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Clearing a Road to Recovery After the Loma Fire

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Ed Orre, Santa Clara County's Division Chief and Unit Forester with Cal Fire, peers into a plastic culvert along Loma Chiquita Road on March 14, 2018. The culvert melted during 2016's Loma Fire, which scorched the remote region in the Santa Cruz Mountains. (Jennnifer Lemman/Bay Area News Group)



Thick patches of French broom surround Ed Orre as he plucks knobcone pine cones from a fallen tree along Loma Casa Road on March 14, 2018. After the 2016 Loma Fire, exotic plant species like French broom and fire-adapted native species like knobcone pine quickly sprouted along the burn scar. (Jennnifer Lemman/Bay Area News Group)



Ed Orre holds the seed of a knobcone pine tree in his hand along Loma Chiquita Road on March 14, 2018. (Jennnifer Lemman/Bay Area News Group)



Ed Orre picks up the cone of a knob cone pine on March 14, 2018. He is concerned that dense thickets of knob cone pine along Loma Casa Road, which sprouted shortly after Santa Clara County's Croy Fire in 2002, could act as fuel for future fires in the remote community. He's encouraged residents in the burn scar of 2016's Loma Fire to monitor the growth of knob cone pine saplings on their property. (Jennifer Lemman/Bay Area News Group)

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS — Ed Orre swings a long ax and cracks open the cone of a knob cone pine. He's hunting for signs of life amid the charred trees along a foggy ridge off Loma Chiquita Road.

He finds it.

“It looks like it's already released most of its seeds,” said Orre, a division chief and unit forester for the Santa Clara Unit of Cal Fire, based in Morgan Hill. Eventually, the seeds flushed from that cone will become a problem for the rural community, which lies north of Morgan Hill on the Santa Clara side of the Santa Clara-Santa Cruz county line.

In remote regions like this, tucked away high in the hills, the threat of fire is constant. And the Loma Fire that destroyed 12 homes and swept through 4,475 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains on Sept. 26, 2016 is still on the minds of many who live along the ridge line. Nearly two years later, community members are still repairing and rebuilding the landscapes they love — landscapes they're willing to fight for.

But now residents are battling a new challenge: brush that has sprung anew from the ground. Now in several spots, grasses and shrubs peek out from singed soils. With fire season creeping closer and land that can get tinder dry in the summer, residents in the remote region are racing the clock to create defensible space around their homes with the few resources they have.

Orre points to a thick grove of trees on land scorched by 2002's Croy Fire as an example — densely packed knob cone pine. It's a grove of matches waiting to be burned. The highly-flammable, waxy gunk that glues the cones together liquefies in high heat. When exposed to flames, the cones crack open and spew thousands of seeds across the forest floor. These seeds sprout saplings that grow within inches of each other. They compete for resources, eventually die, and become fuel for future fires.

Orre worries that pockets of pine like these — called doghair stands because of their density — pose a significant threat in the upcoming fire

season. So he's worked tirelessly to encourage residents to limit the fire risk on their property by thinning these groves and clearing errant pine cones. Homes with less vegetation around them, he said, are easier to save in the event of a wildfire.

“We could never have an engine parked in front of every house,” said Orre. “The people that live here need to be as prepared as possible — long before the fire gets here.”

Orre — who has been working as a forester since the early 1980's both in the private sector and for Cal Fire — makes the drive up to the community once a month. He's a welcome sight along the roads where residents like Jesse Katz always stop to chat.

Katz and his brother closed escrow on a property along the ridge line the day the Loma Fire ignited. As they watched the flames' orange glow swell from the valley below, the brothers waited anxiously for news about their new home. At one point, they were told that everything had burned to the ground, but shifting winds spared their property.

The Loma Fire swerved away from their home, but scars remain from the Croy fire, which singed 3,127 acres and destroyed 31 homes, causing \$7.5 million in damages.

“Eighty or 90 percent of our 40 acre piece of land is covered in thickets of doghair pine trees planted six inches apart,” said Katz. “Now, we're dealing with a forest that is extremely unhealthy because it was left unattended as it recovered from that fire.” The brothers' property offers a glimpse what the entire mountain could look like 10 to 15 years down the line if left untreated.

Other signs of life are slowly returning. On Priscilla Huber's back deck, hummingbirds zoom by, dipping into the numerous feeders she's set out for them. The region is a migratory corridor for Anna's and rufous hummingbirds; dozens of them swirl around her home.

Immediately after the Loma Fire, Huber says she was concerned about the birds. “The next season,” she said, “they returned.” She's still waiting for other species of birds to fill her garden. Orre works

with residents like Huber, who lost her home in the fire, to head off ecological damage before it takes its toll. As he walks down her driveway, he pauses to pull from the ground a leafy, green stem of French broom — an extremely flammable invasive plant that can sprout again quickly after a fire. Patches of the plant are cropping up all along the burn scar. Orre is concerned that the wily weed will overtake parts of the ecosystem where native plants would otherwise thrive.

She's now cultivating a garden brimming with life. At Orre's suggestion, she's been dutifully working to replant trees lost in the fire, potting sequoias, coastal redwoods, and chestnut trees along the side of her house. The roots these trees inevitably splay out will prevent loose soils from sliding.

Even so, the community faces another quiet force: erosion. Lined with plastic and sandbags, sections along Loma Chiquita Road look like they have bites taken out of them. A mixture of melted culverts unable to properly divert water and charred soil incapable of absorbing runoff have created regions of the mountain more prone to mudslides and debris flows. The loss of native vegetation with extensive root systems also has weakened the soil.

"Erosion is really insidious because you can't see what's not there," said Orre, "so you don't realize how many tons and tons [of soil] have been washed away."

As soon as sparks ignite, Cal Fire sends out a team of scientists and experts to assess long-term hazards associated with a fire. The Watershed Emergency Response Team (WERT) sizes up impacts of the fire on the local watershed and monitors the risk of erosion. Orre has consistently been a part of this process. Last winter, epic rains spurred landslides across the burn scar: leaving Casa Loma Road — a key entry and exit point — impossible to pass.

"There are so many hidden costs to a fire," said Orre "Ever since the fire, we've been doing something out there." According to Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, the damage caused by the Loma Fire, which began after a portable generator at a marijuana cultivation facility caught fire. The fire remains under investigation, and it is

believed that the person responsible fled the country. Damage is estimated between \$29 million and \$34 million. But for many on the mountain, the fire has cost them so much more.

Like others in the community, Katz feels his duty extends beyond his property line. After the fire, he and his brother were inspired to take a more active role in defending their community against the threat of fire.

"We felt compelled to participate and to become really active in these efforts because we got to see first hand what they saved us from," said Katz. They brought in heavy equipment to help stabilize and smooth out roads, and have joined other members of the community to create a landing zone for helicopters.

Immediately after the fire, local churches and community groups assisted with recovery efforts. Team Rubicon, a group of military veterans and first responders, was deployed to help with efforts to clear debris and chop down trees. "Because there's no homeowner's association, because there's no road committee, it's a voluntary effort," said Katz, "everybody pitches in and does what they can."

Adds Huber: "It's a pretty strong community. We're really there for one another."

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