



sonomalandtrust.org

WINTER 2018

REDUCING FUTURE FIRE IMPACTS IN SONOMA VALLEY

The impacts of the 2017 Nuns Fire in Sonoma and Napa Counties remain ever-present in our minds. The Sonoma Valley region that burned has experienced large-scale fires in the past and, in the future, fires are likely to become more frequent and occur over a prolonged annual season. In light of this and considering that fire is a phenomenon that doesn't respect human property boundaries, Sonoma Land Trust, Audubon Canyon Ranch, Sonoma Ag + Open Space, Sonoma County Regional Parks, Sonoma Mountain Ranch Preservation Foundation and California State Parks are collaborating to develop landscape-scale management of fire and vegetation in Sonoma Valley and the surrounding hills.

The towns and homes within Sonoma Valley are surrounded by thousands of acres of protected wildlands and parks that are managed for ecological benefit and our enjoyment, intermixed with farms, vineyards and ranches scattered along steep mountain roads. While building with fire-resistant materials and maintaining defensible space around structures must be the first line of defense for homeowners and communities, the manner in which wild lands are managed can significantly influence wildfire events by affecting fuel loads and fire intensity, and facilitating access and defense by firefighters.

As recent wildfires have again demonstrated, fire in residential areas is tragic. Yet scientists know that fire is a fundamental process in maintaining the ecological diversity and resiliency of many of California's landscapes. In fact, as we are seeing, the prolonged lack of fire will have consequences to plants and animals, water quantity and quality, soil condition and, ultimately, the size and behavior of an inevitable large wildfire consuming many years of fuel.

After decades of suppressing fire on the ground, fire management professionals, scientists and land managers concur on the benefits of prescribed fire, and the State of California is supporting significant increases in its use over coming years. Prescribed fire mimics natural processes, restoring fire to its historic role in wildland ecosystems; it can also reduce fire hazard, enhancing public and firefighter safety. Relatively small and more frequent burns under optimal conditions also produce far less smoke than would be released during a major wildfire. While it's impossible to eliminate all risk from fire, adding prescribed burns to the land managers' toolbox allows greater flexibility in promoting ecological health and human safety.

The new collaborative intends to use prescribed fire, fuel reduction and other

vegetation management activities to enhance ecosystem values while reducing future risks from wildfire to homes and communities along the Highway 12 corridor. CAL FIRE will be a necessary partner in this bold effort and its local staff is supportive because the collaborative plans to accomplish priority elements of CAL FIRE's *Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit Fire Management Plan*. It will also further the recommendations of Fire Safe Sonoma and the Sonoma County Office of Recovery and Resiliency.

Landscape-scale fire and vegetation management is a long-term effort. With the support of the community, Sonoma Land Trust and our conservation colleagues hope to make real progress over the next 10 years that will be cost effective and environmentally sustainable.



A landscape in the process of recovering from the Nuns Fire on our Secret Pasture Preserve.