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Stockton Creek Preserve has limited damage following fire

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By [GREG LITTLE](#) Editor



This photo illustrates that even though the fire burned along this trail in the preserve, the trail itself remains pretty intact. Submitted photo

In the big picture, what unfolded during the French Fire at the Stockton Creek Preserve was, in some ways, positive.

The French Fire began in the evening of July 4 near French Camp Road north of Mariposa. But it didn't take long for the blaze to jump Highway 140 as it headed into the preserve — and was bearing down on the town of Mariposa.

The Stockton Creek Preserve is a 722 acre tract of land that is one of the most popular places in Mariposa, from trail walking to biking to just enjoying nature close to town.

“One of the things is how important that property is as a key battleground for fire protection,” said Bridget

Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy.

The conservancy manages the preserve and was instrumental in its founding. The property is owned by the Mariposa Public Utility District and also includes a reservoir that would prove to be key in the air battle against the French Fire.

Last Thursday, Fithian, many of her staff and officials from MPUD, CAL FIRE and Mariposa County Fire took a tour of the property even as fire officials were already in the restoration phase of some of their work.



Restoration crews were quickly on the scene at Stockton Creek Preserve following the French Fire.

Fithian said she had a “moment” during that tour when she was standing on burned landscape on the ridge.

The moment was just how years of work paid off.

“This is proof of concept,” said Fithian. “It worked really great.”

She said one way it worked was the trail systems became “access and management points” for the firefighters.

“That’s a tool for firefighters to use,” she said.

And it's all part of the overall design and concept of the preserve, she added, where fuels management and fire breaks have been part of the process since its inception.

As far as damage inside the preserve, Fithian said it was not as bad as she had expected – most likely because of the design and how it worked during an actual major fire.



Most of the signage at the preserve was intact after the fire. The bulldozer cuts were made to stop the progress of the fire and now those will become part of the landscape, including as fire breaks.

She said there is some trail alignment taking place because of bulldozer cuts as well as some trees that were knocked down during the firefight.

“The restoration is already happening,” said Fithian while sitting at her desk last Friday.

She did say the work was still ongoing and is hopeful the preserve can be reopened to the public quickly; possibly within a couple of weeks or even less.

She urged people to keep an eye on the social media feeds of the conservancy for updates.

Fithian said there are “concerns” about some of the oak trees that burned on the property and they will be closely monitored. But as Fithian noted, oak trees are resilient and in some cases, it may take up to two years before regrowth happens. In some cases, the trees will die.

“I have hope for that,” she said.

Another positive that came out of the fire is some of the less desirable plant life, like manzanita and poison oak, were burned.

“Some of the burn was good,” she said, noting that fire is a part of the natural process.



This photo shows bulldozer lines that were cut during the French Fire inside the Stockton Creek Preserve. It also shows how the trails were utilized as a buffer. Submitted photos

It was also positive that nearly all of the signage within the preserve was not damaged. Repairs were already underway on a couple of signs that had some damage.

Fithian said another aspect in the big picture is the fact they can now work in conjunction with fire officials when considering the future of the preserve.

“They will know where to build fire breaks,” she said. “Fire officials can let us know what is helpful.”

It also goes to how they look at all preserved properties, including the Mariposa Creek Parkway where a lot of fuels reduction work has been done and much more is planned over the next year or so.

In the larger scheme of things, Fithian said it speaks to the “evolving role” as land trust managers.

“We really have to manage the resources,” said Fithian.

That includes the current study of the Stockton Creek Reserve taking place in conjunction with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Officials are looking at issues like trails, signage, benches, restrooms and more. There is also hope there could be a new acquisition of land near Mariposa County High School.

In some ways, she said the fire “makes it easier to study the property.”

She also pointed out the conservancy has a \$6.7 million grant to continue preservation work on property they manage in the Jerseydale and Lushmeadows areas to continue restoration from the Oak Fire of 2022.

The largest damage to the preserve in Mariposa was near the high school area, she said, while the east side was more of a “mosaic burn” pattern.”

She lauded the “skill” of the fire managers.

“They did an amazing job,” said Fithian.

She also felt the fire showed the crucial role preservation can be when it comes to how to “use those landscapes to be a buffer.”

Overall, Fithian said she thinks the fire demonstrated how land management can work in harmony with firefighting to help protect surrounding area and property – including the town of Mariposa.

Of course, one issue that has been controversial when it comes to the preserve in the last year or more is the fact the Highway 140 entrance remains closed to the public.

Fithian said the conservancy and MPUD officials have tried to work with the landowners who shut off the public entrance after purchasing the property.

To date, nothing has come from those efforts.

“I would like to see access restored,” she said. “We remain open and willing.”

During the French Fire, that access was wide open to firefighters, who used it as a staging area as well as a point of attack. Fire trucks and other fire vehicles used the area during the fire and it’s possible that helped lead to the fire being stopped before it reached into Mariposa.

As of early this week, the preserve remained closed as officials continued with the restoration work.

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