

District innovates with community for local control



When Trinity County Resource Conservation District (District) stepped forward to help resolve a tricky land use issue it was not adverse to breaking new ground. Eight years later it is garnering recognition from federal and state agencies and associations, local landowners, environmentalists and woodland conservation organizations for involving the local community in a collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to forge a first-of-its-kind stewardship agreement creating the Weaverville Community Forest (WCF).

Prior to the agreement, 984 acres of prime timberland that serves as a scenic backdrop to the historic town of Weaverville was under sole ownership of the US government and administration by BLM. The property been slated for a land exchange to an industrial timber company in the late 1990s. Local residents and businesses raised alarm, fearing highly visible timber harvests would damage the town's beautifully forested viewshed to the detriment of its ambiance and tourism economy. Additionally, local residents wanted the forest managed in a way that lowered fire risk while ensuring a healthy forest for recreation and wildlife habitat. Wildfire is an omnipresent threat throughout the heavily forested northern California county where federal ownership comprises 80 percent of the total land mass.

At the request of Trinity County's Board of Supervisors, BLM put the land swap on hold while alternatives could be explored. In 2003, the District's board agreed to look in to ways to manage the federally-held land, and in 2004 BLM's regional manager suggested using a new federal tool, Stew-

ardship Contracting, to manage the lands as a community forest. Legislation behind this mechanism, passed in 2003 and expiring in 2013, grants BLM and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) authority to designate stewardship projects that meet federal land management goals and meet local and rural community needs.

The District negotiated the unique stewardship agreement on behalf of the community following extensive public outreach and visioning workshops. Under the 10-year agreement, signed in 2005, BLM retains public ownership and works cooperatively with the District, with which it has an excellent working relationship, to manage the forest. A high level of community involvement since 1999 provides well articulated objectives for managing the forest resources, including protecting viewsheds, improving forest health through timber harvesting – with products to the community (timber to the local mill, firewood to local households), recreation and education, fuels reduction, salmon habitat, and invasive weeds eradication – endeavors closely linked to the mission of conservation districts. Strategic activities include trails construction or improvement, wildlife habitat protection, fire restoration, riparian projects for water quality and watershed improvement and road repair or decommissioning to protect salmon-bearing streams in the Weaver Creek Basin.

The key to stewardship contracting is that funds generated from sales of

[Innovations]

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forest products pay for forest health project costs. Excess funds are deposited in an account that pays for subsequent projects that meet the objectives of the stewardship agreement, its annual work plan and community goals.

The District developed a detailed and sensitive harvest plan to mechanically thin 200 acres of WCF while preserving good canopy coverage, protecting historical sites and riparian zones and constructing no new roads. That project, completed in 2007, was applauded as exemplary by regional environmental groups that have been critical of timber harvest practices on other federal lands in northern California.

The District makes considerable effort to garner grants and other funding to leverage with WCF Stewardship funds. Other

sources to date include the State Water Resources Control Board, (319[h] grant to address sediment delivery to Weaver Creek as the result of catastrophic wildfire and for a volunteer citizen water monitoring program). CalTrans engaged the District to assist with mitigation, leading to projects in specific areas of WCF being funded by CalTrans and the Bureau of Reclamation through the Trinity River Restoration Program.

The District, formed in 1956, works and partners with several other entities to manage WCF, including Natural Resources Conservation Service, California Department of Fish & Game, Trinity County, and the Northwest California Resource Conservation & Development Council. It also conducts restoration work on the Trinity River and the South Fork of the Trinity River watersheds through partnerships with the Trinity River

continued on page 38

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Restoration Program (Bureau of Reclamation) and the U.S. Forest Service.

The District has gained momentum over the years with the Shasta-Trinity National Forest helping, securing funding for, and implementing, a wide range of resource management projects. This collaboration has fueled the push to expand the WCF onto lands the Forest Service manages in and around Weaverville with The Regional Forester approving the designation of a stewardship area for the WCF in February 2008.

Trinity County supervisors recently approved the District's proposal to apply some of the County's Title III funding from the federal Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act to expand the Community Forest onto approxi-

mately 12,000 acres of USFS lands in the Weaverville Basin and onto additional lands managed by BLM. The District already secured initial support of USFS for the new stewardship area. It now plans to use these County funds to develop a 10-year stewardship agreement for implementing a community-based strategic plan, develop a carbon-credit marketing plan for the Community Forest, and conduct continuing education and outreach. Shasta Community College will be offering a Field Biology class at its Weaverville Campus for the first time, using the WCF as the students' living laboratory.

Probably one of the most impressive aspects of the District's arrangement with BLM is the way the agreement enables forest stewardship projects to self-fund management of the forest. The sale of forest products taken through fuel-reduction programs generate revenues that are funneled back to forest and habitat improvement and recreational enhancements, instead of the money going back to the U.S. Treasury. The successful progress of this stewardship agreement, and its community involvement, may merit emulation elsewhere. Already the District has hosted interested groups from as far away as Ontario, Canada. ■

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