

# FORESTRY *notes*

<http://nacdnet.org/news/publications/forestrynotes>

## Chipping away at wildfire risk

**A California district boasts a long record of success with its community chipper program**



California's Placer County Resource Conservation District (RCD) has served as the managing partner of one of the state's most successful community chipper programs for more than a decade – well before Rick Gruen came aboard as district manager in early 2010. Dating back to 2000, the program has provided more than 50,000 services helping landowners reduce wildfire risk and offering an alternative to burning brush piles.

But a crunched economy has slowly squeezed federal grants and funding established from ballot propositions – the primary funding sources for Placer RCD's \$150,000-to-\$200,000 annual operating costs for the program. A few years of this prompted Placer RCD to explore ways to protect its chipper program, which led to Gruen's hiring. His mission: reshape the program with a more self-sustaining approach.

"We began by taking a critical look at other chipper programs in the state, like Western Shasta RCD's fee for service," says Gruen. "Nevada County's program is run through the fire safe council and is based on 100% donations only. Our board felt that there was an opportunity to create a hybrid program."

Placer RCD already had a few important pieces in place. CalFIRE, a partner from the program's inception, maintains and houses equipment in its facilities and contributes funding through proposition money, when available. And the Placer County Office of Emergency Services provides oversight for the program, which chips approximately 4,200 tons a year.

The most important component? According to Gruen, the program's success rides on its labor force, consisting

largely of inmates made available through a partnership with the local sheriff's department. Workers are placed on crews of three or four men, led by non-inmate paid supervisors. For the inmates, it's valued time outdoors and developing skills; for Placer RCD's chipper program, it's the key to maintaining a lean budget. Says Gruen, "Without the labor component we couldn't do this for anywhere close to what we are."

The most significant change Gruen made to the program in his first few months was to incorporate a cost-share component. Now landowners are asked to contribute half the hourly at-cost rate of the service (half of \$80). For low-income or disabled landowners, the program offers a no-fee rate.

In its first year, the District is generating \$3,000 to \$4,000 per month in cost-share to prolong the life of its federal Fire Safe Clearinghouse funds, and Gruen expects that amount to climb now that California is entering its peak chipping season.

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**Placer County RCD in California hopes cost-share contributions from landowners and a more efficient service schedule will keep its chipper program operating for many years to come.**

**Next  
Month**

The celebration begins  
for the International  
Year of Forests



# Emphasizing agroforestry in Nebraska

 **Lower Loup NRD helps its landowners realize the value of agroforestry practices**

It's a fact Rich Woollen is proud of: for more than 30 years, dating back almost to its inception, Nebraska's Lower Loup Natural Resources District (NRD) has staffed a forester. Woollen is the fifth, having joined the Nebraska Forest Service in 1993, and serving the Lower Loup. "I guess you could say we're a tree-planting district," he shares.

Lower Loup NRD is also a very active agroforestry district, and has been for almost as long as it has had a forester.

Through the years, the Conservation Tree Program has been a big help in the district's ability to install practices within its 16-county district. "Quite a few windbreaks," says Woollen, who points out the district has long had a living barn demonstration site. Cooperating with the USDA Plant Materials Center, demonstration plantings were established to evaluate plant material being tested for future agroforestry applications. Lower Loup has also invested time the past few years trying to establish a ponderosa pine seed orchard from progeny of a local population unique to the district. One day seed collected from the orchard may be used to produce ponderosa pine seedlings better adapted to local growing conditions.

A living snowfence program was a pilot project started in the Lower Loup NRD which brought strategic partnerships together to make it work. Without the combined collaboration of the State and County Roads Departments, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and the local Natural Resources District the program would not have been a success. The Roads Department needed wind protection from blowing snow closing sections of their highways. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission wanted shelterbelts for wildlife habitat protection. The NRD had the trees and planting crews needed to install the practice.

Partnerships with other agencies, such as the Nebraska Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, have allowed Lower Loup NRD to do a number of riparian forest buffer plantings in recent years. Last year, Woollen says the district installed the "Cadillac" version of a buffer for one farmer, including tree tubes for deer protection.

Lower Loup NRD assists landowners in all phases of planning, and has a staff of four



**Lower Loup NRD offered six workshops to educate landowners on the potential wood markets available in Nebraska.**

conservation technicians – each with his/her own tree planting crew – capable of doing the work on the ground. Woollen says one key to successful agroforestry has been to take the process at a comfortable pace and make sure all of the landowner's goals are identified.

"It's important to make sure the practice has the best chance for success," he says.

In the past couple of years, the district has also begun to explore ways in which land-

owners can utilize material harvested in the district, much of which is tied to agroforestry practices. Thanks to Nebraska's Environmental Trust, which uses state lottery dollars to fund conservation projects, Lower Loup NRD was rewarded funding in 2009 for a chipper and small bandmill.

"Folks don't get much for logs based on the timber market here in Nebraska," says Woollen. "This was meant to demonstrate that an agroforestry application could incorporate a side business to market some of that wood."

As part of the grant, the district performed six workshops to show landowners how material might be utilized, and to explain which markets might be the most profitable. Says Woollen, "It all goes back to promoting the utilization of material that often ends up in the burn pile because there isn't enough of it to warrant traditional wood market use."

The district also encouraged landowners to consider utilizing red cedar – viewed by many pastureland producers as a nuisance – for small sawlog, post or woody biomass production.

For more information on Lower Loup Natural Resources District's agroforestry efforts, contact North Central District forester Rich Woollen at [rwoollen@unl.edu](mailto:rwoollen@unl.edu).

 **NACD now on Facebook**

Last month, NACD launched its Facebook page, where it shares photos, updates and news releases. Visit [www.facebook.com/conservationdistricts](http://www.facebook.com/conservationdistricts) and click the 'Like'

## Forestry Briefs

button at the top of the page. Those not active on Facebook may want to consider setting up an account; it's a great way to connect with districts, lawmakers and other partners to share ideas and spread the message of conservation.

 **Grants available for landowners in upper Delaware River Basin**

The Pinchot Institute for Conservation, in conjunction with the Commonwaters Partners, recently announced a million-dollar grant program for private landowners in the upper Delaware River Basin to implement watershed forestry practices. Forest owners in three states will be eligible to receive financial assistance for implementing sustainable forest management projects on their property. To

learn more, visit <http://www.commonwatersfund.org>.

 **Study: More trees leads to healthier newborns**

A study conducted in the Portland area suggests the presence of more trees may result in healthier newborns. Geoffrey Donovan, a scientist with the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station in Portland, served as the study's lead author.

Researchers used satellite images to compare tree cover around the houses of 5,696 women who gave birth in Portland in 2006 and 2007. According to the data, pregnant women living in houses graced by more trees were significantly less likely to deliver undersized babies. For each 10 percent increase in tree coverage within about 50 yards of a home, the rate of undersized newborns decreased by 1.42 per 1,000 births. As it stands, about 70 of every 1,000 newborns in Portland are small for gestational age.

Donovan acknowledges more research is needed to support the findings. "Our point is, look, here are some interesting results, let's look at this some more," he told a local reporter.



## District coordinates self-guided maple tour

Three years ago, Paul Reining was sitting in front of the Wayne Conservation District Board of Directors interviewing for the district’s forest specialist position. His experience was impressive – Reining had spent most of his adult life working for his family’s timber business – but the Board wanted to know what new ideas he had to offer the district. Among them, Reining suggested the district consider hosting a tour of maple syrup producers in the area. It would offer a boost in sales and an understanding for the process; it might also convince a few landowners to try their hand at making maple products.

“You can tell people about making maple syrup,” he says now, “but it’s not the same unless you’re standing near an evaporator smelling the maple and experiencing it.”

Last month, Reining coordinated the district’s second annual self-guided maple tour, showcasing 12 area producers. Some of the sites welcomed as many as 60 guests during the two-day tour.

Reining’s passion for maple syrup production was born out of his youngest son’s need for a senior-year school project. Reining and his wife, Penny, suggested the son study maple syrup production and track the family’s experiences. Twenty buckets the first year has grown to a small operation of 54 taps today, and the experience helped connect Reining with many of state’s

maple leaders, including the Northeastern Pennsylvania Maple Producers Association (NPMPA).

His first steps in organizing the tour were to build partnerships with NPMPA and the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in Wayne County. With that support, the Wayne Conservation District Board of Directors gave Reining the green light to move forward with the planning. In November 2009 he began to contact local maple producers and a few months later began to promote the tour. Local Agway stores agreed to distribute brochures containing maple syrup production facts and terminology, as well as a map for the tour. Reining sent press releases to local media and also promoted the weekend event on the district’s website.

Wayne County Extension offered funds to produce the brochure and map. NPMPA provided upfront money to make ‘We’ve Got Maple’ signs to mark each destination on the tour.

Most of the producers tap sugar maple trees, although Reining says a few also rely on red maple. The bigger producers in the area operate more than 2,000 taps and use reverse osmosis to reduce the time needed for the boiling process. At many of the sites, visitors are walked through the process of collecting maple to make everything from syrup to maple-flavored cotton candy.

### Maple Fun Facts



A sugar bush is the term used for a producer’s maple stand.

Producers expect a 40 to 1 ratio, meaning for every 40 gallons of sap they collect they can convert it into 1 gallon of syrup (2% sugar content).



On average, a maple tree generates one quart of syrup each season.

Producers typically sell syrup in pint and half-pint containers. In Wayne County, a pint sells for \$10 to \$12 on average, depending on the container.



Apart from the self-guided tour, Reining invited Honesdale High School’s environmental club to visit his family’s operation. The students were given a step-by-step overview of the process and were able to see Reining’s wood-fired evaporator at work.

Reining believes the tour has two selling points. “It helps to promote the idea that there are multiple ways landowners can enjoy their property, and it’s a way they can realize some income,” he says.

“Although there is a fair amount of work, it is enjoyable. It’s one of those things that halfway through the season you can’t wait for it to be over, but come winter you can’t wait to get back out there again.”

To learn more about this maple syrup tour, visit the district’s website at <http://wayneconservation.org>, or contact Paul Reining, Wayne Conservation District Forest Specialist, at 570-253-0930, or via email at [preining@co.wayne.pa.us](mailto:preining@co.wayne.pa.us).



(Above) High school students observe Paul Reining operate his wood-fired evaporator. Reining has been producing maple syrup for six years. (Right) Tour attendees spent as much as \$300 per site on maple products this year. (Megan Gustafson photos)





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Another positive to come from the cost-share approach: efficiency. Landowners now call when they've accumulated larger piles, and they have shown a willingness to band together with neighbors when scheduling a chipping appointment instead of scheduling individually, as had often been the case in the past. All this has led to fewer site visits and a decrease in operating costs while maintaining the volume of brush piles chipped.

Landowners call CalFIRE to schedule appointments. Whereas landowners would sometimes wait up to three weeks for a visit, now appointments are handled in a timelier manner.

Says Gruen, "Landowners are happy because it's a more customer-friendly service."

According to Rui Cunha, Assistant Director of Emergency Services for Placer County, the program not only assists the county in encouraging landowners to abide by the state's defensible space requirements, but it also limits the number of potentially dangerous fires that can occur when landowners choose to burn their slash piles.

Burning is legal in Placer County with the proper permit, but many areas are classified as 'high to very high fire danger areas.'

Says Cunha, "Every year there are incidents where property owners do burning and we have escaped burn piles – usually two or three times a year, all over the county. Having a program such as this one that offers an alternative to burning is a very, very valuable tool."

Moving forward, Gruen's next goal for the program is to explore potential secondary uses for the chipped material. Some landowners use it for water retention, deriving water quality benefits, as well. And the county has made wood-to-energy projects a priority. Adds Gruen, "We hope to figure out a cost-effective way to transport the chips to be used for renewable fuel. Even if it were break-even, I think it would be a good thing."

To learn more about Placer County Resource Conservation District's chipper program, contact District Manager Rick Gruen at 530-885-3046 extension 118, or via email at [gruenprcd@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gruenprcd@sbcglobal.net).

## Conservation Calendar

- **May 2-5** – International Biomass Conference & Expo, America's Center, St. Louis, Mo. Visit <http://www.biomassconference.com>
- **June 4-9** – 12th North American Agroforestry Conference, hosted by the University of Georgia. Visit <http://hosting.caes.uga.edu/2011NAAC>
- **June 19-21** – Forest Products Society's 65th International Convention, Portland Ore. Visit <http://www.forestprod.org/ic65>
- **June 28-July 1** – 4th Annual Ecosystem Markets Conference, sponsored by the World Resources Institute and American Forest Foundation, Madison Concourse Hotel, Madison, Wis. Contact Todd Gartner at [Todd.Gartner@wri.org](mailto:Todd.Gartner@wri.org)
- **July 17-19** – NACD Summer Legislative Conference, Washington, D.C. Contact NACD at 202-547-6223 or [meetings@nacdnet.org](mailto:meetings@nacdnet.org)
- **Aug. 2-4** – NACD Forest RPG Meeting, Grey Towers National Historic Site, Milford, Penn. Contact Yenie Tran at [yenie-tran@nacdnet.org](mailto:yenie-tran@nacdnet.org)
- **Sept. 18-22** – 2011 NASF Annual Meeting, Renaissance Hotel, Baltimore, Md. Visit <http://www.stateforesters.org>

## Share Your Success Stories

Have you implemented a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, successfully implemented fuel-load reduction practices or assisted with agroforestry practices? Your successes can be shared with other districts through NACD's communication tools. Tell us about your district's work by sending us a note at [forestrynotes@email.nacdnet.org](mailto:forestrynotes@email.nacdnet.org)

A joint project of NACD, USDA Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters for the purpose of keeping America's conservation districts informed. Our services and programs are provided without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, age, handicap or religious affiliation. This publication is funded in whole or in part through a grant awarded by the USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry.

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