

**DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION**

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**NOTICE OF INTENT
TO ADOPT A MITIGATED NEGATIVE DECLARATION**
Project Name: Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve Prescribed Fire Program Unit 7

Notice Date: April 29, 2020

In compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (Public Resources Code § 21000 *et seq.*) notification is hereby given to responsible agencies, trustee agencies and the public that the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection proposes to adopt a mitigated negative declaration for the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve Prescribed Fire Program Unit 7 Project.

Project Description: The project is a 322-acre fuels reduction and ecological enhancement effort situated on Musty Buck Ridge within the 3,950-acre Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve (BCCER). The 322-acre BCCER prescribed fire project would complete the western portion of a landscape-scale defensible zone in the path of historic fire spread in the Big Chico Creek Watershed. The other, eastern portion is already being achieved by the BCCER-Vegetative Management Plan (VMP) units on the east side of Big Chico Creek.

Dominant vegetation within the project area includes annual grasslands, black oak and canyon live oak woodlands, and scrub communities dominated by buck brush, deer brush, scrub oak, and manzanita. In August 1999, much of Musty Buck Ridge and the project area were burned in the 16,757-acre Musty Fire. The project area is relatively remote, and terrain is rolling to extremely steep, interrupted by rocky areas and steep cliffs. The project objective is to remove enough encroaching brush and chaparral to achieve a healthy and resilient landscape reflected in a fine grain mosaic of shrubs interspersed with grasslands and oak woodlands that is reflective of traditional knowledge and historic photographs of this area. It is intended that facilitating this vegetation composition and structure will achieve a dynamic ecological community that is fire resistant and adaptive to future environmental change (i.e., warmer and drier conditions or climate extremes). It is believed that this approach will provide improved water yield and quality, provide diverse habitat including at springs and seeps, reduce rates of spread for future wildfires, and provide fire protection for the communities of Chico, Richardson Springs, Cohasset, and Forest Ranch. After the project, desired conditions will be maintained with ecologically and culturally appropriate broadcast burning in such a way as to promote native species and achieve numerous ecocultural objectives.

To accomplish these objectives, the applicant proposes to reduce scrub continuity to promote a diverse age-class mosaic and reduce wildfire related risks to oak woodlands. Initial project work will involve enhancement of existing fuel transitions along roads, trails, and edges of shrub patches in order to achieve adequate spacing to enable the safe use of broadcast burns where appropriate. In some instances this enhancement may be achieved by running burn strips in shrubs during high moisture conditions, or focusing on areas with senescent shrubs.

The project would reduce fuels using mechanical cutting, crushing brush with a machine such as a small tracked Bobcat, uprooting brush by pulling, pile burning, and broadcast burning. Means of shrub and small tree removal -- mechanical, motorized, or fire -- would be selected based on careful analysis of current site conditions including weather, time of year, and the presence of sensitive cultural or biological resources. On steep slopes, or where machine access is impractical, fuels would be reduced by hand crews opening long hand-cut transects and piling brush for machine collection, or later pile-burning when conditions are optimal. Pockets of black oak would be used as "anchor points" to define project boundaries and sub-zones within the project area. Approaching the project in this way will conserve black oaks and facilitate range expansion where appropriate conditions exist. There is evidence from within the project area that these black oak stands were once more expansive, but top-killed by previous wildfires. Currently many pole-sized oaks are emerging within dense shrub stands, and arise as sprouts from large diameter burls.

Auxiliary project operations would include maintenance and improving (including isolated widening) the natural surface (dirt or bedrock) of the private 4WD roads which access the steep, remote area, and rehabilitation of excessively disturbed areas (e.g., machine tracks) after machine operations are concluded. Brush removal would be almost entirely within a 50-100-foot buffer of Musty Buck Rd., and would taper off to a lighter prescription beyond the buffer. The lighter prescription would widen existing openings, interrupt fuels continuity to slow fire spread, reduce ladder fuels to protect black oak crowns from ignition, yet still maintain a desirable spatial and biological diversity of shrub species. Project activities will likely commence Fall 2020 and be complete by December 2028.

Project Location: Butte County, CA, Portions of Sections 14, 22, and 23, Township 23N, Range 02E, Mount Diablo Baseline and Meridian.

Public Review Dates: The draft mitigated negative declaration will undergo a 30-day public review period during which comments may be submitted. The review period begins on April 29, 2020 and ends on May 28, 2020. Written comments regarding the contents of the mitigated negative declaration should be sent to: Tim Keesey, Conservation Project Coordinator, Butte County RCD, 150 Chuck Yeager Way, Suite A, Oroville, CA 95965, (530) 260-0934.

Location of Documents: The mitigated negative declaration and related documents are available for review at Butte County RCD, 150 Chuck Yeager Way, Suite A, Oroville, CA 95965.

The Notice of Intent will be posting at the following locations:

CAL FIRE Cohasset Station #22
9868 Cohasset Rd.
Chico, CA 95973

The Notice of Intent will also be posted on and off site in the area where the project is to be located.