

Tuolumne County Leads in Battling Tree Mortality

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This time last year, Lee Dennis felt terrified whenever she looked out at her yard.

Dozens of dead trees taken down by Pacific Gas and Electric contractors were piled up on the 67-year-old Leisure Pines resident's half-acre property. About 20 more trees were dying from ravenous bark beetles.

"There was no way I could pay for it," she said. "It was not even cost plausible."

Dennis, who lives on Social Security, went to the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors in September 2015 for help after being quoted \$1,200 per truckload to remove the dead pines.

On Sept. 15, 2015, the board joined several other Sierra Nevada counties in declaring states of emergency in response to the growing crisis. Gov. Jerry Brown followed on Oct. 30 by issuing an executive order that freed up state funds and resources for public agencies to tackle the problem.

The county has led the charge over the past year in launching programs to help protect public safety and provide some relief for homeowners like Dennis.

Although the state assistance is not available to private citizens, county officials have collaborated with a number public and private partners to take down as many trees as they can on private land that are threatening public roads.

Roughly 50 pines were cleared from Dennis' property through a pilot project this summer, in addition to roughly 700 more throughout the neighborhood. She said she "couldn't be more pleased" with the results.

"I thought I was going to be looking at that mess for the rest of my life," she said. "I'm very grateful for everything that's been done."

Dennis said the work has also made a huge difference in the neighborhood's landscape. From her window, she can see homes that she always knew were there but weren't previously visible through the trees.

There's still one dead pine on Dennis' property, and she's hoping she'll qualify to have it removed through a recently launched, privately funded program aimed at helping seniors with the cost of removing dead or dying trees.

However, Dennis knows the problem is still spreading far beyond her neighborhood.

"I have a great view, but unfortunately I'm watching the pines turn brown," she said. "From ridge to ridge."

Programs

Tuolumne County was the first of the 10 counties labeled by the state as “high hazard areas” to get equipment on the ground to deal with the tree mortality crisis.

Cal Fire officials who toured Leisure Pines in June to get information on the county’s pilot project there said the program was something that could and should be replicated in other parts of the state.

“Tuolumne County has really taken the lead in a lot of areas and cleared a lot of hurdles for other counties to do this work,” said Cal Fire Amador-El Dorado Division Chief Chris Anthony, who serves as a deputy leader of the governor’s statewide tree mortality task force.

Since that time, the county has identified 10 separate project zones. The next areas they are targeting include Mi-Wuk Village, Old Highway 120, Confidence Road, Merrell Road, Tuolumne Road North and Ponderosa Hills.

Mike Albrecht, a logger with Sierra Resource Management in Jamestown, was contracted by the county to coordinate the tree-removal projects.

People must sign and return a “right-of-entry” permit allowing contracted foresters and arborists on their property to identify trees that would qualify to be removed using state funds. They can’t begin work in an area until 75 percent of the permit forms have been returned.

Deputy County Administrator Tracie Riggs, coordinator of the county Office of Emergency Services, said getting people to return the permit forms in a timely manner has been one of the biggest delays.

About 6,000 have been sent out to homeowners in the affected areas, she said. As of late August, about 54 percent of the 978 permits sent to people in Mi-Wuk Village had been returned.

Some people can be difficult to track down because they own a vacation home and live outside of the county, others are wary of signing the form that releases the county and its contractors from liability.

Dennis commended the local contractors the county used in her area for being cautious and encouraged others to sign the forms if they can’t afford to take down their trees themselves.

“It doesn’t affect just you,” she said. “Dead trees are just like matchsticks, not to mention the damage they could do when they come down.”

In addition to the county’s efforts, community groups have been reaching out to help homeowners as well.

The Sonora Lions Club launched the Tree Mortality Aid Program, or TMAP, earlier this year to provide aid for low-income seniors.

A number of other groups joined to help administer the program, including Interfaith, Yosemite Foothills Fire Safe Council, Sonora Sunrise Rotary, Kiwanis Club of Sonora,

Sierra Non-Profit Services, Twain Harte Soroptimist Club, Area 12 Agency on Aging, the county Office of Emergency Supervisors, and the county Board of Supervisors.

People must be 60 or over and meet certain financial criteria to qualify.

Gregory Oliver, the program's chief administrator, said 40 applications for assistance have been submitted since they began accepting them on Sept. 15. Registered foresters are being sent to do site visits for those who applied.

"Once they get done with that, they'll map out where they are and we'll begin putting together a plan for bringing in crews to cut those trees down," he said.

The group recently received a donation from a registered forester in Merced who volunteered to cut down up to 50 trees for free. They hope to raise over \$2 million in the coming years to meet the need.

Applications for assistance are available through the Area 12 Agency on Aging.

Funding

One lingering concern on the minds of local leaders is how to keep up with the cost of removing all the dead trees, especially if the problem continues getting worse.

The board recently budgeted nearly \$670,500 from county's reserves to cover the tree-removal program for the next year. The state requires entities receiving assistance to pay 25 percent of the total cost.

County Administrator Craig Pedro has warned that the work could deplete the county's General Reserve fund within two to three years. The goal is to keep at least \$7.6 million in the fund, but the total currently stands at about \$1 million.

Federal assistance could bring the county's share of the cost down to 6.25 percent, but local leaders have had little luck lobbying the Obama Administration to make a presidential declaration.

A recent agreement with the U.S. Forest Service will provide up to \$2 million to cut down and remove hazardous trees on Stanislaus National Forest land along county-maintained roads.

County staff also applied for a federal hazard mitigation grant that would have provided up to \$4 million, but the county was not selected for the funding.

This year's state budget allocated \$11 million for tree mortality projects in the 10 high-hazard counties, which includes Tuolumne and Calaveras.

The county and five other local nonprofits and public entities have applied for a total of \$3.7 million. Cal Fire is expected to announce those selected to receive money in January.

District 2 Supervisor Randy Hanvelt sits on the governor's statewide tree mortality task force with District 1 Supervisor Sherri Brennan. Hanvelt also serves on the Rural County Representatives of California executive committee and says more counties farther north are beginning to experience the early stages of tree mortality.

Hanvelt said the current funding is “way over-subscribed” and will likely become more competitive as the demand increases.

“This is not going away,” he said.

Future

With the state just ending its fifth consecutive year of drought, many people are concerned about what the future holds for forests in the area and throughout California.

Since the county declared a local emergency over tree mortality last year, estimates on the number of dead trees in the Sierra Nevada range have increased from about 13 million to over 66 million.

Another study released late last year concluded that 888 million trees throughout the state have suffered some amount of measurable water loss due to the drought.

Stressed trees are more susceptible to being killed the native bark beetle.

A free event in the Sonora High School auditorium from 7 to 9 p.m. tonight, hosted by the Columbia College Foundation, is focused on setting the politics aside and helping people understand what it all could mean for the future of the area’s landscape.

“It’s not about what we’re doing today in Tuolumne County with regard to TMAP or what the board is doing, it’s more about what is happening on the landscape now,” said Stephanie Suess, the foundation’s director. “And, more importantly,” what is it going look like five years from now.”

The discussion will be moderated by Tom Hofstra, a forestry and natural resources director at Columbia College.

Speakers scheduled for the event include Eric Knapp, a research ecologist with the Forest Service; Lara McNicol, a fifth generation timberland owner in the county and adjunct instructor at Columbia College; Terry Strange, who owns a biological consulting firm; and Beverly M. Bulaon, a Forest Service entomologist.

“I think this is going so quickly, we’re not talking about what this is going to look like in the future,” Suess said. “Our goal in putting this together was to find folks who have done research and are doing on-the-ground studies, have a historical perspective and can tell us what they see.”

The Tuolumne County Alliance for Natural Resources and Environment is hosting a separate event from 9 a.m. to noon Friday at the Mother Lode Fairgrounds as part of the organization’s 15th annual Natural Resources Summit.

According to a press release, the focus will be on strategies for landscape-wide forest management to decrease the severity of future epidemics and wildfires. Confirmed speakers include Congressman Tom McClintock, R-Roseville, Assemblyman Frank Bigelow, R-O’Neals, Cal Fire Staff Chief Rick Carr, biomass experts and Dan Tomascheski of Sierra Pacific Industries.

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