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April 10, 2020

Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District
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RE: Green Waste Removal Program to Reduce Smoke Impacts During COVID-19 Respiratory Pandemic

Problem

Nevada County has an overabundance of vegetation which makes it vulnerable to wildfire for a significant portion of the year. Unfortunately, the high cost of removal of this vegetation remains a significant barrier for many property owners when it comes to fuels reduction. Property owners who want to be good stewards of their land and reduce the threat of wildfire are met with steep fees for disposal at the local transfer stations. Alternatively, residents may choose to dispose of their green waste by burning their material. While burn piles may provide a cost-effective solution for processing this material, it is not an ideal means of disposal as COVID-19 wreaks respiratory havoc across the globe. As coronavirus continues to be transmitted through the community it is imperative that the respiratory impacts of burning be considered. Additionally, as the numbers of COVID-19 positive patients grow and continue to stress the healthcare system, escaped burns could put an even greater burden on first responders.

Solution

Funding from the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District would make it possible for the County of Nevada, in partnership with the Fire Safe Council, to provide alternatives to mitigate particulate emissions during this respiratory health crisis and reduce the threat of wildfire before summer.

Green Waste Disposal Program

County of Nevada and the Fire Safe Council will provide Nevada County residents access to free residential green waste removal this spring. This program is a partnership with property owners. Residents invest sweat equity in their homes and along their roadways, and the County and Fire Safe Council provide a free means of disposal, one that does not jeopardize air quality.

This year, green waste disposal will be available to property owners for three weeks in spring. Fire Safe Council is partnering with the County of Nevada to provide community disposal at three secure locations in Western Nevada County. This year, the program will provide an opportunity for property owners to pick up free wood chips to help with soil enrichment, erosion control, weed suppression, and moisture retention outside of the first 30 feet from their home per defensible space best practices. In Eastern Nevada County, County of Nevada is coordinating with the Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal to offer similar programming. Both the County of Nevada and Fire Safe Council have a history of successfully partnering.

In the spring of 2019, more than 1,000,000 pounds of green waste were collected and the program received widespread positive feedback from the community.

Funding from the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District would provide resources to more than double the impact of the existing program. Additional funding would allow disposal at 3 community sites, 3 days a week, over 6 consecutive weeks. In terms of green waste disposal for Eastern Nevada County, funding would provide for approximately 5-6 weekends of green waste disposal for property owners. With more than 500 tons collected in Western Nevada County alone last year, we are confident that providing an alternative to burning and expensive transfer station fees would incentivize the community to conduct defensible space clearing around their homes and roadways.

Access & Functional Needs Program

The Access and Functional Needs Program (AFN) assists low-income seniors and disabled persons with creating defensible space at no cost. These individuals are both physically and financially unable to meet the requirements of the County's Hazardous Vegetation Ordinance and are considered at-risk. Individuals applying for service must qualify by documenting their age (>65) or physical disability, by medical doctor, and be under the established low-income criteria for Nevada County as determined annually. Individuals are served on a first-come, first-served basis. Fire Safe Council staff in coordination with licensed contractor crews are utilized to implement defensible space as prescribed by the County's Hazardous Vegetation Ordinance.

Additional funding would provide 15 low income residents with access and functional needs to receive defensible space clearing around their homes. This program has been unfunded for several years, and with 26% of the Nevada County population being 65 years of age and over, we know the need to assist individuals with physical limitations far exceeds existing resources.

Defensible Space Chipping Program

The objective of the defensible space chipping program is to provide drive-by chipping service for residents to incentivize hazardous fuels reductions around homes and roadways. Roughly 75% of Nevada County's roadways are privately maintained and most are severely overgrown with hazardous fuel.

This program is currently supported by a grant which covers the cost of inmate crews who provide the chipping services. The inmate labor crew rate is far below that of hired staff. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, the inmate labor program has been paused, even on essential operations such as wildfire mitigation. This has put the chipping program entirely on hold, as there is not adequate funding to compensate staff at market value. Additional funding from the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District would provide 15 weeks of free chipping to the community at a critical time this spring, before the arrival of fire season. The chipping crew would work 4 days per week, allocating 1 day per week in Eastern Nevada County.