# Six years after the devastating CZU fire, a new vision for the Santa Cruz Mountains takes root

An unprecedented partnership is using the burned landscape as a living laboratory to restore forest health and reshape wildfire management

By Kathryn Wheeler  Aug 13, 2026

Original article on Coastside News

Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

There are few areas of the Coastside that remain as scarred from natural disaster as the southern Coastside's redwood forests.

The groves of giant trees that flourish in Pescadero's Butano State Park and extend south along the Santa Cruz Mountains more than 86,000 acres remain charred and blackened by the most devastating fire in San Mateo County history.

In the early morning hours of August 16, 2020, the remnants of Tropical Storm Elida swept across Central California causing 11,000 lightning strikes across the state. Combined with the hot and dry conditions of mid-August, the bolts sparked multiple fires that eventually merged to form the CZU fire. The fire went from 3,000 acres to 40,000 acres in a 12-hour period, spreading rapidly and burning uncontained for more than a month before it was fully

extinguished. Roughly one-third of the area burned is in San Mateo County, with the remainder in Santa Cruz County.

The devastation of the fire remains apparent. Where there were once lush and vibrant groves are now miles of woods that seem all but dead.

Remarkably, though, they are not. The old growth trees that looked to be victims of the fire are now rebounding. Six years later, the fire has become the subject of a cross-county effort that could reshape how humans respond to and plan for wildfire.

Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

"Our region has been an innovation hub," said Timothy Federal, a senior program manager at the San Mateo Resource Conservation District. Federal has been instrumental in the formation of a unique partnership between five agencies across both San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties. Led by California State Parks, the Coastal Santa Cruz Mountains State Parks Forest Health Initiative has brought in leaders from Save the Redwoods League, Sempervirens Fund, the San Mateo County and Santa Cruz County RCD.

The broad partnership formed out of conversations among the 25 organizations within the decade-old Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network. The network brings together groups

that own or manage land in the Santa Cruz Mountains including public agencies, nonprofits, universities, timber companies and conservation groups. In some ways a partnership that would examine how to restore the forest was obvious. "We saw that fire doesn't respect boundaries," Federal said.

But the scope of the partnership, a result of years of conversations, is something Federal said is unique not only in California but nationwide. The "level of trust and collaborative spirit that those organizations hold," including among groups with sometimes opposing interests - like conservationists and timber companies - is rare in fire recovery efforts.

Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

The partner groups set about answering a question: "How do we manage these ecosystems in a way that fosters resilience instead of vulnerability to high intensity fire?" That question was the seed of a large coordinated effort to use 12,000 burned acres across the three affected state parks - Big Basin Redwoods State Park, Butano State Park and Año Nuevo State Park - as a case study in conservation methods. Those areas now have dense resprouting shrubs, thousands of standing dead trees, and heavy understory likely to support another severe fire. The project proposal views these post-fire conditions as both a challenge and an opportunity for restoration particularly, in an era where climate change increases the likelihood of devastating wildfire.

The project is only now in its early stages after years in the making. It was formally proposed in draft form in January of 2025 and received the greenlight from the Coastal Commission in February of 2026.

The project is multi-pronged. Rather than using methods to rebuild the forests as they were, it will involve using innovative methods for reshaping the affected area to be more resilient to future fires.

The project operates on a widely acknowledged scientific understanding that the country's approach to fire for more than a century has been deeply flawed. Prior to the takeover of the Santa Cruz Mountains by Europeans starting in the 1700s, the indigenous Ohlone people stewarded the mountain areas for more than 10,000 years.

The Ohlone recognized that there was such a thing as "good fire," or the intentional burning of landscapes in order to clear dead brush. The Ohlone people observed that igniting fires as part of the ritual of "cultural burns" actually reduced the intensity of wildfire and promoted the growth of native plants used for food, medicine and basketry.


Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

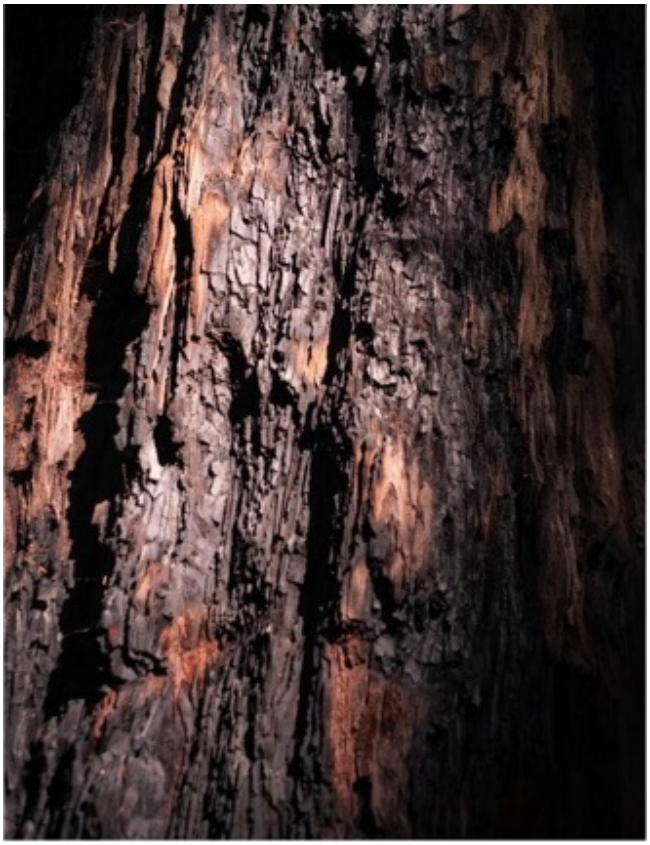
Redwood trees were also understood to be remarkably adaptive to fire. Their thick, tannin-rich barks serve as insulation to the growing band of tissue, or the cambium layer, inside. When

fires scorch the flammable needles in the canopy, ancient dormant buds and carbon reserves reemerge and resprout, effectively healing the tree.

In the early 1900s, Americans broadly viewed fire as bad after several catastrophic fire seasons destroyed areas of the West. That brought the "war on fire," led by the U.S. Forest Service. "The pendulum swung to the idea of fence off the forest and don't touch it, because the forest can manage itself," said Federal.

As a result, the Santa Cruz Mountains no longer saw regular fire, which meant brush accumulated and stands of redwood trees grew thick and overcrowded. When the CZU Fire ignited, decades of accumulated brush and dense stands of trees contributed to high-severity fire behavior that was extremely difficult to contain.

Using the historical context of the Ohlone, the project will attempt to mimic traditional forest management methods. Researchers will do so by reintroducing low-intensity fires to the project area, cutting trees to reduce the density of the forests, restoring a "mosaic" of different vegetation types, protecting native grasslands and shrublands, and improving the habitat for threatened and endangered species that are a critical part of the forest ecosystem.



Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

Researchers must rely on several methods beyond fire to restore the forest back to health. "You can't just light them on fire," Federal said, because there is too much accumulated fuel that the area could easily burn out of control. The area will first undergo mechanical or manual treatments to reduce fuel loads before prescribed fire can be used effectively.

The forest is also being utilized concurrently for a separate study led by the University of California and funded by a grant through CalFire. The study examines 300 forest sites and compares the outcomes of those managed by human treatment methods, like prescribed fire, and those left untouched.

The scope of the project has meant "There's been a lot of regulatory hurdles," Federal said. This included writing a 400-page Project-Specific Analysis approved by the California Vegetation Treatment Program and a Public Works Plan. Project members streamlined the process, however, by overlapping regulatory processes by creating a pathway that satisfied both California Environmental Quality Act and Coastal Act requirements through a coordinated review.

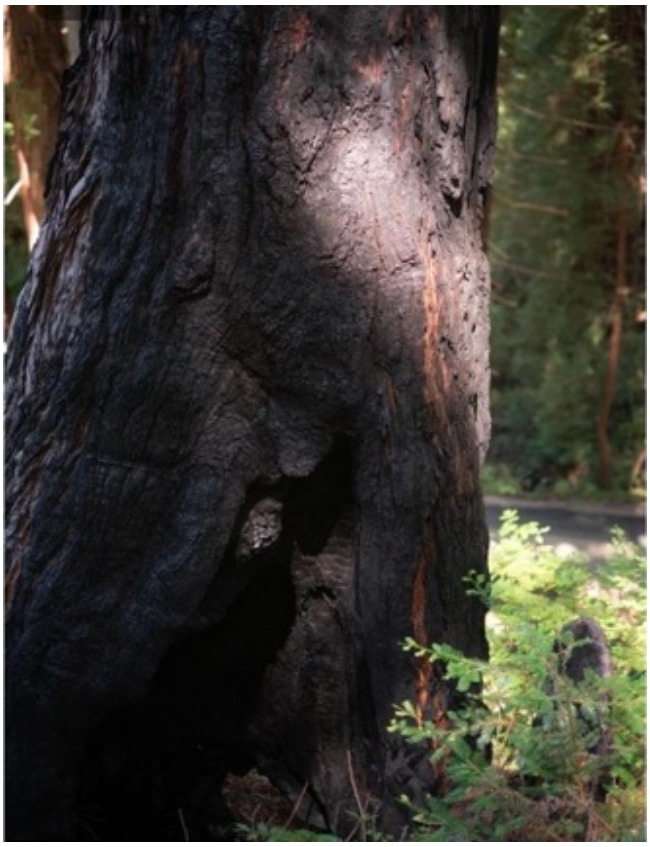
The project currently has no expiration date. Largely grant funded, it will require an ongoing coordinated effort to be sustained. The Project-Specific Analysis alone cost more than $100,000 in consulting fees, Federal said. The project team has already identified potential partners in CalFire, the California Coastal Conservancy, the California Department of Conservation and the Wildlife Conservation Board.

Funding may also hinge on decisions made at the state and federal levels, where budgets are tight and federal funding for environmental-related work is being slashed, Federal said. "If the state has a choice of paying for food insecurity because of a loss of Social Security, instead of preparing for a potential future wildfire, obviously they're going to choose to feed people, right?"

A large part of the effort is public education. For many locals, seeing trees being cut and areas being burned naturally stirs concern and can seem counterintuitive to protecting forests. Some backlash has already come from groups that see conservation differently, Federal said. "I think, in a lot of situations, people are just really trying to advocate for what they think is best," which is where education and addressing misconceptions is critical.

So far, the project is not only unique in its ambitions, but in its modeling of a new kind of framework in response to, and preparation for, disaster.

"I've worked all over the country in natural resource management, and I've never worked anywhere where there was so much trust in your neighbor," Federal said. Part of that is from the land itself that was burned, which is under the purview of a variety of agencies and landowners. That, Federal said, naturally necessitated cross collaboration. Everyone started from "a base of best intentions," which was true from the day the fire started - when neighbors drove around to check on each other - to now, six years later, as restoration efforts kick off. Collaboration "results in getting so much more work done," Federal said.



Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

Other fire prevention efforts are flourishing in the Santa Cruz Mountains. This year's iteration of the Santa Cruz Mountains Regional Priority Plan, released in March, makes that clear. The plan solicits project proposals that relate to natural resource protection and wildfire prevention across the Santa Cruz mountain range. In this year's plan, there were more than 100 submissions for projects, which will be ranked and linked with funding partners.

"There are regional priority plans all across the state, and our region is comparatively small," Federal said. "But we have more projects that have been identified and vetted in our plan than almost any other regional priority plan, and a lot of that is because the neighbors already know each other."

Kathryn Wheeler/Coastside News

The acres of redwood forest ravaged by the CZU fire are likely to show scars of fire for decades, or even centuries in the worst affected areas like Big Basin. Rather than leaving these forests alone to recover, humans are now being seen as a critical part of the restoration process - a lesson that may apply to the prevention of and response to other natural disasters.

"Humans were always a part of this system, and there needs to be some human input in order for the system to maintain itself," said Federal. "And so now it's settling back in that middle of what I call active stewardship where it's not conservation, not preservation, but where we're active stewards, where we are putting input into the system."

---

**Kathryn Wheeler**

Staff Writer

Kathryn has reported for newspapers on both coasts, including The Red Hook Daily Catch, The Seattle Times, The Salish Current, and The Journal of the San Juan Islands. She has worked as a staff writer, freelancer, and photographer. She graduated from Wesleyan University, majoring in "Science in Society". She has also been a teacher and communications director.