

NID project reduces fire risk at Scotts Flat Lake in Nevada County

Trina KleistSpecial to The Union

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Below the dam at the end of Scotts Flat Lake, a thick stand of pines and firs caught Kevin Whitlock's fire-fighter eye.

If a wildfire blisters this grove, flames could jump to the 3-megawatt hydroelectric powerhouse across the dirt road and block fire trucks from getting through.

Winds could fan fire up-stream through dense trees into the 400-plus homes of Cascade Shores, just west.

Or, Whitlock said, "If you got a down-canyon wind ..." He glared down Deer Creek toward Nevada City, 5 miles away. "That fire is comin' home."

Small, diseased and dead trees that could fuel a severe wildfire will be cut down under a \$278,000 project that Nevada Irrigation District started Dec. 8 on 82 acres it owns on the lakeshore. NID's newly hired Water Resources Planner Neysa King landed a \$251,000 grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy in August to fund most of that cost; King will oversee the project.

Most trees smaller than a foot across will be ground into mulch and spread about the forest floor, said Whitlock, a licensed Grass Valley forester hired by NID to work with this project. Some dead-but-standing trees will be left for cavity-nesters such as red-shafted flickers, pileated woodpeckers and owls.

Native dogwood — food for bees in spring and shimmering red-and-gold leaves in the fall — will be mostly preserved.

Jason Barrett's crew from the California Conservation Corps appraised the forest during a recent hike with Whitlock and King. The Auburn-based crew members (many from urban areas) said they are eager to protect an area they described as "beautiful" and "amazing."

"It's really cool to see the finished product and say, 'Wow, that looks awesome!'" Barrett said. "And you know it's healthier for the forest."

PROTECTING WATER QUALITY

In a natural system, lightning would spark fire here every 15 to 20 years, quickly burn smaller trees and bushes, open the forest floor to sunlight and spur new growth. Instead, a century of well-intentioned fire suppression has left this forest choked with young trees.

"Where a healthy forest should have 60 trees per acre, we have hundreds in some areas," NID's King said. "We are focused on leaving a stronger stand of forest with diverse ages and types of trees, with healthy competition."

A healthy forest here also would protect the area's water supply, said Andy Fristensky, regional manager of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency. A catastrophic wildfire would leave bare dirt to wash into the lake, reducing water quality for NID customers across western Nevada County. Plus, every foot of eroded soil is that much less water that can be stored for the dry season.

The fire-water link multiplies across 20 million acres of California forest land, where one-third to nearly one-half of the acreage is at risk of severe wildfire, the U.S. Forest Service estimates. That's why the Forest Service and Sierra Nevada Conservancy launched the Watershed Improvement Program along the mountain range, improving forest health to reduce big fires and secure supplies of clean water — including at Scotts Flat Lake.

"Fire is a natural part of the ecosystem, but what's unnatural is the amount of fuels we have allowed to grow over time," Fristensky said. "The goal of this project is to restore that ecosystem to a more balanced and more naturally functioning way."

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