

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Mark Steffek

This is a busy summer for the California Chapter of the SWCS. Five members attended the International Conference in Keystone, CO July 22-26. The theme of this year's conference was **Resource Conservation and Environmental Management**. There were two plenary sessions



this year. The first was **In Scarcity the Opportunity for Community: Water Management and Conservation in the 21st Century**. This session was presented by Honorable Gregory J. Hobbs, Colorado Supreme Court Justice. Justice Hobbs practiced law for 25 years with emphasis on water, environment, land use and transportation.

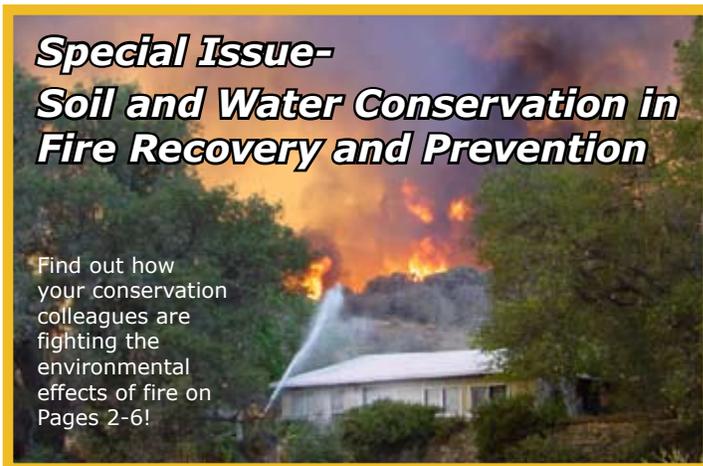
The second plenary session was **Conservation in the 2007 Farm Bill: Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges**. This panel session was led by Bruce Knight, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Under Mr. Knight's leadership, NRCS began the work of implementing the Conservation Title of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act, known as the 2002 Farm Bill.

In addition to these plenary sessions, there were numerous training opportunities for members. Sessions included workshops, technical sessions, tours, and student member activities.

This was an excellent opportunity for members to learn about the latest information in the field of soil and water conservation. The topics addressed at the Conference

Special Issue- Soil and Water Conservation in Fire Recovery and Prevention

Find out how
your conservation
colleagues are
fighting the
environmental
effects of fire on
Pages 2-6!



are those that we need to know to be on the leading edge as soil and water conservation professionals in California.

The California Chapter also presented an Issue Paper at the Conference during the House of Delegates meeting on Sunday, July 23rd. The Issue Paper addresses the partnering of the California and Nevada SWCS Chapters in order to better serve members in each State. This issue was first brought forward by the Nevada Chapter in 2003. The purpose of presenting this issue to the House of Delegates was to make the SWCS leadership aware of California and Nevada Chapter activities and to obtain positive feedback from them.

One other California Chapter activity to look forward to this fall is the **Growing Biofuels Sustainably** workshop. One of our newly elected Executive Board members, Kristen Hughes, has identified the need for this workshop. Kristen is in the early planning stages of this workshop. She has set a tentative date of mid-November. Please keep this workshop time open on your calendar. Biofuels production in California has the potential to shift agricultural practices and create greater demand on soil and water resources. The California Chapter of SWCS, with leadership provided by Kristen Hughes, will give direction of energy production and soil and water conservation to landowners, technical professionals, and researchers. Look for more information on this upcoming workshop.

HELPING PEOPLE HELP THE LAND

by *Paul Laustsen*

When District Conservationist Bob Hewitt of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was invited to a Riverside County Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) meeting at the end of 2002 to discuss the possibility of utilizing the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) to address the tree mortality problem, he was cautious not to promise what he knew would be a challenge to obtain. The stakes were very high as three California counties were well into the early stages of a severe tree mortality problem that threatened mountain communities with devastating wildfires due to the dead trees and excessive fuels.

"Nothing like this had ever been done before," said Hewitt, "the program was traditionally employed after an emergency, typically a natural disaster such as a fire, flood, earthquake or windstorm,



Dead trees bring the threat of wildfire uncomfortably close to home for some Southern California homeowners. Photo by Paul Laustsen.

this was a proactive attempt to reduce the likelihood of devastating destruction to life and property before it happened."

In collaboration with EWP program specialist Bill Ward and county sponsors, Hewitt drafted up the first of three damage survey reports that would be prepared by NRCS. These damage survey reports identified a significant threat from devastating wildfires to over 100,000 people in a three county area impacted by this severe tree mortality emergency. The state of California had already declared this problem to be an emergency situation. The cost estimate to provide this protection was approximately \$120 million and the investment was predicted to reduce potential wildfire damages by as much as \$8 billion dollars. This certainly sounded like a worthy investment.

The EWP program is not an automatically or annually funded program. Congress funds this emergency program by passing a supplemental appropriation dependent on the project and availability of funds. Congress most commonly takes this action after major disaster events occur where available emergency funding is not adequate to meet emergency needs. With all the disaster events across the country there are many times when the demand for emergency funds far exceeds the availability of funds and projects can be delayed and even never funded. The national EWP program is usually funded by Congress on the average of \$120 million a year, so when California submitted a request for that same amount in the three county EWP project to remove dead and dying trees and protect the natural resources disturbed by



The tough work of removing dead trees begins. Photo by Paul Laustsen.

the activity, heads turned.

It wasn't long after the request was submitted that Southern California suffered the devastating wildfires of October 2003, called by outgoing Governor Gray Davis "probably the most expensive, widespread and most devastating" wildfires the state has ever seen. These fires ultimately burned 800,000 acres and caused 22 deaths. These wildfires came dangerously close to taking off in the tree mortality area. Recognizing the threat if this were to happen, Senator Diane Feinstein and Congressman Jerry Lewis (CA-41) led the effort to approve funding and provide special authority and direction that enabled the Natural Resources Conservation Service to address this threat and do what they do best, help people help the land.

With funding for the unique utilization of the EWP program approved, and additional funding to address the erosion issues associated with the 2003 fires, NRCS got to work with their partners making site visits and planning for

needed action. The result of the planning and hard work resulted in over 350,000 dead, dying or diseased trees being removed in less than two years. Over \$111 million of the \$120 million allocated for the project has been obligated, with the full obligation anticipated by August 2006. Although the money will be obligated, on the ground NRCS projects will be completed sometime in the summer of 2007.

TRANSITION

“Thousands of hours and millions of dollars have gone toward reshaping and improving the health of the watershed and the transition has been nothing short of monumental,” said Ed Burton, NRCS State Conservationist. “Such impressive changes can be achieved when agencies and communities partner together for the good of the land.”

Burton emphasizes that as the project winds down and the work transitions to a state of dynamic watershed maintenance, NRCS will return to its historic role of working with people and communities to put science-based solutions on the land.

“NRCS’s assistance has benefited everyone involved in this project, including the public and



A downed tree marked to remain in the forest for the benefit of wildlife. Photo by Paul Laustsen.

the cooperating government agencies,” said Pre-Fire Division Chief Kevin Turner of the CDF/Riverside Fire Department, “As NRCS’s involvement tapers off, CDF, U.S. Forest Service, Riverside County Fire Department and the Idyllwild Fire Department will continue their roles as the experts in fire prevention, fuels treatment and forest health.”

“It is important that we go forward from here to work with landowners on a voluntary basis to provide options and, where needed, technical and financial assistance,” said Burton. “Their land is under their care and we will work with them to understand its needs and respond to them.”

While all the work with agencies, communities and contractors has had its memorable and even victorious moments, Hewitt, who has been working with landowners and managers in Idyllwild since the late 70’s, isn’t opposed to putting it into another chapter of his career history and getting back to erosion control, forestry management, and conservation easements. “With this extraordinary, multi-partnered tree removal feat behind us, it’s time to going back to the extraordinary feat of everyday stewardship,” he says with a smile.

REPORT OFFERS DIRECTION FOR FARM CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

SWCS *National News*

A report titled Conservation Effects Assessment Project: A Final Report has recently been released. A Blue-Ribbon Panel, organized by the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS), has been analyzing the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) since 2004. CEAP, a project of the USDA, is a multi-agency effort to quantify the environmental benefits of conservation practices used by private landowners participating in selected USDA conservation programs.

Four key points stand out in the Panel’s recommendations:

First, using computer models to report how government programs are performing cannot—and must not—substitute for on-the-ground monitoring.

Second, Congress should update and reauthorize the Soil and Water Conservation Act of 1977.

Third, USDA must focus CEAP on a handful of critical and explicitly stated environmental goals that are expected to drive conservation efforts over the coming decades and look more to regional—rather than national—level assessments and reporting.

And finally, the panel recommends that building the science base to support environmental management on working lands should be a primary purpose of CEAP.

“CEAP is a compelling opportunity to ramp up the effectiveness of our conservation programs,” said Craig Cox, executive director for SWCS. “We can’t afford to miss this opportunity.”

PRIVATE FORESTS RESTORED FOLLOWING THE SIMS FIRE

by *Tiffany Reiss*

On July 28, 2004 the Sims Fire began Northwest of Hyampom, California at the Grouse Creek Bridge on Route 6. The fire was 100% contained by August 2, 2004 after 4,030 acres burned. Steep 80%-90% timbered slopes, high temperatures, and low humidity created extreme fire behavior with spot fires up to one-half mile away.

Private landowners contacted the Trinity County Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for assistance to restore their forestland. Environmental concerns included hydrophobic soils, soil erosion, water quality, tree mortality, forest fuels, wildlife habitat loss, riparian

temperature increases, and invasion of noxious weeds. NRCS worked with local Registered Professional Foresters (RPFs) and landowners to come up with a restoration plan for 220 private forestland acres, consisting of 3 property owners. The projects are funded under 2005 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Before the Sims Fire the 220 acres was a mixed conifer-hardwood timber stand including Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, incense cedar, madrone, tanoak, canyon live oak, and California black oak. Natural meadows and three significant tributaries to the South Fork Trinity River are located on the private acreage.

Different approaches to restoration

The property owners hired a local RPF to prepare an Emergency Notice for post-fire salvage and logged the property in the fall of 2004. The salvage logging removed all large timber from one property, leaving 10-12 inch diameter or less standing dead timber, charred deciduous trees and brush. Very little natural seedling regeneration was noted on the site. A second site was selectively logged, with large diameter trees left as a seed source. This site showed an abundance of natural regeneration.

The landowner that salvage logged all large trees used a dozer with a brush rake to remove the scorched small timber and brush,



Many seedlings are naturally regenerating on site, but in this case only Douglas fir seedlings are present. Interplanting with sugar pine, ponderosa pine and incense cedar will provide diversity.

and smoothed the ground for tree planting. The 10-12" or less timber was bucked up for use as fire wood and the remainder piled and burned on the landing and access road locations. Deciduous trees were left standing and sprouts from the bole trimmed to 2-3 leaders to prevent brush-like growth. The landowner hired a crew and planted the site in the winter 2005 by hand using a mix of Douglas fir, ponderosa pine and incense cedar. The trees were netted to prevent deer browsing. Survival rate of the trees is still being monitored, however due to the hot and dry summer conditions mortality of some trees has occurred.

In the selectively logged areas, small diameter "flashy" scorched trees continue to be removed using hand labor with chain saws. The small diameter slash will be placed on the roads and landings to be disposed of by mastication, with logs to be used for firewood. The larger diameter trees, equal or greater than 10 inches in diameter, were left standing to decompose, provide shade for the young natural



Area where the tree crowns were partially scorched, but most conifers are surviving. Larger dead trees can be left standing, but over time should be removed as their tops will break and create large amounts of surface fuels. Currently the large trees are providing shade where the young firs thrive.

seedlings below and habitat for wildlife. As these larger diameter trees rot and break, the majority will have to be removed from the site to prevent forest fuels from accumulating, while some will be left for wildlife habitat and soil organic matter.

Regenerating a healthy forest stand

Although competition is removed the first year of planting it is an ongoing process for the survival of the trees. Ceanothus brush has dominated the sites that were not brush raked within the first year, and is competing with the conifer seedlings. Ceanothus was hand pulled, from August to October 2005, on 8 acres when it was approximately 6 inches in height. Although labor intensive, there were several benefits to pulling the ceanothus: it did not have time to grow and compete with the tree seedlings, it reduced the cost of disposing of large abundance of slash, it was discarded back on the ground to provide organic matter to the soil, it removed fuels for possible future fires, and it avoided the use of herbicides which the property owners are opposed to using. Areas that were not hand pulled are now dominated by ceanothus, towering over a foot above the conifer seedlings.

Currently the riparian zones appear to be self-healing. The under story has re-grown and natural regeneration of conifers, maples and ashes is occurring. To avoid bank erosion, conifers were not released from competition by scraping. Dead trees were cut off

at the base to keep the trees from falling and uprooting, which would create instability in the riparian banks.



Splash erosion, where a large tree's roots burned out, evidenced by pedestals.

Long-term resource impacts following fire

This past winter with the heavy rains soil erosion occurred. Major sources for erosion were access road failures and soil slumping. Due to the decrease of soil infiltration and lack of vegetative cover and organic matter, more water flowed over the soil surface and was delivered to the access road systems. Roads are scheduled to be re-graded and rocked with the addition of culverts, rolling dips, and side ditches. Soil slumping occurred due to the lack of root structure and vegetation on the steep hillsides. Tree roots were burned out from the fire allowing water to tunnel into the soil assisting in the slumping.

Noxious weeds have encroached on the disturbed grounds, including starthistle, medusahead, bull thistle and hedgehog dog tail that were not present pre-fire. These annuals do not provide the cover or root structure

that the former perennials did for the site. Starthistle is continues to be pulled from roadsides. Mosaics of native perennials will be planted, and encouraged to spread out. Noxious weeds will be controlled in the mosaics by hand pulling and worked outward to encourage the spread of the native perennials.

The restoration of a severely burned forestland is a long term project that should be implemented in stages. Logging with immediate slash removal, tree planting, and leaving some large diameter trees for wildlife and "seed" trees can be a balance for timber growth and restoration. In many instances, cleaning up the slash and small diameter dead timber is not economically feasible, and this material creates intense fuel loading, potentially creating a hotter fire in the future. With disturbance to the soil surface and open canopies, noxious weeds and brush invasion often occur and must be dealt with so the system can return to its former state. Continued monitoring, flexible planning, and long term management are key for success in restoration of burned forestlands.

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PLACER COUNTY FUELS REDUCTION EFFORTS

by Mike Brenner and Carol Rutenbergs

Working together with private landowners, CDF, BLM, and the Forest Service, the Placer County office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is providing needed funding and technical assistance to help local rural communities address the issues of



Mastication equipment destroys brush undergrowth, removing ladder fuels. Photo by NRCS.



Residue remaining after mastication treatment. Photo by NRCS.

uncontrolled wildland fire and its impact to watershed health.

NRCS cooperates with local forest and range landowners through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). While primarily an agriculture production assistance program, EQIP was expanded to cover forestland properties, and that portion of the program now accounts for the majority of funds al-

located in the County.

EQIP conservation practices have been used to improve the health of forest and rangeland resources by reducing the levels of competing vegetation and thereby contributing to the reduction of potentially hazardous buildups of fuel loading.

Forest stand improvement (thinning), tree pruning and brush removal are three common practices implemented through the EQIP cost-share contract process. Since the program's establishment in 1999, several hundred acres within the County have been treated, and correspondingly the threat of wild-fire has been reduced.



Tree thinning leaves forest plantings less susceptible to fire. Photo by NRCS.



NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY TO BE HELD SEPTEMBER 30

by Wendy Rash

This year marks the 13th annual National Public Lands Day. This is the nation's largest hands-on volunteer effort to improve and enhance America's beauty. National Public Lands Day began in 1994 with three federal agencies and 700 volunteers. Now, 9 federal agencies and many state and local lands participate in this annual day of caring

for shared lands. Last year nearly 90,000 volunteers worked in 800 locations and in every state building trails, planting trees, and removing trash.

This annual event:

- Educates Americans about critical environmental and natural resources issues and the need for shared stewardship of these valued, irreplaceable lands;
- Builds partnerships between the public sector and the local community based upon mutual interests in the enhancement and restoration of America's public lands;
- Improves public lands for outdoor recreation, with volunteers assisting land managers in hands-on work.

The National Public Lands Day will be teaming up with Take Pride in America for the third straight year. All NPLD worksites will also be considered Take Pride in America worksites and therefore are eligible for the Take Pride in America volunteer awards.

This year will mark the fourth annual volunteer photo contest. Amateur photographers are able to celebrate the natural beauty of our country's public lands. Winning photos will be published in the NPLD newsletter and use in press releases featuring the days' events. Although the deadline has passed for this year's contest, the deadline for next year is fast approaching in November!

To find a site near you in California, go to <http://www.publiclandsday.org/involved/california.cfm>

For more information on Take Pride in America, visit <http://www.takepride.gov>

For more information on the photo contest, visit www.npld.com/involved/photo_contest.cfm

Society Shorts

NEW CHAPTER MEMBERS

by Walt Bunter

We extend a GREAT BIG WELCOME to the following ten members who recently joined or rejoined the SWCS and our California Chapter or transferred in from another state chapter.

Chapter membership on July 1 was 176.

Anita Brown - Davis

Cori Calvert - Escondido

Jody Gallaway - Chico

Glenda Humiston - Richmond

Salim Khalil - Costa Mesa

Laura Mitsch - Irvine

Julie Price - Ukiah

Cory Scott - McKinleyville

Matthew Stevenson - Albany

Ann Thrupp - Hopland



CHAPTER SCHOLARSHIP WINNER SELECTED

by Tina VanderHoek

On behalf of the SWCS California Chapter Scholarship Committee, I am pleased to announce that Monica Galli has been selected as this year's scholarship recipient. Monica is a California State University- Chico student with a double major in Plant Science and Agriculture Business. This year's choice was based on merits of grades, activities showing leadership and interest in resource conservation, and financial need. It was very hard to make a choice among the high-achieving applicants, but Monica stood out. I encourage other applicants to try again next year.

Note: Chapter Executive Council Director Tina VanderHoek, Soil Conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service at Templeton, chairs the Scholarship Committee. Katie Banister and Kay Joy-Barge also served on the committee.

ONLINE REGISTRATION OPEN FOR "MANAGING AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES" CONFERENCE

by Wendy Rash

Online registration is now available for "Managing Agricultural Landscapes for Environmental Quality: Strengthening the Science Base", a workshop sponsored by the Soil and Water Conservation Society. The conference will be held in Kansas City, MO October 11-13, 2006.

The primary objective of this workshop is to bring together individuals in the technical and scientific communities who are working to quantify the environmental benefits of conservation practices on agricultural land at landscape and/or watershed scales.

Registration can be accessed at: <http://www.swcs.org/index.cfm?nodeID=8409&audienceID=1>

Registration fee is \$250 before September 29, 2006, and \$300 after, or at the door. Payment is by credit card only.

AWARD NOMINATIONS SOUGHT

by Wendy Rash

Do you have a colleague whose professional or volunteer work constitutes an outstanding achievement in conservation? Or is there a fellow member of the SWCS who has provided exceptional service to the organization? Do you work with an organization that has created products or done projects that are a significant contribution to the conservation field?

Consider nominating these individuals or organizations for SWCS Awards! There are several categories of awards given by the National SWCS as well as by the California Chapter. You can explore the multiple award categories and criteria at <http://www.swcs.org/en/awards/> and follow the instructions on the site to submit award nominations. Or you can submit nominations for Chapter Awards to Hank Wyman, chair of the Nominations Committee, at hank-wyman@carcd.org. Give those special people the recognition they deserve!

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FIRST CLASS

CALIFORNIA CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2006

RunOff is the official California Chapter SWCS newsletter.

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**How are you addressing
winter runoff in urban or
agricultural settings?**

**Submit an article for the
next issue of RunOff!**

Deadline: October 2, 2006

Articles should be 500-750 words (1-2 pages). Submit articles and photos to wendy.rash@ca.usda.gov