PO Box 431
Markleeville, CA 96120

The Friends of Hope Valley want to thank you for your past support. We hope that you will continue your membership in this non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of historic, recreational, and scenic values of Hope Valley and Sierra Nevada's eastern slope in Alpine County. With your help we can continue to address the sensitive environmental concerns of the eastern Sierra.

Friends of Hope Valley 2016

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Friends of Hope Valley, PO Box 431 • Markleeville, CA 96120

Friends of Hope Valley Newsletter

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For the preservation of the scenic, recreational, and historic use of Hope Valley and Alpine County's eastern Sierra slope.

Wildland Fire in Alpine

–Jim Donald

By the time you read this in early December, the Washington Fire will have receded into distant memory, superseded by subsequent larger and more deadly fires in the Sierra and Coast Ranges. But, at 17,790 acres, it was big, it got our attention, and made news.

It was caused by a 'smoker' – a snag or deadfall hit by lightning – two weeks prior to the fire blowing up when winds and moisture levels reached optimum conditions on June 19, 2015. At 10,000 feet, on the east ridge of Silver Mountain at the top of Washington Canyon above the Lady Washington mine, the fire spread to surrounding fuels in a northeasterly direction.

By Saturday morning, the fire was estimated at 75 acres. Estimates then vary widely as the expected red flag warning – southwest winds 40, gusts 50 in wind prone areas – moved in. By dark Saturday, the fire had crossed the East Fork of the Carson River, the largest natural firebreak in its path. By Sunday afternoon, driven by very strong winds, it had jumped Hwy 4 at Centerville and Hwy 89 at Monitor Junction and was now threatening Carson River Resort and Chalmers Mansion. It was also approaching the Indian Creek drainage off Poor Boy Road, three miles south of Markleeville.

Numerous hikes in various burn areas off Hwy's 89, 4 and Wolf Creek Road show large variability in fire intensity ranging from complete scorching of mineral soil to almost no damage at all. Now, some four months later, many areas are showing good recovery with understory plants sprouting and aspens sending up new shoots. In the areas of highest heat many stands of Jeffreys are dead and will not recover. Friends of Hope Valley recommends that the forest, as much as is safe and practical, be allowed to recover on its own.

Photo courtesy of Philip Bellman

The evacuation advisory for Markleeville came at about 5pm Sunday with a deputy advising to "be ready to go in 15 minutes if we come back again". Apparently the reverse 911 system failed due to the interconnect between Alpine County Sheriff's Office and Douglas dispatch. That has since been fixed according to county officials.

Monday night infra-red mapping showed the fire at 16,644 acres, a remarkable increase in size over two days of winds. On Tuesday the wind stopped. Markleeville was socked in by smoke, which cleared slowly as lighter winds returned. The air attack began with 11 helicopters and eight air tankers including the DC10 from Castle Air Base and a P2V Neptune from Stead. It was impressive to watch the precision as the lead plane orbited over Markleeville to pick up each tanker and lead them into the drop zone.

Meanwhile ground crews, who had initially cut a line on the north side of the fire to protect the town, could now concentrate on accessible areas and work on containment. Within three days, aided by light winds and 1.7 inches of rain in some areas, the fire had been reduced to a smolder. The evacuation advisory was lifted, campgrounds re-opened and some sense of normal life returned. Ground crews were able to start pulling out, obliterating their tracks as they went, while hotshot crews and helicopter drops attacked hot-spots. Control, at 17,790 acres was declared on August 17. The final map can be viewed on Inciweb.nwcg.gov.

An Inter-agency BAER team *(Burn Area Emergency Response)* was sent in to assess hazards and recommend rehab strategy. Dozens of trees, rocks and debris flows (from the aforementioned rain) along the highways were cleared. It was noted during inspection that debris flows in the burn area were no greater than those in unburned areas so no widespread ground cover reseeding is deemed necessary by the USFS. A final report is still pending and should include a comment period.

The burn areas opened up the forest and natural succession will establish ground cover first and then allow the forest to grow back, albeit slowly, over multiple decades. The snags and deadfalls will provide habitat for many birds and insects. The groundcover growth in the now open areas will likely enhance deer populations and, over time, many other species will benefit.

(continued on page 2…)

Friends of Hope Valley sincerely thanks all of the enthusiastic volunteers and encourages all to visit our website at: **friendsofhopevalley.org.** *There's also a link to our page on the website and we encourage your posts and pictures.*

Fire, even intense wind driven crown fire, is a cleansing and renewal process that is a natural part of the ecosystem. There will be a greater need to learn to live with fire as drought and climate change continue. Radical changes in structure materials and location, and effective escape-plans are necessary. Fuels reduction and other current techniques are helpful but are not a panacea. That beautiful wood house in the forest certainly seemed like a good idea then, but it's very much up to luck whether it survives with the prospect of increasing fire danger.

Groundwater Management in Alpine County

–John Barr

In 1992, the California Legislature enacted the California Groundwater Management Act (AB 3030) to encourage local public agencies to adopt plans to manage groundwater resources within their jurisdictions. Provisions were created in the California Water Code *(CWC)* with the intent to manage the “safe production, quality, and proper storage of groundwater”. Ten years later, SB 1938 was signed into law, amending the CWC with required components of a Groundwater Management Plan *(GWMP)* for a public agency seeking state funds for groundwater projects administered through the Department of Water Resources. Included in the mandatory components of an AB 3030 GWMP:

“Monitoring and management of groundwater elevations, groundwater quality, inelastic land surface subsidence, and changes in surface water flows and quality that directly affect groundwater levels or quality or are caused by pumping.”

On December 20, 2005, the Alpine County Board of Supervisors formally approved a resolution directing the County to proceed with the development of a countywide AB 3030 GWMP.

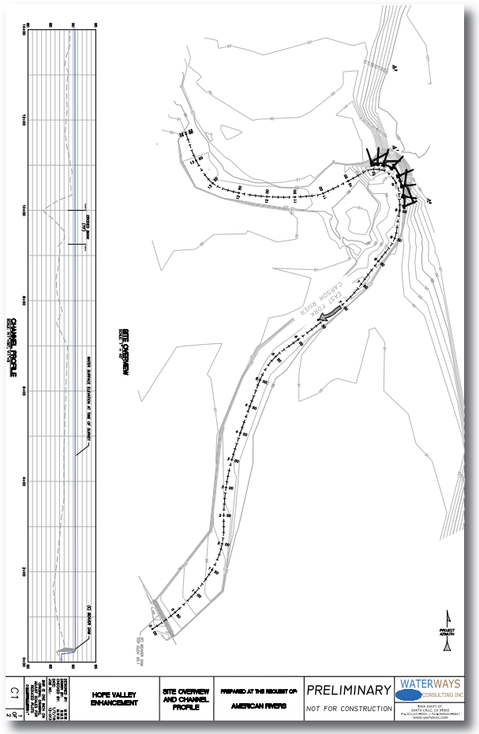
By February 2007, with the assistance of Brown and Caldwell of Carson City, Nevada, Alpine County developed a GWMP to provide guidance in managing the groundwater resources within the county. The county’s GWMP: 1) documents existing groundwater conditions; 2) provides a framework for water users to implement water management programs, included surface water resources; and 3) presents a number of recommended actions that would achieve sustainable groundwater supplies.

Now, over 20 years after the enactment of AB 3030, with the majority of the state in “exceptional drought– the worst condition”, what actions has Alpine County taken to “achieve sustainable groundwater supplies”? Several of the county’s leaders have been asked this question. Their answers have been contradictory, to say the least.

In the context of national policy (Alpine County is 98% public land), the US Forest Service published field guides in 2012 to improve the awareness and management of groundwater-dependent ecosystems for its 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands. They assume a connection between surface and groundwater sources, and emphasize sustaining groundwater-dependent ecosystems. Gordon Grant, a Research Hydrologist of the Forest Service, believes that: “Clean water will be the single most important commodity produced from national forest lands. It will totally eclipse timber.”

Ask your leaders: Does our county have a groundwater management plan? If so, have components of your GWMP been implemented?

Hope Valley Restoration Project



The overall goal of the Hope Valley Meadow Project is to restore the full range of ecosystem services that this highly-visible and well-known meadow has the potential to provide including: natural water storage, flood attenuation, cooling and filtering of water, aquatic and riparian habitat, and recreational values.

The Hope Valley meadow is threatened by hydrologic alteration and the West Fork Carson River is currently downcut. The restoration project will address this issue through technical designs that aim to restore natural hydrology including the reduction of downcutting and an increase in flood frequency in the meadow. This can be achieved through a variety of approaches and techniques depending on goals and desired outcomes.

Work on one of the sites was complete in the fall of 2015. The project will continue up stream in the spring of 2016.

The 2015 project consisted of bank stabilization. By installing a log/rootwad revetment structure to stabilize one especially high eroding bank by placing large logs and boulders to form a dense matrix to reduce sheer stresses on the eroding bank.

Photo courtesy of J.E. Wickwire/ Horsefeathers Photography

Habitat Restoration a Conversation on a Cold Night

–Peter Lathrop

It was night, so getting cold as my brother from the City, Tigger, and I were sitting alone under the Alpine Aspen Festival tent, all the other people having gone home. I was reading by the light of a single Coleman lantern which just lit up the collection of chairs and tables in the tent. Outside of that light there was only the light of the stars.

"What are you reading?" Tigger asked, looking to conversation for calming company.

"The Carson District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest has produced a Scoping Document: Monitor Pass Habitat Restoration Project. The goal of the Project is to conserve aspen groves and sage grouse habitat." I replied. "Recent research has shown a decrease in the aspen stands in our region due to drought, overgrazing, and especially fire. According to the Scoping Document the aspen are also: 'currently declining in condition due to conifer encroachment'. During natural succession the aspen clones sprout well in direct sunlight, growing up toward the sun, and then shading the ground.

However, this benefits conifer's shade tolerant seedlings, which then outgrow and shade out the aspens. The Project will assist the aspen in this competition for light by thinning the conifers within and without of the aspen stands. And secondly, the habitat of the sage grouse has been decreasing in this region, specifically in the Monitor Pass area, because of the spread of pinyon/juniper woodlands.”

"Aren't pinyons and junipers also conifer?" he asked. "I'm a bit confused."

"The conifers involved in the successionary competition with the aspen are the mixed conifer community species of jeffery pine, white fir, and western juniper," I hopefully clarified. "They grow much taller than the aspens. The majority of these conifers within the aspen groves will be removed by such methods that will cause the least disturbance to the natural environment. Legacy trees...mature, old-growth trees...will be left alone as these trees provide nesting sites for a large number of birds and arboreal mammals. The conifers outside of the groves will be cut back: 'for a distance of approximately 1.5 times the existing aspen height'. Conifers with a DBH (diameter at breast height) of up to 30 inches and within 100 to 150 feet of the edges of the aspen stand will also be culled. This thinning will be more pronounced on the south-facing sides of the groves, which are toward the sun and would therefore shade the aspen environment more than on the north sides."

“But if succession is the natural course of things, shouldn't they just let nature go its way?” Tig asked while examining the bodies of different bugs attracted to the light.

“That's all very good in theory but we humans have completely changed the natural environment," I retorted. "Except for that one lodgepole pine over there by the Red Corral, most all of the trees in the Hope Valley are the secondary growth from the clear cutting done way back when for the Comstock silver bonanza in Virginia City. Even the parking lot we are camping on is artificial. It's like you brought the pavement from the City. So one is forced into making decisions on which species to favor based on ecologically based data and sometimes one's own biological prejudices."

"The second part of the Project is the elimination of pinion/juniper woodland "encroachment" in the sagebrush community," I continued. "'The Bi-State Sage Grouse District Population Segment is currently proposing to list grouse as a ‘Threatened’ under the Endangered Species Act,' as stated in this Scoping Document. The sagebrush community is an important habitat for this species of grouse, therefore protecting this community in the Monitor Pass area is a necessary part in improving the likelihood of the grouse's survival."

"Are there are ecological and historic arguments for allowing for the spread of pinion/juniper woodlands?" Tigger asked, shuttering at the sound of coyotes out in the meadow.

"True, however in the area in which the proposed project will be implemented the habitat for the sage grouse is much more limited than that of the pinion/juniper woodland. Monitor Pass is also an important part of the grouse's migratory route between their summer and winter ranges. Furthermore, as with the conifers, in the aspen groves, legacy single-leaf pinyon and Utah juniper trees will be left alone, providing nesting sites for many of the pinion/juniper dependent populations," I answered as the baying recided in the distance.

Ignoring the sounds of nature I continued: "This program will be saving some of the best pure aspen stands in the Eastern Sierra Nevada in terms of area and number of mature and legacy trees. The groves are also the location of some of the best tree carvings found.

In combination with the surrounding biotic communities the aspens contribute to Monitor Pass's extremely high biodiversity. Improving the sage grouse's habitat will add to this. The thinning of the surrounding and integrated conifers, both large and small, is extremely well planned so as to produce the least detrimental effects on the natural environment and the existing ecosystems. The saving of the aspen groves and grouse habitat in the Monitor Pass study area is justified by the many benefits produced by the project. The Project is not just ‘saving aspens’, it is also improving the watershed, providing food and nesting sites for a variety of wildlife, acting as a barrier to large wildfires, protecting archeological sites, and increasing biodiversity.”

“Well, based on your research, the USFS's well-thought-out plan, and what I've learned here at the Alpine Aspen Festival I can see why quaking aspen and sage grouse are both part of the ecological, spiritual, and ascetic experience of your Eastern Sierra. So your organization, the Friends of Hope Valley, must agree with the USFS's plan for the

“Now I'll be brave so we can get out of this artificial light and see the beautiful stellar display outside--that river of stars we can't see in the City. Then, after trying to remember the constellations and listening to those sounds of the night, I'll lock myself in my van and try to get a good night's sleep.”

Alpine Aspen Festival

The Alpine Aspen Festival is a celebration of the beauty and vital role of aspen groves in providing clean water to millions of Californians and Nevadans. This year’s festival included a free expo with educational hikes, speakers, conservation projects, music, and more!
Other activities included fly-fishing, horse back riding, artist workshops are lead by professionals and experts in their fields, these events have a cover charge. The monies are donated to the Alpine Watershed Group (AWG), a nonprofit environmental organization. The AWG, in cooperation with Friends of Hope Valley, work to preserve the watersheds and natural environment of Alpine County
For next year’s event go to: www.aspenfest.org