Beckwourth Ranker District fuels officer, checks the deft layer. That's the« layer of forest debris that's built up over time. In this case, pine needles and other drying vegetative debris are 4-5 inches deep.



This slope has been treated by members of two Beckwourth Ranger District fire crews. The Plumas County Board of Supervisors and Resource Advisory Committee approved special funding for the project. Other projects are slated at Greenhorn Ranch development, Long Valley, Indian Falls, Quincy and near Camp Layman.