

ASHLAND DAILY TIDINGS

RESTORATION INITIATION

Watershed thinning begins

Lomakatsi crews began work Monday on 7,600-acre project to reduce combustibles



Lomakatsi Restoration Project crewperson Lucas McNaughton pauses while clearing limbs.

By Vickie Aldous

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Sawdust flew Monday in the Ashland watershed as crews from the Lomakatsi Restoration Project started long-anticipated thinning work.

Some cut down small trees, while others cleared vines, brush and other flammable materials around larger trees.

Aaron Nauth used the stumps of small trees to clamber up a slippery 70-degree slope, then tossed the cut material into a pile, being careful not to squash a patch of huckleberry bushes he identified earlier in the day.

To an untrained eye, the flurry of activity looked chaotic, but the Lomakatsi workers were using their training and following careful guidelines on the first day of on-the-ground work for the 7,600-acre Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project.

Subcontractors and workers from Lomakatsi — a nonprofit, Ashland-based ecological restoration organization — will spend the next decade thinning flammable materials in the Ashland watershed and neighboring watersheds on U.S. Forest Service land.

"We're doing fire risk reduction, but we're also doing restoration," said Nauth, Lomakatsi's workforce operations director

Thinning ground fuels around large madrone, pine and fir trees reduces competition for moisture and sunlight, encouraging the remaining trees to grow larger.

After creating several piles of cut trees, branches and brush, Lomakatsi workers draped sheets of heavy brown paper over the piles, then added more material to hold the paper in place. The paper will protect the center of the piles from rain, keeping them dry enough to burn next winter or spring.

On a normal forest thinning project, crews would put black plastic on the debris piles, then come back later to burn the piles — plastic and all.

Using paper instead of plastic eliminates the pollutants created by burning plastic, said Ashland Fire & Rescue Chief John Karns, who was on the site on Monday.

The city of Ashland partnered with the U.S. Forest Service, Lomakatsi and The Nature Conservancy, spending several years crafting an ecologically sensitive thinning project.

As Lomakatsi workers turned off their chainsaws to pile debris and cover the piles, the chatter of Ashland Creek could be heard at the bottom of the steep slope.

Nauth pointed out that not all of the cut trees were going into the burn piles.

"We leave large wood across the slope for erosion control," he said. "We're not sweeping the forest floor clean."

The hillside became noticeably more open as the Lomakatsi workers took out brush and small trees. A large maple stood out, along with towering madrones and conifers. A few scraggly incense cedars, deliberately left standing, emerged with plenty of new room to grow.

Darren Borgias, ecologist and southwest Oregon program manager for The Nature Conservancy, said someday the watershed will be healthy enough for prescribed burns, and perhaps under specific circumstances, even the return of wildfires.

"These guys are the fire — coming through in the place of fire (on) this go-around," Borgias said as he watched Lomakatsi workers thin the forest on a slope below him. "The big trees survive because they're fire resistant, and the small trees and shrubs are killed."

Lomakatsi has 10 workers on the project this spring, and then will take a break from on-the-ground work during the summer when fire season arrives and limits work in the woods, said Marko Bey, Lomakatsi Executive codirector.

With the return of fall rains, Lomakatsi expects to have 50 workers on site, he said.

The project has attracted \$4.5 million in federal economic stimulus funding. The Forest Service has pledged to provide additional money through its normal budgeting process to see the 10-year project through.

Crews hope to finish 2,100 acres of the 7,600-acre project by the summer of 2012.

Work began Monday despite a lawsuit filed by Ashland City Councilor Eric Navickas and Arizona ecologist Jay Lininger, a former Rogue Valley resident. The two filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in January as private citizens.

In their lawsuit, they asked that all work be allowed to proceed in the wildland-urban interface — the forested area closest to Ashland.

"I'm really glad to see work on the ground moving forward," Navickas said. "We've always supported non-commercial thinning."

Many of Navickas and Lininger's concerns focus on future thinning that would occur high in the Ashland municipal watershed.

In their lawsuit, Navickas and Lininger said the project would harm riparian areas, cause erosion, hurt water quality, degrade habitat for Pacific fisher and northern spotted owl and cut into an old growth forest reserve and a roadless area.

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Bravlio Cortez, who works for Lomakatsi Restoration Project, cuts a log Monday during the first day of thinning in the Ashland watershed.