

Ready and resilient: Fire-scarred Concow/Yankee Hill communities stand up to big storm

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CONCOW -- Last weekend was a big test for residents in the Concow/Yankee Hill area.

In 2008, much of the area was ravaged by fire. Since then, residents have worked to clear trees that may fall, establish new plants and stabilize raw earth.

Then an "atmospheric river" swept through Northern California last weekend, bringing 13.23 inches of rain to the area over three days.

When the torrent arrived, they were ready for more work. Chain saws were fired up to clear fallen wood from roads, and gunk was pulled from blocked waterways.

A long story, still in the making

In 2008, 30,000 acres were burned, about 200 homes in the area were destroyed and one man died.

Years have passed, but damaged trees are still coming down in chunks, and creeks and Concow Lake are brown with runoff.

But it would have been much worse if the community had not been working continuously on fire repair.

Brenda Rightmyer is the managing director of the Yankee Hill Fire Safe Council. A big part of her job is to secure grant money and organize programs to help the community of about 3,000.

Folks are fairly self-reliant. Before the most recent storm, Rightmyer said people had gas in their cars, food in their cupboards and ways to generate power and heat if they were cut off. It's common practice to drive with a chain saw in the car.

Driving through the muddy terrain Wednesday, Rightmyer pointed where trees had fallen or dropped limbs during the most recent storms.

With all the fresh wood piled on the side of the road, it's miraculous she had not heard of trees falling into homes or cars, she said. But this can be credited to a lot of work by a lot of people over the past four years.

Erosion

The landscape in the area is sloped, with creeks and streams carrying rainfall from higher elevations to the valley.

Soon after the fire devastation, erosion was expected. At one point land management inspectors said a hillside at the end of Yellow Wood Road would likely slide.

Virginia Beaudry lived there in 2008 and lost her home to fire. She rebuilt in the same location.

Over the past four years, at least 100 bales of rice straw were affixed to the slope. Rightmyer recalled a work day when six volunteers dragged the bales into place.

Last week the hillside remained. Only a few bales were visible because most had been buried in soil — proof they had done the job.

Clearing roads of wood

By Wednesday, most of the water in the area had receded or was traveling safely within swollen creekbeds.

Just a few days before, many of these roads were dangerous to pass. Downhill from Beaudry's house, a dead trout was left behind on the road, washed up when the waters surged.

Rightmyer said the days during and after the rains included countless small jobs to remove fallen trees and limbs.

Up the way near Hoffman Road, a resident had lost a stately cedar tree, but thankfully no power lines were snapped. The massive ball of roots now faced the driveway. Some neighbors helped repair her fence and clear away large chunks of the tree.

Evidence of good land management

This property on Hoffman Road includes many trees that survived the fires four years ago. Most of the trunks are black, where the fires passed through.

Rightmyer said this is a great example of how property owners can manage their land for less fire damage.

The owner had her trees spaced and trimmed regularly, with few bushes below — a park-like setting. The area around her house was swept of dry foliage and well-manicured. When fire arrived, it moved through at a low intensity, but the trees and structures remained.

Just across the road, the forest was thick and the fire was intense. Since then, the land has been clear-cut.

Living in a changing landscape

Reseeding projects and the natural return of plants has helped keep hillsides in place. Meanwhile, tree seedlings have been planted, often through projects involving 4-H, Cub Scouts and other service groups.

Measuring the success of these efforts is imprecise, Rightmyer said. "Was it just luck or the timing that made the difference?" Or was it all the efforts to prepare for an inevitable big storm?

In some ways, living in the area is like "Russian roulette," Rightmyer said.

"Standing deadwood" are trees that will fall in the future but currently remain vertical. Also, trees that have already fallen can be taken over by grass and plants if not removed. This means the dead tree below could ignite if another fire reaches the area.

PG&E is responsible for upright trees near power lines, and more than 100,000 have been removed in the past few years, she said.

Resident resiliency

During the most recent storms, people in the Concow/Yankee Hill area had warning. Experience told them they might not make it out of their driveways, and shouldn't expect to be able to make it to town.

"To have the power go out is not new to them," Rightmyer said, and "erosion is now the new normal."

At her own cozy home overlooking a small canyon, she has kerosene lamps on her fireplace mantle, and the lamps get used.

Another Fire Safe Council employee said she fires up her generator when the lights go out, and can watch TV in dim light.

In some areas where water rose past the road, people were prepared "to shelter at their homes," rather than try to get to town.

Clearing away the wood

Removing dead or dying trees was not an easy task. The timber industry impacts whether there is a market for wood for building material (known as saw logs) and in 2008 the market was bad.

Had it been a different economic time, tree salvage companies would have paid a small amount to property owners in return for hauling away usable wood.

But in 2008, the trees remained until landowners had a chance to clear them away, at their own cost.

Removal still continues.

The past two years the community has been able to organize several mass tree-chipping projects. One plot of land almost entirely destroyed by fire was used to pile up the partially-charred logs.

Last year, 11 truckloads of wood were chipped and hauled to a cogeneration plant (which turns wood into energy). This year, 17 truckloads were shipped out, with the final load just days before the recent storm.

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