

Cal Poly's Swanton Pacific Ranch Receives \$4.7 million Grant to Assist with Post-Fire Recovery Efforts, Increase Fire Resilience Strategies

SAN LUIS OBISPO — Cal Poly's Swanton Pacific Ranch was recently awarded a \$4.7 million grant from Cal Fire's Forest Health Program to assist with post-fire recovery efforts. The grant is the second of two Cal Fire grants, totaling nearly \$9 million, recently awarded to further the ranch's efforts to bring about sustainable, long-term solutions to the management and stewardship of working landscapes.

The grant funding comes one year after the CZU Lightning Complex Fire swept through Swanton Pacific Ranch in Davenport, California, destroying many of the structures and much of the surrounding forest.

Swanton Pacific Ranch partnered with nearby Cal Fire Soquel Demonstration State Forest to seek the Cal Fire Forest Health Program's \$4.7 million grant, which provides critical funding for fire resilience planning and creates key opportunities for students to assist in implementing treatments to restore and maintain healthy forests while enhancing carbon storage. The funding will facilitate increased efforts in forest health and resilience and increased wildfire safety by implementing treatments such as reforestation, forest thinning, removal of dead trees and other potential fire fuels, and tree pruning to more than 930 acres of redwood forest between the two sites, both of which are designated as outreach forests in coastal redwood systems.

"Through this work, we are improving our forests and establishing leadership and expertise at the Central Coast's premier outreach forests to create more resilient forests for demonstration, research and teaching," said Grey Hayes, Swanton Pacific Ranch's research and education coordinator. The extent and ferocity of recent catastrophic wildfires, including at Swanton Pacific Ranch, have elevated the need for improving the health and resiliency of forests prior to and after wildfire, especially in California's coastal redwood ecosystems, as wildfires become more frequent. In 2020, more than 4 million acres burned throughout California, with 2021 on course to be equally as devastating.

"Swanton Pacific Ranch and the Soquel Demonstration State Forest have similar missions," Grey said. "Swanton is focused mainly on workforce development and faculty research of sustainable management of coastal redwood forests, while the demonstration forest's purpose is to teach the same to broader audiences."

At Swanton Pacific Ranch, the funding will be used to assist in restoring ecosystem services damaged by wildfire. At the nearby Soquel Demonstration State Forest, efforts will be focused on forest management and implementing fire resilience strategies in preparing for future fires.

"This Forest Health Grant and partnership with Cal Poly will make possible an increased amount of fuel reduction and forest health treatments across Soquel Demonstration State Forest," said Angela Bernheisel, who manages the state forest. "Additionally, research and monitoring of the treatments and effects will take place in partnership with Cal Poly. The local community and recreational visitors will have the opportunity to learn about the fire resilience strategies through

education and demonstration.”

This Cal Fire Forest Health Program grant follows a \$4.2 million grant Cal Fire awarded the ranch in June, to provide increased training for the current and future workforce in fire mitigation. Hayes and Jeremy James, head of Cal Poly’s Natural Resources Management and Environmental Sciences Department, will lead the effort.

“This grant funding from Cal Fire will significantly enhance our ability to complete critical forest health treatments at Swanton Pacific Ranch following the CZU Lightning Complex Fire,” said Mark Swisher, director of Swanton Pacific Ranch. “Cal Poly faculty, student and staff involvement with the planning, execution and monitoring of those treatments will have far-reaching impacts on the pace and scale of fuel treatments in California.”

In the classroom, students will be taught practical lessons such as designing vegetation management plans to make forests more resilient to fire. Students will also have the opportunity to partake in fire recovery research and aid in reforestation efforts that include planting 55,000 trees across 270 acres. Outside the classroom, a series of workshops, headed by a program coordinator and overseen by Hayes, will be held throughout California. Students will be involved in that process as well.

“As we work to re-envision and rebuild Swanton Pacific Ranch for the future, the critical support we are receiving from our partners along the way ensures that our students will continue to receive unparalleled hands-on learning and research opportunities for understanding sustainable land management practices,” said Andrew Thulin, dean of the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences.