



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Less-Brushy Look Staves off Robbers Fire for Brushy Creek Circle Homes

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Jody Schnell
Brushy Creek Circle Landowner

On July 15, 2012, the Robbers Fire licked its way up the canyon bordering Jody Schnell’s home on 220 acres of private forestland near Foresthill in Placer County. Schnell’s family evacuated and held their breath, waiting for the news to come.

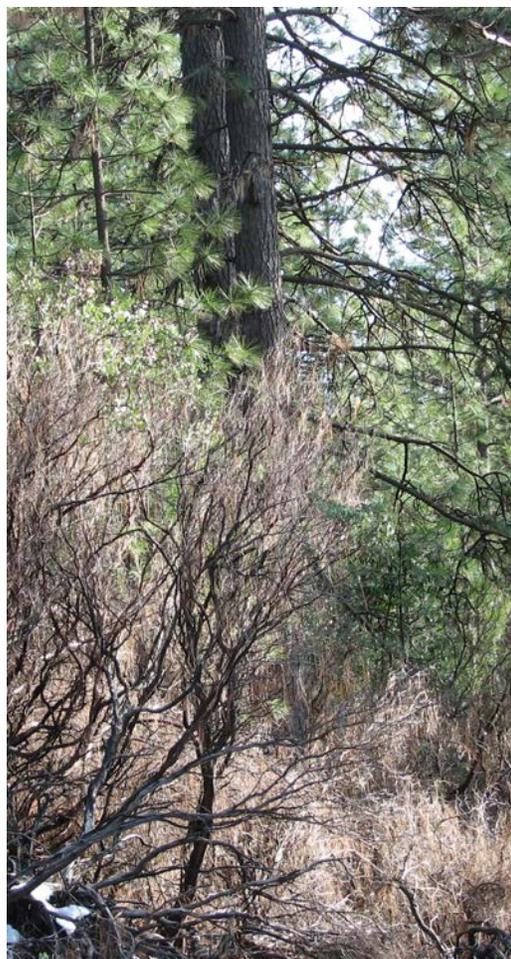


(From left to right) NRCS District Conservationist Mike Brenner and Landowners Jody and Jeff Schnell walk along the fire line - bordering their property. The tree and brush thinning work was considered instrumental by fire fighters in fighting the fire.

The news was merciful. Firefighters decided that Schnell’s property on Brushy Creek Circle was an ideal place for a staging area and used it to make a stand, set a backfire, and battle the advancing blaze back down the canyon. Schnell and her eleven neighbors on Brushy Creek Circle were largely spared fire damage. CalFire Battalion Chief Chris Paulus called it a “game changer.”

What exactly did the Brushy Creek Circle landowners do that made such a difference?

Firefighters - and others who look closely - will notice that the properties of the twelve adjacent Brushy Creek Circle landowners have a different look than much of the surrounding and densely vegetated land consumed by the Robbers Fire. The land of Schnell and the other Brushy Creek residents is, well, less brushy these days. In the past twelve years each of the landowners have done (and/or are doing) work with local conservationists to tame the tangle of trees and underbrush and give the forest the room needed for the sunlight to penetrate, the remaining trees to grow healthy, and the space to better resist an advancing fire (see sidebar for forest health practices).



Heavy brush occupying forest land may be the result of a previous catastrophic fire.

“When the forest fuels have been treated, it provides greater safety for the firefighters,” said Paulus. “You can look around and see

what action you will need to take to fight the fire and you can move much more readily to attack it by both ground and air,” he says. The Brushy Creek properties provided that kind of refuge.

The work is a 50:50 partnership by landowners and Placer County’s NRCS Service Center office, as well as the Placer County Resource Conservation District (RCD). NRCS and the RCD provide landowners with aerial and topographic maps, soils descriptions and a list of recommended conservation and engineering practices to make their surrounding forestland healthier and more fire resistant. All of the planning and technical services are free of charge and to put the plans into action there may be financial assistance available through NRCS’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), that pays about half of the costs. In Placer County, approximately 80 percent of the roughly \$900,000 in annual EQIP funding goes for the type of forest health practices undertaken by the residents of Brushy Creek Circle, according to NRCS District Conservationist Mike Brenner.

When coordinated, the work of adjacent landowners magnifies the belt of safety for the entire community, agrees Brenner and Paulus. So in 2008 when Brenner and Soil Conservationist Carol Rutenbergs noticed a cluster of forest landowners in the Brushy Creek community had done significant forest health work they sent letters to the remaining residents telling them about the technical assistance and the

opportunities through EQIP. The RCD helped with outreach to the community and the final contract to begin forest health work began this year.

“The forestry work done on Brushy Creek definitely had a significant impact on the Robbers Fire,” added Paulus. “Had the work not been done, the fire would have burned into the housing area and maybe beyond ... more acres would have been burned and the intensity would have been greater. The work the landowners did (with NRCS and the RCD) made a major difference in controlling the Robbers Fire and protecting their homes.”

Every year forest landowners have to balance the competing demands for their time and resources, and while most realize the value of forest thinning, they may not know how to do it properly, have the resources to do it, or even know where to look for help. Jody Schnell recommends visiting the local conservation office to begin the journey of building a healthier forest around your home.

“I’m thrilled with the results,” says Schnell. “One of the CalFire officers told me, “If you hadn’t done this work, it would have been a whole different ballgame up here.”

That’s one ballgame we would like to sit out.

Landowners interested in doing forest health improvement or other voluntary conservation assistance on private land are encouraged to contact their local NRCS or RCD. Visit www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov for more information and for a list of office locations.

Popular NRCS Conservation Forestry Activities



TREE PLANTING: Establishing trees by planting seedlings or cuttings, direct seeding, or natural regeneration.



FOREST STAND IMPROVEMENT: Treating areas made to improve the composition, structure, condition, health, and growth of even- or uneven-aged stands. Smaller trees in an immature stand may be removed to provide adequate growing space, and improve the form of the remaining trees.



FUEL BREAK: Creating an area where the vegetation and debris have been reduced and/or modified to control or reduce the risk of the spread of fire.



WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES: Providing and managing upland habitats and connectivity within the landscape for wildlife through treatment of the habitat. This enables movement, or provides shelter, cover, and food to sustain wild animals that inhabit the area during a portion of their life cycle.



SLASH DISPOSAL Treating woody plant residues created during forestry activities to reduce hazardous fuels, the risk of harmful insects and disease while maintaining air quality, improving access to forage for grazing and improving soil organic matter.