

Stewart Canyon restoration underway Saturday morning

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Launa Taylor, left, and Hannah Wilson from The C.R.E.W. weeding in Middle Stewart Canyon Creek Feb. 13.

Perry Van Houten, *Ojai Valley News* senior reporter

Volunteers are needed this Saturday morning to help pull invasive grasses and plant native plants in a waterway near Ojai City Hall.

The \$1 million Middle Stewart Canyon Creek Restoration Project is a partnership between the city of Ojai and a handful of local groups, including Concerned Resources Environmental Workers (The C.R.E.W.).

Jennifer Berry, executive director for The C.R.E.W., said four volunteer opportunities were scheduled, with three remaining — Feb. 27, March 13 and March 27.

Scheduling the volunteer days was dependent on rain, so there wasn't a lot of time to get the word out, Berry said.

But a “soft opening” on Feb. 13 went well, with members of The C.R.E.W., community members, Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, and city of Ojai employees turning out to help. “All kinds of people have been out, so it’s been great to open that part up to the public,” she said.

The project involves restoring about a half-mile of the creek and its banks, covering a total of 10 acres, by removing invasive vegetation such as palm trees and eucalyptus, along with non-native grasses and other plants.

“The first step is removing them, and once they’re out, planting,” Berry said.

The invasive vegetation will be replaced by natives. “We have hundreds of oaks slated to go in, of varying ages,” Berry said.

Work late last year focused on taking out hundreds of invasive trees, the largest 3 to 4 feet in diameter and more than 100 feet tall.

Not only are the plants being removed non-native, they pose a high fire risk and harm the natural environment by taking over the water supply.

Sycamores will be planted as well, Berry said, and some walnut trees have already been planted. “It turns out the California walnut is considered threatened in a lot of areas, but it does extremely well in Ojai,” Berry said.

In addition to native trees, other smaller plants like purple sage, mountain mahogany, milkweed and mule fat will be planted. “There are literally thousands of individual plants that are going to go in,” Berry said.

Over the next two years, Berry expects that a total of 4,000 to 5,000 individual plants will be planted.

Other key partners in the project include PAX Environmental, Channel Islands Restoration, California Conservation Corps, Mark Crane’s Tree Inc., Ojai Valley Land Conservancy and Once Upon a Watershed.

With the help of The C.R.E.W. and PAX, the city of Ojai in 2019 obtained a \$864,000 grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Matching funds made it a \$1-million project.

The three upcoming Saturday volunteer events are scheduled from 9 a.m. to noon. Volunteers meet at Ojai City Hall, 401 S. Ventura St. in Ojai, and should wear long pants, sturdy shoes, gloves and masks, and bring water and a snack. Tools are provided. “We start off at City Hall, and once everybody is collected and organized we just walk down to the creek and get started. It’s pretty shady, but a hat is a good idea,” Berry said.

Workers will be masked and social-distanced. “It’s so spread out. It’s such a huge area,” Berry said.

All ages are welcome, but people under 18 will need to have a parent or guardian sign a volunteer waiver.

The first volunteer day on Feb. 13 saw people enjoying being out in the sunshine with other nature lovers, Berry said. “The initial response was so enthusiastic, because people are just so eager to get outside, be active and be social.”

More information on the project and how to volunteer is available on The C.R.E.W.’s website and on the city of Ojai’s website. “Everything that anybody would ever want to know about the project is there,” Berry said.

For more information on the Middle Stewart Canyon Creek Restoration Project, visit <https://ojacity.org/middle-stewart-creek-canyon-restoration-project/> or <http://www.thecrew.org/middle-stewart-canyon-creek-restoration>.