Recent projects improve Brooktrails fire safety

By Linda Williams/TWN Staff Writer The Willits News
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CalFire and the Brooktrails Fire Department have worked jointly during the last three years to construct fuel break buffers between extremely flammable vegetation and Brooktrails homes. These projects combined to strategically clear more than 250 acres of overgrown vegetation in the greenbelt along the township perimeter and between hundreds of homes on small lots. Hundreds of home and lot owners in adjacent areas have also privately abated their lots to improve the fire safety of the township.

The Mendocino Fire Safe Council authored all three grant requests with Brooktrails as a focus due to the "very high" fire severity rating and the potential loss of life should a fire occur in the area.

"The limited access, steep slopes, and roads and dwellings interspersed with undeveloped, overgrown parcels surrounded by a natural Greenbelt environment, offer the potential for expensive and large losses to wildland fire," as stated in the Mendocino County Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

A 2006 Bureau of Land Management grant included $16,400 for fuels reduction in Brooktrails and another $29,000 in Sylvandale. The most recent grants for $166,852 from BLM and $36,063 funded by the US Forest Service were primarily for removing overgrown vegetation to provide a buffer along the perimeter with the dense greenbelt and between several hundred homes on small lots.

The combined projects, "will make a huge difference should a wildfire approach Brooktrails from any direction," said CalFire Battalion Chief Dave Barsi. Barsi has recently retired.

"The final results of the project have yet to be tested (thank God), but I have heard mostly positive feedback from the citizenry. There are some who are concerned about their privacy, but most everyone understands the necessity of a project such as this. We have gained considerable defensible space in areas that would challenge our ability to stay and defend without the fuel reduction that was completed. The safety of the firefighters and the local populace has been vastly improved by decreasing the fuel load around structures and streets."

The grants required matching contributions in manpower and management by both CalFire and Brooktrails with most of the work being conducted by CalFire Department of Corrections crews. Clearing in areas unsuitable for these crew was performed by private contractors.

The main efforts of the crews were to create a shaded fuel break by eliminating ground litter, ladder fuels and low branches on public land, expanding the defensible space and protection for nearby homes. The refuse was burned whenever possible and chipped if it could not be burned. Wood from small cut trees and large branches were cut into rounds and stacked for the citizenry to use.

Brooktrails Township is now responsible for maintaining the defensible space established.

"The CalFire crews were very efficient, hard working and well supervised," says Brooktrails Fire Chief Daryl Schoeppner. "We couldn't have completed the project without their help especially in the challenging terrain.

"We should also recognize the work by CalFire and our own fire prevention office Batallion Chief Jon Noyer in making this a successful project."

In the last few years more than half of the wooded lots have also been abated, with priority given to those areas near homes, densely populated areas and along escape routes.

Funding for the Brooktrails Fuels Reduction Project was provided by the US Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management through the Fire Safe California Grants Clearinghouse. The second grant was provided through a

competitive process by the Western States Wildland-Urban Interface Grant Program funded by the US Department of Agriculture through the US Forest Service. The grant application was written jointly by the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council and CalFire.

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