

'This is good fire': Controlled burn illuminates sky above Tulare County,

preserves sequoia groves

By Joshua Yeager

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Sequoia forest officials are intentionally burning hundreds of acres of land above Badger to protect giant sequoia groves and help remove thousands of dead and fallen trees from the landscape.

The Big Stump Redwood Mountain Fuels Restoration Project began Monday and caused some Tulare County residents to express alarm on social media, with large mountain flames visible from as far as Woodlake and Exeter.

Rangers said residents have nothing to fear, however.

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More than 80 firefighters from the Forest Service and Cal Fire are overseeing the controlled burn, which spans 750 acres across the Hume Lake Ranger District, including Big Stump and Redwood Mountain Giant Sequoia Groves. The project will run through the end of February and has been in the works since 2019.

"I can understand why people would look up, see the flames, and be concerned after the KNP Complex. But this is good fire that will prevent future wildfires from burning as intensely," District Ranger Jeremy Dorsey told the Times-Delta.

Rangers treated 175 acres on Monday before a winter storm temporarily halted the operation, Dorsey said. During the prescribed burn, dozens of firefighters follow the contours of the mountain with diesel-powered drip torches, carefully lighting fallen trees and brush on the forest floor.

Fire lines and patrols surround the area to prevent the burn from escaping the project area.

"The winter weather has slowed us down for a couple of days but gave us an additional buffer. The snow and moisture give us more security to hold the fire within our lines," he said.

Controlled burns are necessary to remove a record buildup of dead and desiccated trees and plant matter — what firefighters call fuel — from the landscape. The area Dorsey and his crews are treating now hasn't experienced fire in more than a century, he said.

The accumulation of fuel — created by drought conditions and the elimination of fire from the Sierra landscape by a historically overzealous Forest Service — is a key cause of mega blazes that have wreaked havoc across the Sierra and killed up to 20% of the world's mature giant sequoia population.

Groves treated with prescribed fire are much more resilient to wildfires, such as the KNP Complex which torched portions of the Redwood Mountain sequoia grove last fall.

The Redwood Mountain project will remove many of those surface and ladder fuels, causing future fires to burn at a much lower intensity in the treated area. While the famed sequoia monarchs require fire to reproduce and clear the forest floor of competitors, high-intensity fire can spread to their crowns and incinerate them.

"The KNP Complex burned into three of the units we're treating, and the difference is stark. There are no trees left where the KNP burned," he said. "The Redwood Mountain project will reduce the intensity of future fires, which helps protect and preserve sequoia groves."

The project is funded in part through California propositions 1 and 68, as well as a \$900,000 grant awarded to the Great Basin Institute.

Residents can expect to see smoke and, in some cases flames, through the end of February. Burn bosses are working with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to mitigate smoke impacts to nearby communities which have had otherwise clean air through the month.

Joshua Yeager is a reporter with the Visalia Times-Delta and a Report for America corps member. He covers Tulare County news deserts with a focus on the environment and local governments.