

VENTURA

Ventura County nabs more than \$1.4 million to lower risk of wildfires



Wes Woods II

Ventura County Star

Aug. 20, 2022, 6:00 a.m. PT

More than \$1.4 million in grants were approved for Ventura County wildfire prevention projects, with a majority going to the Ventura River watershed and Foster Park area to eradicate non-native plants.

The funds were part of a larger, statewide program totaling \$118 million for 144 projects awarded by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection or Cal Fire. Ventura County received grants for six projects, the agency announced this summer.

Cal Fire awarded more than \$777,400 for the Ventura River watershed and Foster Park projects, located in Ventura and Ojai.

Dig deeper: [Ventura County's city-by-city guide to water-use restrictions amid California drought](#)

"We have a path to fully eradicating this nasty, invasive species from our watershed," said Vivon Crawford, Ojai Valley Land Conservancy's restoration program director, about the giant reed called arundo. "It's an invasive species but it's also a huge fire hazard and to show this interagency coordination and interest in something that's a huge impact in our watershed, that was pretty exciting."

Crawford, who wrote the grant application, said she anticipates getting the money to start the project this fall. Notification of the award came in June.

OVLC is working with the Ventura County Resource Conservation District, Pax Environmental and Ventura County Parks on the project, she said.

The arundo, according to a Cal Fire [project description](#), can grow as high as 30 feet tall and displace native vegetation, reduce wildlife habitat and deplete water supplies.

"It basically takes over," Crawford said. "It doesn't allow for any space for any natural, riparian vegetation like willows and things like that."

She said removing arundo is a multi-year effort so it will likely be a decade or more before everything is removed.

"It'll be a long time but now we know we have a path to do that," Crawford said.

A recent project in San Antonio Creek in Ventura County to remove arundo took five years, but there is still work that needs to be done, including making sure it doesn't return, she said.

Between the Ventura County Watershed Protection District and OVLC, more than 200 acres of arundo have been removed from the upper watershed to date, Crawford said. For this grant, arundo will be removed in an area of approximately 70 acres.

The mouth of the Ventura River watershed is located at the Pacific Ocean in the city of Ventura and snakes its way up Highway 33 and spreads outward and encompasses the city of Ojai to the Los Padres National Forest, Crawford said.

The second largest Cal Fire grant of \$358,400 went to Soule Park in Ojai for tree mitigation and replacement. In recent years, according to a project description, more than 82 sycamore and maple trees have died because of severe drought.

Trees receive water regularly but their root structure is so deep that surface water can't reach the stems creating an area of heightened fire danger, according to the project description.

The Ventura County Fire Department received \$196,436 in grant funds to purchase fuel reduction equipment to combat fires in the county.

Ventura County Fire Department Capt. Brian McGrath said it was important to get new equipment, in particular a masticator, which makes it easier and more efficient to manage vegetation with newer technology.

"It goes on the end of tractors and pulverizes the brush alongside where it's putting it in ... it's much better than using a chain saw and coming back with a chipper," McGrath said.

Also included is a small skid steer that will be used by the fire department's hand crews and heavy equipment operation to complete wildfire prevention to 846,000 residents within Ventura County, according to a project description.

Another local area that received funding was Bell Canyon for two grants totaling more than \$82,800 for a fuel and vegetation management plan and an ongoing chipper program.

Oak Park received \$9,700 to develop a community wildfire risk assessment.

Wes Woods II covers West County for the Ventura County Star. Reach him at wesley.woodsii@vcstar.com, 805-437-0262 or @JournoSes.