

FY23 CONGRESSIONALLY DESIGNATED FUNDING REQUEST



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Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Extension

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Emergency Services

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PONDEROSA WEST GRASS VALLEY DEFENSE ZONE EXTENSION PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Despite increased investment in wildfire risk mitigation, 2021 marked the first time in recorded California history that a wildfire burned over the Sierra Crest – and this happened not once, but twice – with the Dixie and Caldor Fires. In total, the Dixie Fire burned for three months across five counties and nearly 1 million acres, destroying the entire rural town of Greenville and over 1,300 structures in the process. When the River Fire ignited in Nevada County on August 4, residents had been under the siege of smoke for an entire summer and catastrophe seemed inevitable. The River Fire incinerated 142 structures and 2,600 acres in nine days. This “close call” has been a brutal reminder that in the absence of aggressive wildfire risk mitigation actions it is not a question of “if” but rather “when” a megafire will strike Nevada County.

In 2019, Phase I of the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone was identified by California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and California Governor Newsom as one of the State’s **highest priority** fuel reduction projects. This 1,200-acre shaded fuel break project wrapped up on March 15, 2022. The County now aims to leverage and extend the protections afforded by this project by maintaining and doubling the current treatment area. The proposed Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Extension Project would conduct second pass implementation on 1,200 acres and expand the treatment area by an additional 1,220-acres, anchoring the original defense zone project. The project will reduce catastrophic wildfire risk and promote forest health while creating safer public evacuation and wildfire suppression routes.

Hwy-20 bisects the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone area from east to west and in case of emergency would be a critical artery for evacuation from nearby communities including Grass Valley, Rough and Ready, Penn Valley, and Lake Wildwood. Within the 1.5 miles of the Project boundary there are more than 3,000 improved parcels in these communities and surrounding areas. Maintaining access to critical roadways in the vicinity would ensure that people would be able to safely evacuate, and that fire suppression equipment and personnel would have access to safely combat wildfire in the vicinity or other nearby populated areas.

Nevada County’s Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP) classifies wildfire as having a HIGH probability of future occurrences in the County, which means there is a 100% chance of occurrence in next year, or it happens every year. The plan also designates the geographic extent of the threat of wildfire to be extensive; wildfire has the capacity to impact 50-100% of the planning area. The plan’s Hazard Identification Assessment concludes wildfire has a magnitude severity of Catastrophic. In other words, wildfire has the potential to result in more than 50% of property severely damaged, facilities being shut down for more than 30 days, as well as multiple deaths and injuries. Action must be taken now to prevent future loss.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

According to CAL FIRE’s Fire Hazard Severity Zone map, over 90% of Nevada County is living within the high or very high fire hazard severity zone. This Project leverages and extends millions of dollars in investment by state, federal, and local partners to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire by treating 2,420-acres in a high fire severity zone. At completion the project will provide protection to a thriving rural community of over 100,000 people in a County widely recognized for its historic Gold Rush significance and home to two of California’s 14 Cultural Districts. The Project has been identified by CAL FIRE’s Nevada-Yuba-Placer Unit as a

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priority project in the 2021 Strategic Fire Plan, is the top priority project for Western Nevada County per the Community Wildfire Protection Plan and has broad-based community support - **but this work cannot be completed without federal support.**

PROJECT BUDGET

The total budget for this three-year project (4/2022-9/2025) is \$7,314,032 which represents funding strategically leveraged across state, federal, and local partners as follows:

1. County of Nevada currently has a proposal under review with FEMA (\$3,451,226; award timeline 6/2022-6/2025) which in combination with the required match provided by Cal OES PrepareCA Match (\$862,806) will provide the bulk of the funding for the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Extension Project.
2. For Project Year 1 the County has been approved for \$750,000 in FY22 Federal Earmark funds, which will be stacked against \$750,000 in local matching funds (a combination of general funds and PG&E settlement funds).

In combination, item 1 and item 2 will result in 1,200 acres of newly constructed shaded fuel break.

3. **This FY23 earmark request of \$750,000 is for Project Year 2**, which will be stacked against state matching funds in the amount of \$750,000 (proposed State funding from Sierra Nevada Conservancy Forest and Watershed Health Grant Program and/or CAL FIRE Wildfire Prevention Grant Program; should State funding not be secured, the County is prepared to identify local match). The FY23 federal funds will be used to support second-pass implementation on 1,200 acres of shaded fuel break initially treated in 2019/2020.

PROJECT TIMELINE / READINESS

The duration of the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Extension Project is 36 months, with an anticipated start date of April 2022 and an anticipated end date of June 2025. To date, 1,666 acres of the total 2,420-acre project area are shovel ready; right of entry forms for the remaining 754 acres of privately-owned land will be collected upon award of FEMA funding.

We are requesting FY23 funds in the amount of \$750,000 which will be obligated to this project for use between the dates of 9/1/22-9/31/23. This Project will build on and extend the Ponderosa West Phase I Project that was funded by CAL FIRE (in the amount of \$3.5 million) and which wrapped up March 15, 2022. In total this project will construct 1,220 acres of new shaded fuel break and conduct second-pass treatment on 1,200 additional acres.

EVIDENCE OF LOCAL SUPPORT

Strategic Plans:

[Nevada County Local Hazard Mitigation Plan](#)

[Nevada County Community Wildfire Protection Plan](#)

Nevada Yuba Placer Unit Plan

Community Letters of Support: Nine letters of Support for the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone.

Media Coverage:

[Nevada County starts work on Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Project, The Union, Grass Valley, July 9, 2019](#)

[Ponderosa West, the Grass Valley Defense Zone Project, closer to reality, YubaNet, Nevada City, July 12, 2019](#)

[Work Begins on Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Shaded Fuel Break, YubaNet, Nevada City, August 21, 2019](#)

[Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Project ahead of schedule, setting ambitious pace for 2020, YubaNet, Nevada City, January 7, 2020](#)

[Ponderosa defense zone nearing completion: More shaded fuel breaks in the works, \(PHOTO GALLERY\), The Union, Grass Valley, October 1, 2020](#)

[In the zone: Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone nearly finished, more fuel abatement projects to follow, The Union, Grass Valley, April 15, 2021](#)

Film:

[The Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Project](#)

Resolutions Pertaining to Support of Phase I of the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone:

1. [Res No. 19-402](#): Resolution approving a contract between the County of Nevada and CAL FIRE for the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Project, in the amount of \$1,000,000, for the period July 9, 2019 through December 31, 2020, authorizing the Director of Emergency Services to execute the contract, and directing the Auditor-Controller to amend the Fiscal Year 2019/20 Office of Emergency Services budget. (4/5 affirmative vote required) (Districts III and IV)
2. [Res No. 19-403](#): Resolution accepting a grant from CAL FIRE in the amount of \$2,536,477 for the Ponderosa West Grass Valley Defense Zone Project, for the period July 9, 2019 through March 15, 2022, and authorizing the Director of Emergency Services to execute Grant Agreement No. 5GG18114. (Emergency Services) (Districts III and IV)

JUSTIFICATION FOR FEDERAL SUPPORT

Federal investment is necessary to mitigate wildfire risk in strategic locations that are fundamental to protecting the safety and well-being of Nevada County residents. Neither the County nor the State have the resources to confront this problem head on without federal support. Every federal dollar invested in mitigation reduces the potential that federal dollars will need to be expended after the fact in disaster response and recovery – when the damage has already been done. Furthermore, as the federal government is the single

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largest landowner in the region (the 1,300 square mile Tahoe National Forest is headquartered in Nevada County) every dollar invested in preventing catastrophic wildfire serves to protect federally managed forest resources. FY23 funds will be a key piece of a carefully crafted funding portfolio designed to mitigate wildfire risk in a location recognized by both experts and the community as strategically necessary.

PROJECT LEADS

The Office of Emergency Services (OES) is the County department that is project sponsor.

The County staff member acting as the project manager is Paul Cummings, Program Manager of the Office of Emergency Services.

PROJECT CHARTER

This project does not have a charter.

GRANTEE LEGAL NAME

Nevada County, Office of Emergency Services (OES)

PROJECT POINT OF CONTACT

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