

Collaborative forest project grant seen as boon for economy

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The Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group Cornerstone Project on the Eldorado and Stanislaus National Forests will receive \$730,000 in Collaborative Forest Restoration Landscape Restoration Program funds this fiscal year, the U.S. Forest Service announced Thursday.

The project was one of the 10 new projects selected for inclusion in the competitive, national program. Each project is expected to receive program funds for a decade.

Over the next ten years, the Cornerstone Project is anticipated to bring in more than \$43 million in federal and partner funds. Among other benefits, the project will generate 204 jobs, harvest 1.7 million board feet of timber, restore 32 acres of waterways, reduce fire danger by removing 66,400 tons of biomass and small-diameter trees, reduce sedimentation from 787 miles of road, and restore 400 acres of Native American cultural sites while making local communities safer from damaging and costly fires.

The project will take place on the Amador and Calaveras Ranger Districts in Alpine, Amador, Calaveras and El Dorado counties. The project planning area encompasses nearly 400,000 acres of federal lands.

“With this recognition and funding, our local national forests have moved to the forefront of community-based forest restoration,” said Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky. “It’s a great day for Amador and Calaveras. This is the result of a tremendous amount of work by a very broad coalition of dedicated people from both counties and beyond. While the project has yet to begin, we’re ready to roll up our sleeves and put people to work in the forest.”

The Cornerstone Project was developed in early 2011 by the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group, a community-based forest collaborative group that works to create fire-safe communities, healthy forests and watersheds, and sustainable local economies.

Wilensky and Sierra Nevada Conservancy Executive Director Jim Branham originally convened the group in December 2008. The group’s diverse membership includes forest contractors and other businesses, resource agencies from all levels of government, social service agencies, Native Americans, fire-safe councils, conservation organizations and individuals.

“We’re really excited to be among 10 new projects in the country,” said ACCG and Cornerstone team member Cathy Koos-Breazeal, executive director of the Amador Fire-Safe Council. “We’ve worked very hard together over the last three years to get to this point.”

John Romena of ACCG-member Buena Vista Biomass Power near Ione was also cheered by the news.

“Our Jackson Valley plant needs a reliable and predictable supply of biomass from local forests,” he said. “This 10-year project will make a significant contribution to our operation.”

“This shows what a diverse group of people can do when they join forces and work together for a common goal,” said Katherine Evatt, Foothill Conservancy president and Cornerstone project editor and contributing writer. “Without the broad skills, knowledge and viewpoints of the team and the ACCG, we never could have developed a nationally competitive project.”

Cornerstone Project/ACCG development team members include: Calaveris District Ranger Teresa McClung, Stanislaus National Forest; Amador District Ranger Rick Hopson, El Dorado National Forest; Steve Wilensky, Calaveras County Supervisor; John Hofmann, Hofmann Natural resource Consulting; Cathy Koos-Breazeal, Amador Fire-Safe Council; Mother Lode Field Manager Bill Haigh, Bureau of Land Management; Rick Breeze-Martin, Breeze-Martin Consulting; Brandon Sanders and Mark Stanley, Sierra Nevada Conservancy; Warren Alford, Sierra Forestry Legacy; Katherine Evatt, Foothill Conservancy; U.S. Forest Service staff from the Stanislaus and Eldorado National Forests and Region 5 office; Doug Barber, retired Forest Service district ranger; Robert Smith, Smith Grinding; and Pablo Garza and Laura McCarthy, The Nature Conservancy.

In announcing the funding, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Viscick said, “Through our partnerships with states, communities, tribes and others, we are committed to restoring our forests and bringing jobs to rural America. Whether the threat comes from wildfire, bark beetles or a changing climate, it is vital that we step up our efforts to safeguard our country’s natural resources.”