

# Wildfire in the Spotlight

by Maripaula Valdes-Berriz

Ventura County hosted the first California Wildfire Conference between October 24-26 with the aim to connect practitioners and share experiences on a topic that deeply impacts all Californians. It was organized by the Ventura County Wildfire Collaborative (a program of VC Resource Conservation District), Coastal Quest, California Climate Investments, and CALFIRE. The first two days included discussion panels with participants representing a very large community ranging from scientist, fire departments, non-profits, engineering businesses, as well as indigenous cultural fire practitioners from California and Australia. There was something for everyone at this conference. Topics included community-based mitigation efforts, insurance problems and solutions, state and federal financial support for projects to increase resilience, research on the effects of wildfire on our coastal ecosystems, and how technology is being used to predict and detect wildfires. Importantly, there were strong critiques about the lack of inclusion of indigenous practitioners who have been using cultural burning to manage vegetation and the resources they utilize from it in a controlled and sustainable way for millennia. The importance of technological advances for planning preventive measures, mitigation, and solutions was frequently highlighted in this meeting, especially in the light of climate change. In contrast, the prominent indigenous voices humbled us and reminded us of human's long-standing relationship with fire.

Julie Clark and I participated in the conference as representatives of UCCE Ventura. Our work with prescribed burning and wildfire started with advisor Matthew Shapero's research and his involvement with the establishment of Ventura's Prescribed Burn Association. Currently, we are carrying out research to evaluate if prescribed burning can help control the highly invasive yellow star thistle (*Centuarea solstitialis*) at Ojai Valley Land Conservancy's Steelhead Preserve. The project aims to see if 3 years of consecutive prescribed burnings can reduce the abundance of this invasive weed before other restoration techniques are applied. The first burn took place successfully in June of this year, and it was an extensive collaboration between several different fire departments, OVLC, VC Resource Conservation District, and UCCE Ventura. We surveyed the vegetation and collected samples of the soil seedbank before the burn, and took measurements of fire intensity, fuel moisture, and the weather conditions during the burn. On the final day of the CA Wildfire Conference, I talked to a group of participants during a field tour of Steelhead Reserve about the overarching goal of our research to inform how we can use prescribed burning to manage invasive species effectively. I and the other collaborators shared our experiences and the lesson learned from the first prescribed burn of the project, which I think perfectly captured the purpose and spirit of this conference as we move towards a future of good fire in California.

Picture description: First prescribed burn at OVLC's Steelhead Preserve by the Ventura River on June 22, 2023.  
Photo by Maripaula Valdes-Berriz



Conference website: <https://www.coastal-quest.org/conferences/california-wildfire-conference/>

VC Wildfire Collaborative: <https://vcrd.org/vcwc/>