



Woodland elves work wildlands

Elves in Kensington?

Folktales proclaim elves live in hills and are not bound by physical limitations. Victorian literature illustrates tiny men and women of pointed ears and stocking caps. American tales focus on crafty Santa's helpers at the north pole. Modern images include skills with baking Keebler cookies or promoting Rice Krispies.

Kensington woodland elves are a unique subspecies. They live to work wildlands. The results of their labors can be seen in the 1.72 mile interface between homes in the unincorporated Contra Costa County town of Kensington, California (pop. 4,936) and the wildlands of Wildcat Canyon. Their mission is to lower the height and break up the continuity of fuels to reduce wildfire hazards.

In March 2008, Diablo FireSafe Council (DFSC) submitted a grant application to Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E). The purpose of the \$15,000 project was to manage flammable vegetation behind 30 homes along Lake Drive, Los Altos Drive and Canon Drive at the top of the western slopes of Wildcat Canyon Regional Park. The elves would focus on pruning lower limbs and cutting brush below trees to eliminate "ladder fuels" that could carry a wildfire up into trees and nearby homes. Once materials were cut it would be chipped; with chips spread to reduce weed growth.

More writing was needed before work could begin. The East Bay Regional Park District created a Right of Entry agreement with DFSC to allow the elves to work on parklands. The agreement is the first of its kind between the District and residents. Facilitated by the Diablo Fire Safe Council, it formalizes a working relationship that is also supported by the Kensington Fire Protection District and El Cerrito Fire Department.

Diligently the elves worked adjacent to the two trailheads at Grizzly Peak Boulevard and Lake Drive. They also encouraged neighbors to manage their own properties. One neighbor slowly converted her back slope into a native fire resistant landscape with perennial bunch grass and buckeye trees. More neighbors worked with neighbors to clear adjacent vacant lots belonging to out of town owners. Discussions of removal of highly flammable masses of juniper shrubs led to cutting shrubs and removing lower branches of trees which effectively widening the narrow streets.

By 2010 the PG&E funds had been spent, but the work continues. 2011 sees four different elf coordinators focusing fuel management from Canon Drive to Purdue Avenue. Diablo Fire Safe Council is able to provide cost share to these groups' sweat equity with funding provided by a National Fire Plan grant from the USDA Forest Service through the California Fire Safe Council. There are elven plans afoot for future partnerships with the Beloit Dad's Club and expansion north to the El Cerrito Border.



For more information see our website at www.diablofiresafe.org
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