

OFFICIALS: CLEARING MIMICS GOOD EFFECTS OF NATURAL FIRES

Mechanical grinder quickly creates firebreaks in Oracle

A.E. Araiza Arizona Daily Star

Wildfires, by nature, can be beneficial to a forest. But if a fire is headed directly toward your home, or you are a firefighter charged with trying to save the home or the surrounding forest, it could be perceived quite differently.

That is why the Santa Catalina Ranger District in the Coronado National Forest is erring on the side of caution, creating firebreaks on 300 acres of forest lands adjacent to private property in Oracle.

This is the first time the Catalina district is using a tractor with a brush-crushing attachment to grind up fuels such as small oaks, manzanitas, various grasses and more, said Chris Stetson, a fire manager and fuels planner with the Forest Service.

The machine has been used in the Sierra Vista and Douglas districts but not in the Catalinas, he said.

The device removes so-called "ladder fuels" - any type of vegetation that can ignite bigger trees or vegetation that are next to them.

"This is saving hundreds in man hours (in labor) and saving thousands in dollars," said Pete Gordon with the Forest Service. "We would not be able to get this kind of production (by using hand tools) in this short of time span."

Heavy brush has accumulated in the area over many years and could hamper fire-suppression efforts, according to the Forest Service.

With homes so close to the area, the agency opted against prescribed burns. Using the machine simulates a naturally occurring wildfire if it were allowed to burn - but without the smoke and threats to lives and property, the Forest Service said.

Clearing the area was contracted to Environmental Land Clearing, said tractor operator Mark Siebe, who was creating openings in the dense brush last week.

Siebe uses a 140-horsepower Fecon cutter with 36 tungsten carbide blades capable of grinding brush and small trees. Then with the treads on his tractor, he churns the crushed material into the soil, creating mulch, he said.



Mark Siebe of Environmental Land Clearing prepares to move his brush-clearing rig into a new area. In the grinding process, the machine creates new mulch for the forest floor.

PHOTOS BY A.E. ARAIZA / ARIZONA DAILY STAR



Forest Service staff members Pete Gordon, left, and Rodgers Wright, middle, check a new firebreak with Mark Siebe, in coveralls.

PHOTOS BY A.E. ARAIZA / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The device works better going backwards.

"You knock it down going forward," Siebe said, "but backwards is where you make your money."

The new openings will stimulate new growth and forage for wildlife.

"This has exceeded my expectations," said Rodgers Wright a fire management officer with the Catalina district.

"I can put a hot shot crew in here" he said, referring to a clearing Siebe made. "Before, there would be no way I'd put a crew in here."

OFFICIALS: CLEARING MIMICS GOOD EFFECTS OF NATURAL FIRES

continued . . .

The project involves removing brush with a small diameter but leaving some of the old dead trees, Wright said.

"Anything eight inches or larger we are retaining," he said.

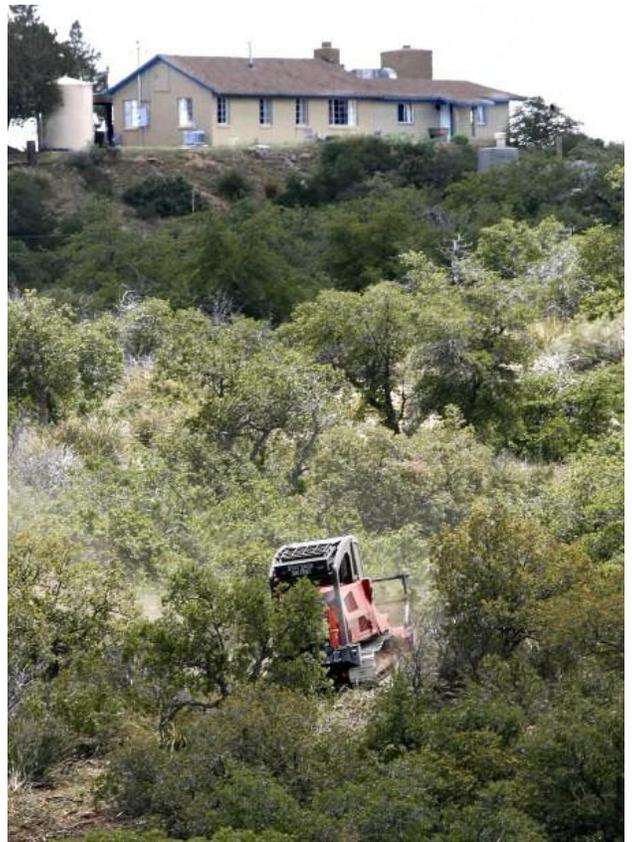
In addition, they are saving some of the old trees, called snags, where owls, squirrels and other cavity-nesting birds live, he said.

The nutrients that are returned back into the soil as mulch can stimulate the soil, much like a wildfire.

"This may grow back in its current condition in 20 years," Wright said. But, "it will be years before it's a fire hazard again."

On StarNet: To view more photos: Go online to www.azstarnet.com/gallery

Contact photographer A.E. Araiza at araiza@azstarnet.com or 954-3154.



The cutter-crusher plows a line below a home in the Oracle area. "Ladder fuels," which can fuel even hotter fires, are removed in the process.

PHOTOS BY A.E. ARAIZA / ARIZONA DAILY STAR