

King, Sand fire restoration efforts require collaboration

By Joann Eisenbrandt

PLACERVILLE – “It’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon,” El Dorado County Board of Supervisors Chairman Ron Mikulaco told those assembled in the board chambers Jan. 12 for updated presentations by representatives of the El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation Districts, Eldorado National Forest and the CalFire Amador-El Dorado Unit on the status of post-King Fire and Sand Fire cleanup and restoration efforts.

In summer and early fall of 2014, these two devastating fires ripped through the foothills and forests of El Dorado County. In July and August, the Sand Fire burned 4,240 acres east of Highway 49 near Plymouth, destroying 20 homes and 47 outbuildings and in September and October, the King Fire, which began near Pollock Pines, scorched 97,717 acres, threatening 12,000 homes and eventually destroying 12 houses plus 68 outbuildings and important infrastructure including facilities, roads, bridges and electrical transmission and distribution lines. More than 100 Native American archaeological sites dating back hundreds and thousands of years were also irreversibly damaged.

Once all the flames were extinguished, the fires were out, but their lingering effects on El Dorado County were just beginning. What also was just starting was a coordinated effort by a broad coalition of local, state and federal government agencies as well as local stakeholders to find a cohesive strategy to not only deal with the immediate aftermath of these two catastrophic fires, but to find solutions to prevent the reoccurrence of such fires in El Dorado County in the future.

Mark Egbert, district manager of the El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation District, told the board that the RCD had received funding from CalFire for the Sand Fire Restoration and Reforestation Project in the amount of \$793,551 and for the King Fire Restoration and Reforestation Project in the amount of \$1,893,956.50. These projects are aimed at reversing the ecological, environmental, aesthetic and social impacts of the fires. They include such things as removing accumulated debris and dead trees and selling what timber is still viable, replanting and restoring the affected lands to increase potential carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, protecting watersheds and water quality for domestic water sources and educating the public about wild fire response.



The 2014 King Fire destroyed thousands of acres in the Eldorado National Forest. Photo/Joann Eisenbrandt

Egbert noted that their post-fire efforts were part of an unprecedented interagency collaboration in the county that included not just the RCDs, but the U.S. Forest Service, CalFire, El Dorado County Fire Safe Council, El Dorado County, Caltrans and private stakeholders such as PG&E, Sacramento

Municipal Utility District and Sierra Pacific Industries.

Meetings were conducted with private landowners as well to assess their needs, since unlike the King Fire, the majority of impacted land in the Sand Fire was privately owned. They are also seeking additional grant funding, including a potential grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy under its Healthy Forest Initiatives program as well as several federal grants. District 5 Supervisor Sue Novasel asked Egbert if he could estimate in an ideal world were the funds were available, what it would cost to make the county's forests and foothills fire safe. "I can't even project that. It's an unlimited amount of money," Egbert responded. "The answer is really how much money do you have?"

Laurence Crabtree, Eldorado National Forest supervisor, followed Egbert, giving a presentation on the King Fire Restoration Fire Adapted 50 Cohesive Strategy. This was one of two projects selected for funding in California as part of the federal Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy put into place in 2009 as part of the FLAME Act. Projects must reflect a holistic view of the landscape and include collaboration between federal, state and local agencies, Native American tribes and other local stakeholders. The Eldorado National Forest received \$625,000 for the project. An environmental impact statement was prepared under National Environmental Policy Act, which analyzed five alternatives for the project. The alternative selected by Crabtree as the preferred one will treat approximately 17,000 acres, which is 26 percent of the National Forest System lands burned in the King Fire. It includes salvage and fuel treatment, roadside hazard tree removal, erosion control and rehabilitation on watershed sensitive areas and reforestation.

Not everyone was happy with Crabtree's decision. At the meeting Tuesday, he noted at the beginning of his remarks, "We know there are lots of dead trees in the forest and there will be more dead trees in the forest."

While everyone agrees that recovery and reforestation is vital, not everyone agrees on the best way to accomplish that. In their comments on the EIS, some wanted more logging, some wanted less, some wanted to "let nature take its course" and do nothing, some expressed concerns for disturbances logging could cause to the habitat of the spotted owl, the federally threatened red-legged frog, the endangered Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog and other area wildlife. In the written record of decision by Crabtree in September 2015, he noted, "I know that my decision will not satisfy every competing interest or solve every problem conveyed to me. However, I believe my decision provides an appropriate balance ... that achieves the broadest range of goals to best serve the public interest in the long term recovery for this area."

District 4 Supervisor Michael Ranalli, who had requested these presentations to the board, asked Crabtree how the logging efforts were progressing. Initial logging efforts have begun, Crabtree responded, but the current wet winter has stopped them. He noted that all the timber offered for sale has been purchased with more sales pending, with the actual removal of this timber to lumber mills to occur in the spring. A half million seedlings have been ordered, with planting to begin in spring 2017.

Because of the closing of the SPI mill in Camino and the lack of other mills in the local area, most of the logs will go to the SPI mill in Lincoln for processing.

Division Chief Mike Webb of the CalFire Amador-El Dorado Unit also spoke about the Adapted 50 project. "We are on track. We have all come together with a single focus and strategy." Calling the project an, "all lands, all hands" approach, he said he was happy to report that what was once just a strategy is now a real project. He noted the important contributions of all parties, including those of the individual fire safe councils which are part of the umbrella nonprofit El Dorado County Fire Safe Council. "We all must come together where

geographic lines have no meaning because they have no meaning to fire.”

One of the strategies is the creation of “shaded fuel breaks” that can be maintained over time. In the Sly Park phase of the project they will add to an existing forest management plan by expanding existing fuel breaks up the Highway 50 corridor to Fresh Pond, adding more protection for Pollock Pines.

Dale Pierce, a director for the El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation Districts, explained to after the meeting exactly what a shaded fuel break is. When dead trees are cleared out, he explained, they will grow back as brush which serves as a volatile ladder fuel for future fires. When a shaded fuel break is created, all the brush is cleared out, leaving spaced large trees. These trees create enough shade so that less brush can regrow because of the lack of sunlight. These breaks need to be maintained with a re-burning of the brush every few years.

Webb also noted work being done alongside Highway 50 to clear brush back from the roadway shoulders to prevent fires from jumping the road. Novasel said she drove that corridor often and has seen the effects of these efforts already.

“We recognize that corridor,” Webb responded, “and its importance to your community.”

“If 50 closes,” Novasel confirmed, “our entire town closes down.”

All the presenters at the Jan. 12 meeting agreed that old forest management plans have to be revised so that fires and fuel loads are the driving force. With the effects of bark beetles moving north from Southern California and into El Dorado County, the drought, and the expectation of continued longer fire seasons, creating fire adapted communities is vital to preventing fires before they start.

District 3 Supervisor Brian Veerkamp agreed, "We have to shift to fuel reduction and modification. It will pay much bigger dividends than trying to catch fires from the rear."

The public was then asked to comment, with several speakers emphasizing the need to keep a real sense of urgency in fire preparedness. Katherine Smith warned about returning to "business as usual" as it was done for the last hundred years. "We didn't take care of fuel reduction and we got the King Fire."

Heather Campbell, chairperson of the Camino/Pollock Pines Fire Safe Council, said her group is planning on distributing a brochure to residents in her area explaining the elements needed to create fire-adapted communities, including the building of "ember resistant" homes which won't ignite from embers landing miles ahead of actual fires.

Sue Taylor of Camino wanted to be sure that with so many commissions and funding sources that the money gets to "the right place." Taylor added to what others had said about the impacts of bark beetles on stands of trees and also about the difficulty for agencies and private landowners to clear their land when there are no mills in the area to purchase and process the timber. "We need to get a mill back in this county."

Ray Nutting, former El Dorado County supervisor, told the board, "I try not to come to Board of Supervisors meetings but I was compelled to come to this one because the No. 1 issue is catastrophic crown fires." Adding that, "Mother Nature knows how to deal with fuels," he wondered about what his great-grandfather would have thought about current fire suppression efforts. "In 1935, he knew that a fire at the bottom of a canyon would run up the hill. He had fires on his property in winter, in the snow, and they ran up the hill and they were 'good fires.' Now, you'd go to jail."