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Guy McCarthy / Union Democrat

Tuolumne Utilities District's water supply depends on a wooden flume and ditch system. The flume and ditch are vulnerable to wildfire and other foreseeable hazards.

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Grant sought for fuel reduction

TUD says overgrown forest an imminent threat to water canal

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Staff with Tuolumne Utilities District and other agencies are seeking \$495,000 in grant funding to pay for fuel reduction on the highly vulnerable flume-ditch system called the Tuolumne Main Canal.

The rickety flumes and earthen ditches date to the Gold Rush era, and they carry most of Tuolumne County's water, from the South Fork Stanislaus watershed to the towns of Tuolumne, Twain Harte, Sonora, Jamestown and Columbia.

The Sonora City Council voted 5-0 Monday to support TUD's grant application and pursuit of the project, which is intended to protect the primary conveyance for 33,000 Tuolumne County water connections that include residents, business and industry.

In an Aug. 3 letter to Sonora Mayor Connie Williams, Lisa Westbrook, of TUD customer and public relations, said the flume-ditch system runs through overgrown forest that is so loaded with fuel it is "an imminent threat to Tuolumne County's water supply."



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Westbrook said TUD staff are planning the project with people from Tuolumne County, Stanislaus National Forest, the Highway 108 FireSafe Council, Twain Harte Community Services District, California Conservation Corps, two collaborating landowners, Sierra Pacific Industries and Pacific Gas & Electric, and the consultant California Reforest Inc.

The grant application is going to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and its Watershed Improvement Program.

'Immediate threat'

The Sonora council's support includes a letter dated Aug. 15 from Williams to Jim Branham, executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

"Wildfire is the most immediate threat to the Tuolumne Main Canal flume system," Williams said. "Fire behavior in this part of the Sierra Nevada is extreme due to the very high fuel loading, pervasive tree mortality, steep slopes, and erratic winds common in narrow canyons."

Furthermore, at the upper section of Flume A, a wildfire above the flume could destabilize soil and lead to large boulders dislodging and rolling downslope to cause major damage to the flume, Williams said.

The main objectives of the Tuolumne Main Canal Fuels Reduction Project are to remove surface and ladder fuels and to reduce the upper crown cover to about 50 percent along the canal to protect it from intense wildfire, Westbrook said.

Benefits of the project include increased forest health, resiliency protection for the flumes and canal system, and protections to the watershed as a whole from threat of wildfire.

'Achilles heel'

A year ago, a proposal to seek \$28 million for tunnels to bypass the vulnerable wooden flumes that carry most of Tuolumne County's water was pulled from consideration for entry in a national disaster resiliency competition.

Before the so-called South Fork Tunnel project got pulled from consideration, TUD officials described the Tuolumne Main Canal as Tuolumne County's "Achilles heel."

In June this year, TUD's general manager talked about a plan to seek multiple grants totaling about \$700,000 for a four-mile-long, 500-foot-wide fire break to clear canopy fuels and understory fuels on each side of the flume-ditch system between Lyons Dam and Twain Harte.

"It's dense, it's overgrown," Haglund said of the unburned watershed the flume-ditch system passes through. "It presents a danger to us."

There is no fire break along the flume-ditch system now. Healthy trees, dead trees and dying trees stand next to the flume, which is basically an aqueduct on wooden stilts built on steep mountain terrain.

"We want to reduce the canopy and reduce the understory so that any fire that comes through there will be low intensity," Haglund said. "We're trying to cobble together funding sources for fire protection of the flume."

'Fire draft points'

In addition to the fire break, TUD staff have identified 20 to 25 spots along the flume-ditch system where tanks holding up to 20,000 gallons of water each can be located as "fire draft points," Haglund said.

The proposed tanks are intended to help Tuolumne County and other fire agencies deal with fire when it comes, to protect forest lands, private property and water quality.

"We've provided these potential sites along the ditch system for Cal Fire to evaluate," Haglund said.

Westbrook said Wednesday the entire project cost is estimated to be about \$767,000.

"All the numbers have not yet been finalized as the project costs are still being finalized," Westbrook said. "The other project partners, especially PG&E and SPI, are planning to do their own fuel-break work as well."

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy is a state agency created by bi-partisan legislation and signed into law in 2004.

The conservancy region covers all or part of 22 counties and more than 25 million acres. The Sierra Nevada constitutes about 25 percent of California's land area. It's the state's principal watershed, and it supplies more than 60 percent of the state's developed water supply to residents, farmers and other businesses and industries.