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More grant money means expanded fire mitigation in Los Gatos Creek Watershed

Collaborative to add 841 acres in Santa Cruz Mountains to its efforts



Dave Manson of the Saratoga-based Santa Clara County FireSafe Council inspects an area of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District that has seen fire mitigation efforts by the Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative. CAL FIRE this month awarded the collaborative a $6.3 million grant to expand its mitigation efforts into Aldercroft Heights and Lupin Lodge in the Santa Cruz Mountains. (Photo by Stephen Harrington)

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The Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative received one of the largest awards last week in CAL FIRE's latest round of Forest Health Grants.

The $6.3 million grant will go toward expanding the collaborative's project area by 841 acres to include Aldercroft Heights and Lupin Lodge, residential neighborhoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains, bringing overall coverage to 2,700 acres.

Aldercroft Heights and Lupin Lodge have a handful of areas that are at a high fire risk. Residents have to travel one-lane roads during evacuations, which can cause traffic and congestion, said Seth Schalet, chief executive officer of the Saratoga-based Santa Clara County FireSafe Council.

The watershed is located in the Santa Cruz Mountains that border Saratoga, Los Gatos and San Jose, near where the CZU Lightning Complex Fire burned 86,509 acres in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties in 2020. It also holds water reservoirs that serve more than 100,000 people.

“There’s a risk of fire and a history of fire,” said Schalet. “What we’re trying to do is lessen the impact should a fire happen. Hopefully, through our mitigation efforts, a fire would be less damaging ecologically and economically.”

The collaborative’s mitigation efforts within the watershed include removing dead trees and clearing underbrush that can make fires spread fast. The grant brings the total CAL FIRE allocation for these efforts to more than $13.8 million.

CAL FIRE had $93 million in grant funding to spread across the state this year, and applicants requested more than $225 million. Of 44 organizations that applied, 17 were awarded funds.

CAL FIRE awarded $7.5 million to the Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative in 2021. Schalet said he was pleasantly surprised that the collaborative received such a large grant in the latest round of funding.

Schalet said he was pleasantly surprised that the collaborative received such a high grant after it already received a large award.

“They originally had us allocated for $4 million,” he said. “They were so satisfied with the work we were doing that we got the full award. … We’re making an investment in the area.”

Ed Orre, a unit forester with CAL FIRE, said the collaborative’s work will help to protect the thousands of residents who live in or near the watershed, as well as the reservoirs that supply the West Valley with water.

“Because they had proven they were capable of doing similar work, and standing on existing success, that did put them in a more favorable position with the grant,” Orre said.

The collaborative has already started trimming trees and clearing underbrush in the watershed and is removing trees that were dried out by sudden oak death, which makes them quicker to burn and more likely to spread a wildfire.

The project will also protect the drinking water in the Lexington and Elsmann reservoirs that supply more than 100,000 Santa Clara County residents.

In addition to the FireSafe Council, the Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative includes San Jose Water, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District and Santa Clara County Parks.

“Natural disasters generally, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, they take a backseat in people’s minds until they’re hit with one,” Schalet said. “We’re making an investment in the area.”