

6

Benjamin Hesser - 2020 CalaverasGROWN Scholarship Essay

Prompt: "How could we employ young people in Calaveras County to improve the health and fire resiliency of our eco-system and watershed? Be sure to focus your answer on how your solution would employ local people ages 16-40."

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group defines a fire adapted community as "A human community consisting of informed and prepared citizens collaboratively planning and taking action to safely coexist with wildland fire." Having a healthy forest and watershed ecosystem is an essential part of a fire adapted community. Collaboration among government, landowners, homeowners, public and private entities and our educational institutions is a key component to making this possible. Young people can, and should be part of the solution.

One of the main problems the Calaveras forests currently face is that nearly one hundred years of fire suppression has created an unnaturally high fuel load. The devastating extent of the Butte fire was the result of years of drought combined with overgrown and dense vegetation allowing the fire to grow quickly and become deadly. For many in our community it became clear that we need to reduce the fuel load, bringing our forests into a more natural state so that future fires will not be so devastating.

One of the seven goals of the 2018 Strategic Fire Plan For California, developed by the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, is to "integrate implementation of fire and vegetative fuels management practices consistent with the priorities of landowners or managers". In order to accomplish this goal, Calaveras county could tap into resources such as the California Climate Investment Forest Health Grant Program, that could provide funding to hire and employ more

young people in the efforts to achieve this goal in Calaveras County. The Calaveras Resource Conservation District (CRCD) is already pursuing some of these opportunities. Young people can get involved by attending the CRCD meetings and providing input and becoming more knowledgeable about our own fire plans in Calaveras County.

If Calaveras County is able to create economically viable forest projects, in combination with securing additional funding to reduce fuels, with young people's involvement in the process, it would create many opportunities for employment. There would be a need for general labor to do the clearing and clean up in addition to needing people to develop the fire reduction plans and oversee the projects. With an up and coming Forestry and Natural Resource Pathway at Calaveras High School and an established Forestry program at Columbia Community College, there is an opportunity to recruit and encourage Calaveras County youth to get the education they need locally to get involved in this line of work if they know there are good paying jobs for them at the end of the road.

Fuel reduction is an important component of developing a fire adapted community in Calaveras County. Working together, with multiple stakeholders, including young people like myself, we can make short and long term plans that includes hiring and retaining our young adults by securing funding and creating sustainable forest management projects. This has the potential to improve the health and fire resiliency of our ecosystem and watershed, while at the same time employing more young people.