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# \$100K Grant funds work to lower fire risk

## Representatives from three governments meet for project

By Bridget Jones, Journal Staff Writer



Ben Furtado/Auburn Journal

Known to the crew as a sawyer, Chris Corbin, of the California Conservation Corps, cuts back one of the many trees during Project Canyon Safe shaded fuel break work Monday morning near Thirza Court in Auburn.



The local, state and federal government came together in Auburn Monday to work toward a safer American River Canyon.

The California Conservation Corps is using a \$100,000 grant to continue creating a shaded fuel break in the canyon below the Aeolia Heights neighborhood. The grant can only be used to clear the canyon's federal lands, which are owned by the Bureau of Reclamation.

The fuel break is part of the Project Canyon Safe effort.

Project Canyon Safe began in May in Robie Point. The program's goal is to create a shaded fuel break in the canyon, keeping Auburn safe from a potentially catastrophic wildfire spreading from the canyon. The break allows firefighters to move throughout the canyon more effectively should a fire start, minimizing the possibility that a large wildfire would overcome the city of Auburn.

Several neighborhoods of volunteers are now working to create the break near their homes on the rim of the canyon.

Monday representatives from the California Conservation Corps, Bureau of Reclamation, State Parks and the Auburn Fire Department met downhill of Thirza Court to continue the project with Conservation Corps crew

workers clearing brush, limbs and some trees.

The entire Aeolia Heights project is about 15 to 17 acres. Conservation Corps crews will be working 10-hour shifts this week and clearing will continue every day for the next two or three weeks, said Auburn Fire Chief Mark D'Ambrogi.

Although crews won't be clearing on rainy days, they can use those days to chip what has already been cut down, D'Ambrogi said.

Juan Muy, a crew supervisor for the California Conservation Corps, which has continuously been involved with Project Canyon Safe, said the group is just as uneasy about the possibility of wildfires as neighbors are.

"For the most part, I think it's everyone's concern," Muy said. "This is kind of one of those ticking time bombs. It's our area as well. We do come from different places, but we live here."

Rob Schroeder, of the Bureau of Reclamation, said it was important for all parties to meet so that everyone was on the same page with the project and how to create the fuel break.

"To be successful you have to have strong ongoing communication," Schroeder said.

Schroeder said the priority was to clear land on the interface of federal and private property.

"A grant like this affords an opportunity to expand that (work)," Schroeder said. "These are hard economic times ... and the resources are hard to come by, and since we have been offered this resource, we are trying to take full advantage of it."

D'Ambrogi said Monday's meeting was a groundbreaking occasion.

"This is the first project that I know of that we have done this – where we have had all levels of government working together," he said.

According to Councilman Kevin Hanley, chairman of the Greater Auburn Area Fire Safe Council, who has helped spearhead Project Canyon Safe, neighbors in Aeolia Heights have raised \$8,000 for clearing work.

D'Ambrogi said the grant allows neighbors to keep their funds for maintenance rather than initial clearing.

Mark Meadows, who lives in Aeolia Heights, said neighbors are now talking about how they will use the funds to maintain the fuel break.

"We are working now to put together the plan," Meadows said. "If we use this plan, hopefully we can maximize the funds we have."

State Parks Ranger Scott Liske said there are two options when it comes to clearing land: a prescribed burn and a mechanically created shaded fuel break.

Liske said there is a small window of opportunity for the prescribed burn, and the affected area loses some of its attractiveness with that method.

"You see the scars from the fire, and you live with the smoke for a couple days," Liske said. "(Mechanical clearing) can be done at any time of the year."

Schroeder said the bureau's goal in keeping those living around the canyon safe from wildfire is to develop new relationships and keep current ones.

"We are working on a long-term agreement with Cal Fire," he said. "We have an agreement currently with the city of Auburn Fire Department."

Schroeder said these agreements allow other agencies to hire contractors to work on the bureau's land to maintain the fuel break.

Eric Peach, a member of Protect American River Canyons and resident of the Aeolia Heights area, said he hopes current Project Canyon Safe work will inspire more funding opportunities.

"I think once the community and state see the value of this, there will be continued funding streams," Peach said. "Then the big issue will be how do we go about maintaining it? There will be work parties for a long time to come."

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