

Parts of fire-ravage Calif. forest to be restored

April 15 2011, By NOAKI SCHWARTZ , Associated Press

(AP) -- Nearly two years after an arsonist ignited what became the largest fire in Los Angeles County history, officials have launched an effort to restore tens of thousands of acres in some of the most severely charred areas of the mountainous Angeles National Forest.

Against the backdrop of a rocky hillside of scrub, blackened trees and pockets of new green, the National Forest Foundation and local and federal officials on Friday announced a five-year effort to plant 3 million trees on 10,000 acres, remove invasive plants and restore the habitat on another 40,000 acres in the Big Tujunga Canyon watershed. The National Forest Foundation said it plans to raise \$5 million toward the effort.

Officials stressed the importance of preserving the national forest, particularly because of its location next to an urban environment like Los Angeles.

"In short, these lands are America's expanded backyard and nowhere is that more true than the Los Angeles area," said John Hendricks, chairman of the Forest Foundation.

The 2009 Station Fire scorched about 161,000 acres, destroyed 89 homes and killed two firefighters. An estimated 14,000 acres were burned to deforested conditions, and it is this area that is being targeted for tree planting.

While setting aside the Angeles National Forest as a reserve was important in 1892, said Tom Tidwell, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, preserving that land is even more critical today.

"There are more stresses on these lands than there ever has been," he said.

Workers have been collecting seeds from other parts of the forest in elevations that correspond to the destroyed areas. The seeds have been sent to a nursery that has been growing the saplings being planted in the forest. Officials hope to plant a variety of fir and pine trees on an estimated 4,200 acres this year and already have planted 500,000 trees.

Marty Dumpis, deputy supervisor of Angeles National Forest, said that without the restoration effort, invasive plants would crowd out all the native plants in some parts of the forest. And while the effort will help restore areas where traces of burned trees and charred debris are still visible, Dumpis admitted it may never be what it was.

"We realize we're never going to be able to 100 percent mimic what used to be out there 200 or 300 years ago," he said.

Critics, however, said officials should make sure to plant only the types of trees that belong in the burned areas but appear to be planting a type of tree that could alter the balance of the ecosystem.

"What I've been told is that they're planting Coulter pines in areas that used to have big cone Douglas fir and they're doing it because that's what they have available," said Jon Keeley, research scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey Western Ecological Research Center. "They have a lot of them, they're cheap and they grow fast."

This is of particular concern because the big cone Douglas fir is not

found everywhere and has lost a lot of its former range, Keeley said.

"What they're doing is contrary to good ecosystem management, in my mind," he said.

Vance Russell, California Director of the National Forest Foundation, called the concerns "a little overblown." They are not planting anything that is not native, he said.

Angeles National Forest sprawls over 650,000 acres in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Los Angeles. The Station Fire, named for a ranger station near the ignition point, was set on Aug. 26, 2009, and spread through the rugged range, threatening suburbs on the foothills below.

It was not fully contained until the following Oct. 16. Subsequent rainstorms unleashed debris flows from denuded slopes that damaged or destroyed some foothill homes, while forcing repeated evacuations.

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