

Ecological Restoration and Partnerships

Los Padres National Forest

Los Padres National Forest plays an important role in the lives of millions of Central and Southern Californians. The Forest encompasses 1.75 million acres of the Central Coast, stretching from Big Sur south to Santa Barbara and inland to Ojai and Frazier Park. The Forest ranges in elevation from sea level to almost 9,000 feet. These National Forest System lands include critical watersheds that sustain adjacent communities and farmlands. As one of the nation's most populous regions, Central and Southern California is home to 27 million people representing nearly 60 percent of the State's population.

Agriculture plays a prominent role along the Central Coast, with an emphasis on crops that flourish in cool coastal climates. Los Padres tributaries are an important source of water for farming communities, including the Carmel, Salinas, Cuyama, Sisquoc, Santa Ynez, Sespe, and Piru rivers. The Forest is home to 468 different types of fish and wildlife, as well as, many threatened and endangered plant and animal species. Much of Los Padres is primitive and nearly half the Forest's land base is comprised of 10 designated wilderness areas: Ventana, San Rafael, Matilija, Chumash, Dick Smith, Machesna, Santa Lucia, Garcia, Sespe, and Silver Peak. The Forest has 1,200 miles of trails, including two designated National Recreation Trails: the Piedra Blanca and Santo Cruz/Aliso trails, and 1,100 miles of roads.

Los Padres has prehistoric and historic Native American sites, properties related to the practice of Indian and non-Indian religion, historic properties and districts. Interpretation of cultural resources meets a growing demand for information concerning heritage and history. The Forest contains some of the most extraordinary native rock art to be found anywhere in the world. Created by ancestral Native Americans, these complex and intriguing pictographs are found on numerous rock outcroppings and in caves. Forest archaeologists work closely with the academic community, volunteer site-stewards, and local Native American groups to inventory, study, interpret and protect these sites.

The Forest currently has one large-scale Ecological Restoration project—FIRESCAPE Monterey—and several small-scale projects. Within the FIRESCAPE Monterey planning area, we selected two priority watersheds under the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) process. Our goals for these two watersheds are:

1. Big Sur WCF priority watershed

- a. Reconfigure campgrounds along the Big Sur River to increase setback and upgrade sanitation facilities to improve water quality (2013);
- b. Seasonal restrictions on wood fires and dispersed concentrations of visitors among the campsites and potential visitor quotas to lessen impacts on riparian vegetation and soils (ongoing);
- c. Map and inventory invasive weed infestations, and organize group eradication efforts (ongoing).

2. Danish Creek/Carmel River WCF priority watershed

- a. Conduct Proper Functioning Condition Assessments along the main stem to determine the riparian/wetland vegetation condition (2012);
- b. Analyze and plan with appropriate NEPA prioritized fuels treatments addressing fire effects and regime condition (2013);
- c. Implement and monitor fuels treatments to address fire effects and regime condition (2014).

FIRESCAPE Monterey will help foster discussion among Los Padres land managers, private land owners, and the public to accelerate the scale and pace of forest restoration and adaptation strategies on both public and private lands. The goal is to retain and restore ecologically healthy and resilient landscapes that have the capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of natural disturbances and large-scale threats to sustainability.

While there is considerable risk of wildfire resulting from climate conditions, decadent vegetation, steep terrain and human use, most fires on Los Padres are human-caused. Intense wildfires cause substantial resource and property damage and are difficult and expensive to suppress. Since 1912, wildfires have burned more than 2.3 million acres in the Forest for an historical average of 25,000 acres per year. Most wildfires are human-caused with the balance resulting from lightning strikes. Some of the largest wildfires in California history occurred on the Los Padres National Forest, including the Matilija (1932/220,000 acres),

Marble Cone (1977/177,866), the Day (2006/162,702), the Zaca (2007/240,000), and the Basin Complex (2008/162,818).

The Forest has developed a 5-year plan for Ecosystems, which includes fuels, reforestation, and thinning projects dependent on available funding. With its limited workforce, the Forest is addressing these smaller-scale fuels treatment projects:

- a. Santa Barbara Front Country Project
- b. Wheeler Gorge Fuelbreak
- c. Alamo Fuelbreak
- d. Sierra Madre Fuelbreak
- e. Tamarisk EIS (removal of tamarisk noxious species using herbicides)
- f. Reforestation treatments in Zaca, Piru, and Day Fire areas

We have one NEPA ready project called the Frazier Mtn. project.

Work occurring across private forest lands and within communities is a critical link to the restoration work occurring on National Forests Service System lands. Public engagement is essential to raising awareness, building consensus, and achieving shared outcomes. By working collaboratively to accomplish mutual goals we can affect tremendous positive benefits. Only with the participation of the public can we truly manage and protect these valuable resources. We have the federally-funded community partnerships:

1. Mt. Pinos Communities Phase1 – Challenge Cost Share Agreement 2010
2. Mt. Pinos Communities Phase2 – Challenge Cost Share Agreement 2011
3. Ojai Community Defense Zone Project – Ojai Valley Land Conservancy Challenge Cost Share Agreement 2011
4. Painted Cave project – Local Landowners Challenge Cost Share Agreement 2011

Currently, we have the following Firesafe Council Grants:

1. 2012 WUI What Kind of Fuel AM I - Highlands Community Fire Safe Committee
2. Mission Canyon Defensible Space Project - Mission Canyon Association
3. San Luis Obispo County 2012 Hazardous Fuel Reduction Program - San Luis Obispo County Community Fire Safe Council, Inc.

4. South Coast Community Fuel Hazard Reduction Project – Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade

Last year, we had the following Firesafe Council Grants:

1. Carmel Highlands Community Organization, Education & CWPP Project
2. Carmel Highlands Residential Chipper Program
3. Palo Colorado Fuels Reduction - Glen Deven Ranch - Monterey/Big Sur coast
4. White Rock Strategic Fuel Break Project North of Monterey Ranger District
5. San Luis Obispo Countywide Risk Assessment, CWPP and Environmental Assessment
6. Community Alert Radio - Wildland Residents of Painted Cave
7. Santa Barbara 2010 Community Fuels Hazard Reduction Project
8. Digier Canyon Community Roadside Defensible Space - Mt Pinos community
9. Mil Potrero Communities Interagency Escape Route - Mt Pinos community
10. Girl Scouts Fire Force: Taking Action to be Fire Safe - Ventura County
11. Ojai Valley Wildfire Prevention and Safety Education Project

Last year, we completed the following ecological restoration projects:

1. Day Fire Reforestation
2. Ojai Community Defense Zone
3. Pine Mountain Club Fuel Reduction Project
4. Figueroa Mountain Prescribed Fire understory, pile burning, and thinning
5. Annual Routine Fuel Reduction projects and understory Rx burning and thinning
6. Oversight of non-federal lands partners fuel reduction project activities

If you have questions or would like more information on the Los Padres Ecological Restoration, please contact Public Affairs Officer Andrew Madsen at 805-961-5759.