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A Clean Break

A cooperative program aims to put space between fire fuel and homes

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By Cathy Locke
 Bee Staff Writer

--David **Vraiff** can stand on the porch of his ridge-top home and look out over the south fork of the American River.

The view is what led him to purchase the 5-acre parcel near Pollock Pines, the site of a former Christmas tree farm that extends down a steep slope and borders U.S. Forest Service land.

But visions of flames licking up the hillside motivated him to participate in a fuel-break program sponsored by the Forest Service and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

For foothill homeowners, he said, "fire is our biggest concern."

Wednesday afternoon, as fires burned in Southern California, Forest Service and CDF employees took representatives of agencies involved in fire prevention efforts nationwide on a tour of the Independence Fuel Break. The group, which convenes twice a year, was meeting last week in Sacramento.

Extending from Forebay Reservoir northwest to Slab Creek Reservoir, the fuel break represents a collaborative effort of public agencies and private landowners to reduce the threat of wildland fires.

The project is funded by a \$300,000 grant from the Forest Service and is administered by CDF.

Mike Kirkley, a division chief with CDF's Amador-EI Dorado Unit, said his agency sent letters to private property owners inviting them to participate in the program, which can pay up to 90 percent of the cost of clearing brush and trees to reduce fire hazards on their land.

"If they choose not to participate, there's nothing we can do," he said.

But when the agency has offered to share the cost, Kirkley added, "we have had good luck getting 90 percent participation."

There are always a few who refuse, he said, noting that some people don't want to be part of any government project. Others believe that "to cut a green tree is a mortal sin," he said.

The Forest Service also is committed to reducing vegetation on the federal lands that adjoin private property.

Property owners who sign up for the program are given a list of registered foresters whom they can contact to oversee their tree and brush removal.

Mark Stewart, a consulting forester, represents several landowners along Forebay Road who are participating in the Independence Fuel Break.

He prepares a management plan and serves as the property owners' liaison with CDF. He also hires crews to cut trees and remove brush.

In cases where the work is done with hand crews using chain saws and the brush is piled and burned on the site - during the winter - cost ranges from \$600 to \$900 per acre. Bulldozers often can be used on larger acreages, reducing the cost to \$300 to \$400 an acre, Stewart said.

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On parcels of 20 acres or more, masticating machines may be used to reduce the brush to a mulch, which typically is left on the site, he said.

Also, on parcels larger than 5 acres with commercial-size pine trees, landowners may realize some revenue from logging.

When he thins thickets of trees, Stewart said he usually leaves 18 to 25 feet between trunks.

"There is some flexibility between fire safety and aesthetics," he said.

Although heavy growths of manzanita create a significant fire hazard, Stewart said he has developed plans for property owners who want to preserve some of the brush because they find it attractive.

The Forest Service, CDF and the El Dorado County Fire Safe Council, as well as most local fire departments, offer brochures that outline vegetation management plans.

Vicki Yorty, the Fire Safe Council's executive coordinator, said demonstration sites have been created in Mosquito, Auburn Lake Trails and Grizzly Flat to show people what can be done with fire-retardant planting.

"It doesn't have to be a lunar landscape," she said, adding that thinning vegetation can enhance the appearance and the safety of the property.

In Rescue, she noted, residents who participated in a fuel-reduction program discovered a stream that they hadn't known existed on their land.

Richard Mallett, another Forebay Road resident participating in the Independence Fuel Break, stressed that the program involves thinning vegetation, not clear-cutting.

"It's more beautiful without the dense, overgrown foliage," he said.

And, he added, "it's far more economical than what's going on in Southern California."

The fire dangers for people who live in secluded, forested areas with narrow roads and limited access were evident Wednesday as the tour bus navigated Forebay Road.

Teri Mizuhara, a state fire prevention specialist, drove ahead in an agency van to warn oncoming motorists that the bus was approaching.

The bus edged within inches of utility trucks and delivery vans that had stopped along the roadside, illustrating the difficulty fire engines could have getting into the area if residents were trying to get out.

Homeowner **Evraiff** said he recognizes that people who live in such areas need to be prepared to defend their own property against fire.

When he built his house on Forebay Road six years ago, he drew on his background as an engineer to install water storage tanks and a pump system that would enable him to hose down his home to protect it from falling ash. **Evraiff** now markets the system, which also can be used to apply a hydrated gel to protect the structure and allow residents to evacuate.

He was inundated with calls from Southern California residents last week.

But home fire suppression systems aren't a substitute for clearing vegetation to create a defensible space, he said.

Evraiff said he had been working to clear his property before he joined the Independence Fuel Break program, but he needed trained crews to deal with brush on the steep slope.

His goal is to fill the gap between the time a fire starts and firefighters arrive and to create conditions that would improve firefighters' chances of saving his house.

That's a strategy fire officials encourage.

CDF's Kirkley said, "I tell people, 'You should clear an area so you can defend your property yourself without an engine.'"

For information about vegetation management programs, call Yorty at (530) 647-1098.

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The Bee's Cathy Locke can be reached at (916) 608-7451 or clocke@sacbee.com.

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