

Calif. partnership to increase controlled burns

BY Olga R. Rodriguez, AP

Environmental groups and federal and state agencies have formed a partnership to increase the use of prescribed fires to improve the health of California's forests and watersheds and minimize the effects of increasingly devastating wildfires.

The agreement signed by the CalFire, U.S. Forest Service and other federal and state agencies and several environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and The Nature Conservancy, will enable the sharing of resources and expertise among the signatories, who will have their first working meeting Tuesday.

"This allows us to bring key parties together and have a more organized approach to addressing some of the impediments that we face on using fire to restore our natural landscapes," said Jim Branham, Executive Officer for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, one of the state agencies that endorsed the memorandum of understanding.

Prescribed fires are not without controversy because of the air pollution they create but the groups and agencies involved agreed to find ways to better manage smoke during controlled burns. They also agreed to train personnel in agencies that don't have the staff for prescribed burn because of strained resources.

The agreement comes after several massive wildfires largely fueled by extremely dry vegetation scorched hundreds of square miles of forests and destroyed hundreds of homes in drought-parched California.

In Lake County last year, a wildfire burned so hot that the flames generated their own wind and blew out embers that started spot fires ahead of the blaze.

Supporters say controlled burns are one way to prevent wildfires that quickly explode in size and intensity.

“The last couple of years have been kind of a wakeup call that we need to figure out how to put (prescribed fires) back on the landscape in a more sophisticated way than we’ve done in the past,” Braham said.