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Butano State Park slated for forest recovery work

RCD, Cal Fire and State Parks seek plan

By August Howell

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With wildfire season on the horizon in California, a county conservation organization and two state agencies have partnered on a long-term project to bolster forest ecology and reduce fire risk at Butano State Park.

The San Mateo Resource Conservation District has partnered with the California Department of Parks and Recreation and Cal Fire to work on more than 400 acres of Butano State Park three years after the devastating CZU Lightning Complex fires swept through the area in August 2020.

RCD Executive Director Kellyx Nelson said the mechanical work within the next year will help set up Butano for long-term fuel reduction methods like prescribed burning. She noted that with State Parks working on forest restoration from the CZU damage in Santa Cruz County and Big Basin State Park, RCD is stepping in to expand the capacity for Butano. The resource conservation district's plan to prevent wildfires is to use a holistic approach by minimizing tree density and diversifying tree species.

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"This is very much a project that's improving and restoring forest ecology," Nelson said. "It's a habitat restoration project that improves the biodiversity and resilience of the forest."

While RCD is managing the project, Mountain F. Enterprises will provide the boots on the ground thinning overgrown vegetation, removing dead or dying trees, and reducing ladder fuels. According to RCD's bid package, the Butano State Park Forest Health project "encompasses 391.6 acres of mechanical mastication, 16 acres of understory hand thinning, and 52.9 acres of various overlapping treatments aimed at thinning moderate range diameter trees to reduce competition and fuel load." The project is funded by \$560,000 from State Parks and \$2.8 million from Cal Fire's Forest Health Program.

"We are excited to be partnering with the RCD and Cal Fire on this important project," Chris Spohrer, the superintendent of State Parks' Santa Cruz district, said in a statement. "By working together, we can achieve our shared goals of promoting forest health, reducing the risk of wildfire and protecting the natural resources of San Mateo County and the state of California."

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RCD Forest Ecologist David Cowman said the restoration should be finished by fall 2024.

In the last two years, RCD has completed just over 500 acres of forest management and fuel load reduction work in San Mateo County, meaning this singular Buntano project would represent a huge portion of work the conservation district has already done.

Cowman noted that most of the Santa Cruz Mountains are overdue for this type of work. With no low-intensity fires to clear out fuels for the last 200 years, there's a lot of work needed just to set up prescribed burns in the future.

"The long-term goal is to go in with this mechanical work, reset the system and set the park up for prescribed burning," he said.

"There are some types of fire that can be beneficial, and there are some types of fire that can be destructive," added Nelson. "There's no one size that fits all for fire."

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