



**MEMORANDUM
PUBLIC WORKS
ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING
DIVISION**
County of Placer

TO: Honorable Board of Supervisors **DATE:** August 10, 2021
FROM: Ken Grehm, Director of Public Works
BY: Jared Deck Program Manager
SUBJECT: Middle Fork Project / Fuel Reduction Management Program Phase II Funding
Recommendations for 2021

ACTION REQUESTED

Approve \$114,200 in funding for the Fuel Reduction Management Program for the Middle Fork Project and authorize the Director of Public Works, or designee, to sign funding agreements with the City of Auburn Fire Department, the Foresthill/Iowa Hill Fire Safe Council, and the Placer Land Trust. Funding is provided pursuant to the Middle Fork Project Memorandum of Agreement.

BACKGROUND

At the June 3, 2014 Board of Supervisors meeting, your Board approved the Fuel Reduction Management (FRM) Program. The FRM Program provides funds annually for the duration of the federal license for the Middle Fork Project (MFP) to organizations that propose projects or have programs that 1) have a direct nexus to the MFP area, and 2) show the potential to reduce fire danger through some form of fuel management projects. The MFP area is a critical forested watershed, and its protection is of paramount importance to Placer County. The MFP is a multi-purpose water supply and hydro-electric generation project designed to conserve and control waters of the Middle Fork American River, the Rubicon River, and several associated tributary streams.

The FRM Program includes a semi-annual application period (January for Phase I and June for Phase II) that provides participating organizations the opportunity to coordinate FRM funding with other grant funding timelines. Funding for these requests is available pursuant to the MFP Memorandum of Agreement with Placer County Water Agency which administers MFP budgeted funding, at no net County cost. Funding for this year's grant is contained within Fuel Reduction Projects/Middle Fork Trust Fund. This fund is replenished annually to be distributed for this Program.

For the June 2021 Phase II of the Program, staff received three grant requests and recommends funding all projects as they met all the FRM criteria and directly support fuel reduction in the MFP area:

- 1) City of Auburn Fire Department: \$49,500 for MFP portion of American River Canyon Shaded Fuel Break – Auburn Bluffs
- 2) Foresthill/Iowa Hill Fire Safe Council: \$49,500 for MFP Tree Mortality Removal Program
- 3) Placer Land Trust: \$15,200 for MFP Area Fuel Reduction Project

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The details of the projects are included in the attachment titled Fuel Reduction Management Program Recommendations for 2021 Phase II.

Staff has developed a standardized FRM Grant Agreement. Copies of the proposed agreements are on file with the Clerk of the Board.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Staff's recommendation provides partial grant funding to previously approved California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) projects. Each grantee performed that CEQA determination. This action does not constitute a "Project" under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to CEQA Guidelines sections 15378(a) and (b)(5) because it is an administrative action that does not result in any direct or physical change in the environment.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funding for MFP FRM program projects is budgeted in the FY 2021-22 Community and Agency Support appropriation, with reimbursements from the Fuel Reduction Projects/Middle Fork Trust Fund, pursuant to the Middle Fork Project Memorandum of Agreement with Placer County Water Agency which administers MFP budgeted funding. The total grant funding for projects in 2021 Phase II is \$114,200.

ATTACHMENTS

Fuel Reduction Management Program Recommendations for 2021 Phase II

On File with Clerk of the Board: Grant Agreement with City of Auburn Fire Department: American River Canyon Shaded Fuel Break – Auburn Bluffs

Grant Agreement with Foresthill/Iowa Hill Fire Safe Council: Tree Mortality Removal Program

Grant Agreement with Placer Land Trust: Fuel Reduction Project



Middle Fork Project Area Fuel Reduction Program

Fuel Reduction Management Program Recommendations for 2021 (Phase II)

Background: The Placer County Board of Supervisors (BOS) adopted the Fuel Reduction Management (FRM) Program in 2014 to implement a program which funds projects to perform fuel management activities that support a reduction in potential fire in the Middle Fork Project (MFP) nexus area. The funding available is pursuant to the Middle Fork Project Memorandum of Agreement with Placer County Water Agency (PCWA) and based upon a nexus to the MFP area.

Process: The BOS-adopted FRM Program allows for the application period to be twice annually; once in January and once in June. Three applications were received by two organizations and were reviewed by a joint Placer County/PCWA staff panel and the following recommendations for projects have been proposed.

Individual Project Recommendations: The following projects were reviewed by staff to meet all FRM Program qualifications and are recommended for funding in the FRM Program. Staff is recommending a total of \$114,200 in funding to the Placer County Board of Supervisors.

Individual Projects declined: There were no applications declined during this phase of 2021.

Project Recommendation #1

Title: American River Canyon Shaded Fuel Break – Auburn Bluffs

Applicant: City of Auburn Fire Department

County Plan project references: 1) Western Slope Placer County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), 2) DMA 2000 Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (FEMA approved), 3) the Greater Auburn Area Fire Safe Council (GAAFSC) Strategic Plan, and 4) 2019 City of Auburn Fire Department’s WUI Strategic Plan.

Total Project Cost: \$125,000

Application agency contribution: \$75,500

Request of funds: \$49,500

Recommendation of funds: \$49,500 (maximum amount allowed 40% of total project or \$49,500)

Summary of Project: The objective of the American River Canyon Shaded Fuel Break proposed project is to provide a means of protection to the Auburn community from the disaster of wildfire,



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preserve our natural and cultural resources, enhance our watershed, support wildlife habitat, and maintain recreational opportunities to the pristine American River and Auburn State Recreation Area.

The Shaded Fuel Break is a carefully planned thinning of dense vegetation so that wildfire does not easily move from the ground into the overhead tree canopy where fire intensifies and spreads rapidly. The intent of the Shaded Fuel Break is to provide protection by reducing flammable fuels consumed in a wildfire to lessen fire intensity and to allow fire suppression resources the ability to achieve the highest probable success in mitigating such a wildfire.

Vegetation will be removed by hand and/or mechanically using hand saws, pole saws, chainsaws, and mastication. Cut materials will be hauled, stacked in piles, and chipped with a mechanical chipper. Chipped materials will be scattered within the project area and left on site for natural decomposition and soil stability enhancement. Although the prescription allows for pile burning, this Project has been planned with the chipping component to 1) avoid smoke issues, 2) create a more complete project by cutting and chipping, and 3) avoid additional crew time for pile burning. Burning may be used in some cases to eliminate invasive plant species instead of chipping where the broadcast of material may expand such species.

Outcomes of success for this Project include providing defensible space for homes within the Wildland Urban Interface and the effect of the visible fuels reduction, thus creating an immediate fire safe area and the long term ability to continue regular maintenance year after year in a way that is manageable from a ground work perspective and fiscally feasible. The Project will not only bring fire safety to the community, but esthetically pleasing views of well-maintained wildland urban interface lands, a greater producing watershed, a more diverse ecological system, greater recreational opportunity, sustainability to cultural resources, and an example of a multi-agency collaborative project.

The Project area will encompass approximately 10 acres where treatment will be applied. Fuel arrangement and continuity are comprised of ladder fuels well developed in the Project area that are comprised of ground fuels, annual grasses and forbes intertwined with the brush, and mid-story fuels that grow directly under the tree canopy. In many areas the continuity of ground fuels to canopy cover is so dense that multiple brush and tree species do not achieve healthy growth and end up competing with each other. This fuel prohibits larger tree species adequate growth to perhaps become resistant to wildfire.

This Project is crucial to reduce destruction from wildfire and is critical to the watershed. These areas include drainages known as "chutes" or "chimneys"; very steep V shaped canyons that can quickly develop massive fuel loads of natural vegetation when during a wildfire will burn with fierce intensity and cause major destruction to any structures as well as the land itself when not maintained. Fire professionals are extremely concerned when any wildfire occurs in drainages due to the fact that fuels burn extremely rapidly, there is limited success in fire suppression efforts because of terrain, and such areas are an extreme safety concern for firefighting personnel and surrounding development due to intense fire behavior. The 2012 Robbers Fire and the 2013 American Fire in the upper American River Watershed System both incurred intense fire behavior in such drainages. Limited, if any, success of fire suppression occurred in these areas and afterwards it was observed that all vegetative materials were totally consumed



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by intense fire including significant layers of soil. This leaves the V shaped canyons prone to severe erosion and soil runoff during times of precipitation. The V shaped canyons are watershed collectors for ground surface waters that feed into main watershed streams such as the American River. By reducing the vegetation in drainages, fire suppression may be more effective, watersheds may experience less destruction from wildfire, and less vegetation generally will add water to the natural system, in this case, the American River.

The Project area encompasses private lands and is part of the overall American River Canyon Shaded Fuel Break. In 2019-2021 the adjacent public lands were treated through a CAL FIRE grant administered by the Placer County Resource Conservation District. This 1.9-million-dollar grant will apply approximately \$43,000 to the adjacent public lands for crew work on Bureau of Reclamation lands. The Auburn Bluffs HOA has also applied approximately \$32,500 towards this overall project. These requested funds will cover ground maintenance work with a nexus to the public lands. In addition, it is estimated that the City of Auburn Fire Department will match approximately \$2,000 "in-kind" through staff coordination and project implementation time.

The City of Auburn has filed a Notice of Exemption for this Project of which is consistent with like projects administered by the fire department. Adjacent land in public holding; Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) land and leased to California State Parks for recreational use, NEPA has been performed by the Bureau of Reclamation; Categorical Exclusion Checklist (CEC) updated/completed in 2018.

Project Recommendation #2

Title: Middle Fork Project Tree Mortality Removal Program

Applicant: Foresthill / Iowa Hill Fire Safe Council

County Plan project references: 1) Western Slope Placer County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), 2) DMA 2000 Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (FEMA approved), and 3) Foresthill, Iowa Hill (RAMS)

Total Project Cost: \$124,000

Application agency contribution: \$74,500

Request of funds: \$49,500

Recommendation of funds: \$49,500 (maximum amount allowed 40% of total project or \$49,500)

Summary of Project: The Foresthill / Iowa Hill Fire Safe Council (FSC) in cooperation with the Monte Verde Estates, Trailhead Estates, Michigan Bluff, and Foresthill Firewise Communities, Cal Fire NEU Unit, USFS, Placer County Fire Alliance, and other partners propose a program to assist homeowners in removing dead or dying trees within the 150' defensible space of structures in the Foresthill / Iowa Hill FSC MFP nexus area. In 2019, projects funded through the MFP allowed removal of 259 Tree Mortality Hazard trees in the Foresthill / Michigan Bluff MFP areas. Dead or dying trees resulting from extreme prolonged drought, pine beetles, and other tree parasites will be removed, thus reducing the risk to public safety, ingress and egress,



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structures, and perform fuel management activities that support a reduction in potential fire in the Middle Fork Project (MFP) area. This area is a critical forested watershed and protection of it is of paramount importance along with the forest communities that are critical to our economy. Trees infested with beetles will be treated according to best management practices, including felling and covering with plastic to help reduce beetle spread. The FSC and Firewise Communities will work with partners to identify individuals in need, perform site visits to identify necessary work and provide educational materials, and coordinate with local agencies, contractors, and volunteers to complete tree removal work.

These individual properties are dispersed throughout our communities and may be the one property that prevents an entire community from being defensible or fire safe. This program could help ensure consistent fuels reduction throughout a community and reduce the risk of fire spreading from the individual property into the community or neighboring structures, as well as protecting the MFP area from fire originating in these communities and spreading into the watershed.

The entire region is listed by Cal Fire as a 'Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone'. The neighborhoods are on the Federal Register list of 'Communities at Risk' because wildfires, originating in the canyons, progress rapidly up the steep slopes, threatening property and lives. These fires can also originate in these forested communities and progress into the canyons, threatening this critical watershed.

This program will assist in removing approximately 75 additional dead or dying trees adjacent to or within strategically placed fuels reduction project areas planned for 2021 or completed within the past 5 years. This project is adjacent to Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) lands, U.S. Forest Service Tahoe National Forest (USFS) lands, and the PCWA Middle Fork Project area. The Foresthill / Iowa Hill FSC and Firewise Communities have continually worked on private lands to create strategically placed shaded fuelbreaks and educate the communities on defensible space. This has been accomplished through volunteer hours, private dollars, Middle Fork Project grant funds, grants from NRCS, and grants acquired by the Foresthill / Iowa Hill FSC through the California Firesafe Council Clearinghouse from BLM. These combined dollars amount to \$438,800; over the past two years, we have used \$299,900 of these funds for match towards this project. In 2021, we wish to continue this project by using an additional \$74,500 as match for this year's second phase \$124,000 project.

Project Recommendation #3

Title: Middle Fork Area Fuel Reduction Project

Applicant: Placer Land Trust

County Plan project references: 1) Western Slope Placer County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)

Total Project Cost: \$38,000

Application agency contribution: \$22,800

Request of funds: \$15,200



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Recommendation of funds: \$15,200 (maximum amount allowed 40% of total project or \$49,500)

Summary of Project: The Placer Land Trust MFP Area Fuel Reduction Project entails hazardous fuel reduction across three properties as shown on the attached maps. These treatment areas include 100' defensible space from houses, other structures, and roadside areas. Each of the three treatment areas is adjacent to residential development/communities, so treatment of these areas is a high priority.

Treatment prescriptions will comply with the Placer County Hazardous Vegetation and Combustible Material Abatement Ordinance (No. 6015-B), as follows:

Buffer Areas:

- Road Buffers: Within at least 10' of the roadway frontage or a larger width, if feasible.
- 100' Defensible Space Buffers: Within 100' of houses/structures, where 100' defensible space area overlaps onto PLT property boundaries.

Treatment Prescription:

- Annual grasses and weeds mowed/ trimmed to four inches (4") or less.
- Trees limbed to at least six to eight feet (6-8') above ground, including vine removal.
- Brush, flammable vegetation, and other combustible growth removed.
- Hazard trees removed. Maintain any tree adjacent to or overhanging any building free of dead or dying wood.

Methods:

- Hand clearing
- Mechanical thinning
- String trimming
- Mowing
- Mastication/ chipping and/or piling & burning

Treatment Areas:

Property 1, Aeolia Preserve: 1.5 acres

- Road buffers: none (Olive Orchard Drive ends at the property)
- Defensible space buffers: 10 houses within 100' of west boundary

Property 2, Stagecoach Preserve: 2.3 acres

- Road buffers: 1200 ft along Canyon Drive and 350 feet along Russell Road
- Defensible space buffers: 12 houses within 100' on north and south parcels
 - Includes removal of 4-5 hazard trees

Property 3, Spring Garden Preserve (South): 1.5 acres

- Defensible space buffers: 5 houses within 100' of west and east boundaries (1.5 acres)
 - Includes removal of 2-3 hazard trees

Total Treatment Acreage: 5.3 acres

