

Granite project begins

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BOOKWALTER

John Steffey and Denny Paschke control the John Deere 200 LC's mechanical arm, a powerful appendage that can reach 20 to 25 feet from the cab.

A steel-toothed wheel on the end, called a slash buster, measures 4 feet across and spins between 500 and 600 times per minute.

The blade can reduce full-grown trees to piles of sticks within seconds.

"That brush doesn't stand a chance," said Steffey as both he and Paschke operate the huge machine.

And neither does fire, hope managers of the Granite Stewardship Project, an ambitious plan and pilot project on the Stanislaus National Forest's Groveland Ranger District.

After crushing tall brush and thinning trees in the forest, a fire on this plot should stay on the ground and spare nearby pines and oaks, Steffey said.

Steffey and Paschke work for G.H. Ranch, a logging company from Merrill, Ore., that brought the giant slash busters to Stanislaus National Forest last fall to begin work on the Granite project. It's a huge effort that, while late in getting started, is already producing good results, forest officials say.

A team of community members spent almost a decade working out details on what was supposed to be a giant contract and national model. The proposal contained plans to thin 4,000 acres of brush and small trees, burn almost 5,000 acres with prescribed fires, improve 65 miles of forest roads, build an off-highway vehicle staging area and restore streams and meadows — among other changes — on the site of the 1973 Granite Fire. One contractor was supposed to oversee all the work.

But when bids came in last spring, they were more than twice the Forest Service's estimate — nearly \$5 million — for the total project.

And a second call for bids drew offers even higher than the first.

So Stanislaus National Forest Supervisor Tom Quinn broke the project up, allowing more contractors to each take on shares of the work.

G.H. Ranch, for example, submitted a bid just under the Forest Service's \$1.4 million estimate to shred the 2,600 acres, and later, thin 166 acres of trees. It was one of six companies to offer bids.

While G.H. Ranch's bid was not the lowest, it was picked because of the company's excellent reputation, said John Buckley, head of Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center in Twain Harte and a member of the Granite monitoring team. That team is made up of community members with different interests in the forest, who watch the project and send reports back to Congress.

Buckley said the group was again impressed with G.H. Ranch's work.

On a recent day out at the work site, Steffey acknowledged that his slash busters are impressive indeed. The machines exert just 5.8 pounds-per-foot of pressure on the ground, and can handle steep slopes that might send another machine tumbling backwards.

"They stay on the ground real well. That's real important because we like to keep them greasy side down," Steffey said.

As for the rest of the Granite contracts, bids to thin other tree stands and restore meadows and streams should be accepted later this year, said John Swanson, who oversees the Groveland Ranger District, where the Granite project sits.

Stanislaus officials will also seek state OHV grants for trail maintenance and an improved staging area.

Despite what some call a strong beginning for the project, others are waiting to see more results from the divvied-up work plan.

"I still feel bad that it didn't work out the way it was designed," said Mike Albrecht, president of Sonora logging company Sierra Resource Management — one of two companies to bid on the stewardship project in its original, all-encompassing form.

"But if the work's getting done to the standards they want and the taxpayers are being saved money, then that's the way to go."