



Eight years after Rim Fire, partners remain united for reforestation

August 17th marks the 8th anniversary of the Rim Fire, which, at the time, was the third largest fire in the history of California. The fire started at the confluence of the Tuolumne and Clavey rivers and burning 257,314 acres in forest and shrublands including 154,530 acres on the Stanislaus National Forest.

PARTNERSHIPS

After the fire, the Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions (YSS) collaborative group, an independent collaborative representing over 26 industry, environmental organizations, and recreation



Figure 1. Retired USFS Rim Fire Restoration Coordinator Maria Bench discussing effective fuels reduction at a mastication site in the Rim Fire area during a YSS and Stanislaus National Forest Rim Fire Restoration field trip, June 30, 2021. (Photo credit: Traci Allen)

organizations, worked closely with the Stanislaus National Forest, crafting alternatives for the Rim Fire Recovery Environmental Impact Statement (2014) and the Rim Fire Reforestation EIS (2016).

Carolyn Lott, YSS Leadership Team member said, “There were many competing ideas on what types of treatments would produce the most effective results. YSS helped broker common ground among different interests and helped narrow the alternatives.”

“When we planned for Rim Fire reforestation, we were looking about 60 to 100 years into the future to picture our end goal to create a resilient mixed conifer forest,” said

Maria Benech, retired USFS Rim Fire Restoration Coordinator. The Forest adopted a “Community Alternative” approach to test a mix of different treatment types to promote biodiversity, enhance wildlife habitat, and fire resiliency as priorities driving the reforestation plan.

FUNDING SUPPORT

With signed decisions in place, the Forest was ready to move forward on implementation but lacked the funding. The State of California Department of Housing and Community Development applied for and won a \$26 million grant from the Housing Urban Development (HUD) Natural Disaster Resiliency Competition, the first grant to launch forest recovery of the Rim Fire.

Tuolumne River Trust and Tuolumne County on behalf of YSS have also successfully raised over \$18 million from various funding sources including the California Wildlife Conservation Board, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy Proposition 68 and 84 grants, the CAL FIRE California Climate Investments Forest Health program, the National Forest Foundation, and the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance. Funding supports Rim Fire fuels reduction, reforestation, aspen regeneration, deer habitat enhancement, meadows and stream restoration, and trail and campground improvements.

In total, partners have raised roughly \$46 million to support Rim Fire recovery efforts on the Forest.

RIM FIRE RESTORATION PROJECTS

Salvaging dead trees and removing roadside hazard trees was the first step on a trajectory toward reforestation. In some areas post fire, there were hundreds of tons of dead woody fuel per acre. Removing dead trees in selected units reduced fuel build-up that would otherwise significantly increase the intensity of the next wildfire to sweep across the same landscape. Salvage logging allowed dead wood to be repurposed and promoted public and firefighter safety in areas heavily dense with standing snags and half fallen trees.

YSS also supported salvaging dead trees to capture the economic value and stimulate the local economy. John Buckley, Executive Director of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center and Vice-Chairman of YSS said, “YSS successfully negotiated between non-local environmental groups and timber organizations to allow a middle-ground solution to the salvage logging debate to make use of the dead wood. By YSS working to reduce controversy, that reduces the potential for future battles. We aim to find ways that people can work together to find consensus.”

Rim Fire projects also include fuels reduction treatments (site preparation, mastication of downed wood and shrubs, piling and burning) to promote resilience to future fire events. Removing encroaching conifers in aspens stands cultivates natural aspen regeneration, improves riparian corridors, and enhances wildlife habitat for deer, mammals, and small birds.

Through YSS, and other partner support, the Stanislaus National Forest produced 155 million board feet of forest products from salvage logging, accomplished 7,899 acres of fuels reduction treatments, and planted 4,625 acres of trees in the Rim Fire.

Rim Fire restoration activities to increase fire resiliency, promote biodiversity, and enhance wildlife habitat



Figure 2. Before fuels reduction treatment, Rim Fire



Figure 3. After fuels reduction treatment, Rim Fire



Figure 4. Conifer encroachment in an aspen stand, Rim Fire



Figure 5. After conifer removal to allow for aspen stand regeneration, Rim Fire

YSS and its members are still actively engaged 8-years after the Rim Fire, attending field trips to learn by observing projects on the ground and pursuing funding opportunities to continue reforestation into the future. “The Forest Service’s limited budgets and limited staff capacity underscore the need for stakeholders to add value above and beyond what the Forest can do on its own. Thousands of acres are already approved and planned for reforestation treatments. YSS is trying to find the funding to turn those treatments into a vigorously growing forest,” said Buckley.