

People & Places

Living with wildfire

Kate Wilkin helps ranchers, foresters avert catastrophes from massive burns

By TIM HEARDEN
For the Capital Press

YUBA CITY, Calif. — Kate Wilkin had just recently been hired as the University of California's fire and forestry adviser for the eastern Sacramento Valley and adjacent foothills when the crisis hit.

High winds whipped up devastating wildfires throughout Northern California. While the world was focused on the wine country, where the Tubbs Fire became the most destructive wildfire in the state's history, fires also swept through the rural countryside in Butte, Nevada, Yuba and other counties.

The half-dozen fires that made up the Wind Complex started Oct. 8. It burned over 17,000 acres, destroying or damaging 209 residences, 204 outbuildings and one commercial structure while killing four people and injuring one.

Much of the charred ground was winter range, and the fires also caused hay loss, Butte County Farm Bureau manager Colleen Cecil has said. While the fires spared most cattle, they forced ranchers to supplement feed to their livestock while their pastures recover, which could take a couple of years.

"For our local Wind Complex, it was just really striking how the fire was really devastating for the community," said Wilkin, who began her job Sept. 18. "When you have a fire of this scale, it creates a lot of strain, but there was also a coming together. I was really amazed at how much people in rural communities really come together to help people."

Background

Since the fires, Wilkin and other UC Cooperative Extension advisers, including livestock expert Tracy Schorr, have been offering workshops to help families and businesses recover and rebuild in a more fire-resilient way.

But while Wilkin is keenly aware of the devastation the fires caused, she also sees them as an opportunity to



Tim Hearden/For the Capital Press

University of California Cooperative Extension forestry and fire adviser Kate Wilkin stands outside the extension office in Yuba City, Calif., where she is based. She is helping landowners recover from the October fires and researching ways to improve forest management.

Western Innovator

Kate Wilkin

Age: 35

Hometown: Abingdon, Va.

Education: Bachelor's degree, College of William and Mary; master's degree in biology, California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo; Ph.D., University of California-Berkeley

Residence: Grass Valley, Calif.

Family: Husband, Josiah Johnston

Website: <http://cesutter.ucanr.edu/LivingWithFire/>



show policymakers the impact of not adequately clearing underbrush in forests.

"My outreach program is to help people understand how to manage lands to be resistant to fire and extreme weather," said Wilkin, who is based in Yuba City. "It might be with prescribed fires or it might be mechanical (thinning)."

Having grown up in rural Virginia, Wilkin earned her bachelor's degree at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. She'd seen the impact of fires as a child in the rural Appalachia community of Abingdon, Va., but it wasn't until she was 21 that she gained an interest in fire behavior.

She was participating in an internship with the Nature

Conservancy in Kissimmee, Fla., where she observed frequent lightning strikes in the Disney Wilderness Preserve.

"In my first week, they handed me a drip torch," Wilkin said. "My job was to manage prescribed fires. It was interesting to see how the plant community not only was not harmed, but actually thrived."

Wilkin earned her master's degree in biology from California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo and worked for three years in Yosemite National Park, where she was part of a team of scientists that studied the impacts of packhorse grazing in mountain meadows.

She completed her doctorate at UC-Berkeley in 2016, having studied the relation-

ship between fire, forest diversity and water. She took part in the new Graduate Students in Extension program at Berkeley, which trains graduate students for careers in research and outreach.

She was doing post-doctoral work in the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources laboratory with Berkeley fire science professor Scott Stephens when she was hired to work out of the Sutter-Yuba extension office in Yuba City.

Now she's studying the aftermath of the Wind Complex fire.

Nature of fire

"It was ... really interesting to drive around after the fires were out," she said. "They were obviously wind-driven fires. ... With the wind, most fires start as the result of spot fires from embers that can travel a mile or two miles and start another fire."

"Also sometimes you'd see a home that burned and the vegetation around it didn't, which was also because of embers," she said. "In most cases, the way homes burn is from the inside out, which is again because of embers."

As part of the recovery effort, Wilkin and other advis-

ers are helping ranchers with post-fire land management while also teaching people in residential areas how to make their properties more resistant to fire.

She's also been meeting with representatives from the California Licensed Professional Foresters Association and getting to know local foresters and timber operators, she said. A big part of the discussions revolves around improving forest management.

Ranchers in California used to use prescribed fires, but that changed in the 1960s with regulations aimed at preventing fire.

"We would like to start using fire again," she said.

Fire suppression has caused a proliferation of underbrush, and now forests are 10 times denser than they used to be, Wilkin said. She has received funding to do research within riparian corridors, allowing limited harvests of small trees and brush that will be sold to the timber market.

"Our goal is to do this in a way that's sensitive to the riparian zone and creates a more resilient forest," she said. "I understand ... the need to be careful. It's finding that balance."

Calendar

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To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301 or emailed to newsroom@capitalpress.com. Write "Calendar" in the subject line.

Saturday, March 17

Ten Acres and a Dream small acreage workshop. 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Centennial Distributing Co., 701 West Buckles Road, Hayden, Idaho. Topics include living on the land, raising crops and livestock, managing pastures and forestry fundamentals. Cost: \$15. Website: <http://bit.ly/2Gxia5S>

Sunday, March 18

Fruit Propagation Fair. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Clackamas County Fairgrounds, 694 NE Fourth Ave., Canby, Ore. The fair offers attendees hundreds of varieties of free scions and cuttings. If you graft, this is paradise. Or you can choose custom grafting by experts for only \$5. Free with admission are hundreds of varieties of apple, pear, cherry, plum and persimmon scions. There will also be cuttings of grapes, kiwis and figs to root. Arrive early for the best selection. Home Orchard Society experts will be available to answer fruit-growing questions. Mason bee supplies are available for sale, as well as fruit-growing publications. Cost: \$7 per person or \$12 per family for non-members. Website: <http://homeorchardsociety.org>

Tuesday, March 20

Agrarian Elders Planning for Succession. 9 a.m.-noon. Session House, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos, Calif. California FarmLink launched the "Agrarian Elders and the Next Generation Project" to catalyze solutions for retirement and preserving local and organic farms. Join California FarmLink

and partners for a workshop featuring presentations and a panel of perspectives on succession that will include: retirement planning, farm business transitions, taxes and transitioning to non-heir successors. Doors will open at 8:30 a.m. and the workshop will run from 9 to 11:30 a.m. Breakfast snacks will be provided and we invite participants to stay and network with partners and speakers over a light lunch. Cost: \$20. Website: <https://succession-aptos.eventbrite.com>

Tuesday-Thursday

March 20-22

International Mass Timber Conference. Oregon Convention Center, 777 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Portland, Ore. There will be 70-plus speakers from 20 nations and more than 60 exhibits, plus a tour of Oregon's mass timber buildings. Website: www.forestbusinessnetwork.com

Wednesday, March 21

Logger Education to Advance Professionalism (LEAP) Update. 8 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Elks Lodge, 628 Main Ave., St. Maries, Idaho. This program is an annual opportunity for loggers to build on LEAP with in-depth training on forestry topics. Registration: UI Extension, Benewah County office, 701 College Ave., St. Maries, ID 83861 or online at www.uidaho.edu/LEAPupdate

Thursday, March 22

Part 3: Farm & Ranch Succession Planning Workshop. 6-8:30 p.m. Clackamas Small Business Development Center, 7726 SE Harmony Road, Milwaukie, Ore. This program can be accessed online and is offered and taught by the Clackamas Small Business Development Center, along with guest presenters such as attorneys and CPAs. In addition to informative topics and experienced ag professionals, courses include confidential, one-on-one business counseling. A

complimentary light dinner will start each evening at 6 p.m. To register, call 503-594-0738. Cost: Free. Website: <http://bit.ly/2CX1jvl>

March 23-April 30

Wooden Shoe Tulip Fest. 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm, 33814 S. Meridian Road, Woodburn, Ore. The colorful annual festival includes a wide variety of activities. Cost: \$5 per person for 13 and older. Maximum per car charge of \$20. Website: <https://www.woodenshoe.com/>

Friday-Monday

March 23-26

Oregon FFA Convention. Deschutes Fair & Expo Center, Redmond, Ore. Website: <http://www.oregonffa.com/EarnToLive/State-Convention>

Saturday, March 31

Welding and Basic Metal Work for Small Farms. 1-5 p.m. Dunbar Farms, Hillcrest Road, Medford, Ore. This popular class is small and hands-on. With space limited, register early. David Mostue, farmer and equipment guru, will teach the basics of welding techniques on-site at his farm. Particular focus will be on those skills most useful to farmers, including the types of welders, tools and safety equipment needed. Participants will have a chance to try MIG welding, the most useful and common form of welding on farms. General metalwork like drilling, bending and welding prep will also be covered. Cost: \$50 each person. Contact: paula.burkhalter@oregonstate.edu or 541-776-7371. Website: <http://bit.ly/JacksonSmall-Farms>

Wednesday-Saturday

April 4-7

Idaho FFA State Leadership Conference. College of Southern Idaho, Twin Falls, Idaho. Website: [https://www.idahoffa.org/confer-](https://www.idahoffa.org/confer-ences-conventions/)

[ences-conventions/](https://www.idahoffa.org/confer-ences-conventions/)

Thursday, April 5

Part 4: Farm & Ranch Succession Planning Workshop. 6-8:30 p.m. Clackamas Small Business Development Center, 7726 SE Harmony Road, Milwaukie, Ore. This program is offered and taught by the Clackamas Small Business Development Center, along with guest presenters such as attorneys and CPAs. A complimentary light dinner will start each evening at 6 p.m. To register, call 503-594-0738. Cost: Free. Website: <http://bit.ly/2CX1jvl>

Tuesday, April 10

Southern Idaho Livestock Hall of Fame induction. 6:30-9 p.m. Turf Club, 734 Falls Ave., Twin Falls, Idaho. This year's inductees are: cattle rancher Jim Baker of Filer; sheep and cattle ranchers Ed and Emily Baker (posthumously) of Filer; cattle ranchers Scott and Sarah Bedke of Oakley; dairy producers Harry and Flora Bokma of Buhl; long-time Bureau of Land Management supervisor Dean Brown of Jerome; and cattle ranchers Wade and Gwenna Prescott of Carey. Cost: \$25

Thursday, April 19

In the Field: Salem Agriculture Seminar. 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Wilamette Heritage Center, 1313 Mill St. SE, Salem, Ore. A no-cost seminar for a discussion specifically designed to provide agribusiness owners and their managers with the tools they need to get organized. Topics include the new tax cuts, finances and financial statements, regulatory updates on water and wetlands, organizing an agri-business and estate planning for farms and ranches. RSVP at <http://bit.ly/2FwaRPV>. Cost: Free

Shepherds' Extravaganza. 2-10 p.m. Washington State Fair, 110 Ninth Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. Sheep and Fleece Show,

vendors of supplies, used fiber-related equipment, demonstrations, workshops. Cost: No cost after admission to the Spring Fair. Website: www.shepherds-extravaganza.com

Thursday-Sunday

April 19-22

Puyallup Spring Fair. Washington State Fairgrounds, 110 Ninth Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. Website: <http://www.thefair.com/spring-fair>

Saturday, April 21

Oregon Women for Ag Auction and Dinner. 5:30 p.m. Linn County Fair and Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road, Albany, Ore. This exciting event is a fundraiser for Oregon Women for Agriculture, which advocates for all things involving agriculture in the state. Web: owa-online.org

Tree School East. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Baker High School, 2500 E St., Baker City, Ore. This year the school will offer 29 classes on everything from multi-aged forest management, forest insects and disease, controlling weeds, how to survive in the wild, ownership succession planning, to geology of Northeast Oregon, wildflower identification and small scale harvesting for the "do it yourself" folks. The goal is to provide a wide variety of topics valuable for family forestland owners, professional foresters and forest contractors. Sponsored by OSU Extension, the Oregon Forest Resources Institute and the Oregon Small Woodlands Association. Cost: \$50, \$20 for 18 and younger with an adult family member. Website: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/baker/>

Sunday-Wednesday

April 22-25

California FFA State Convention. Anaheim Convention Center, Anaheim, Calif. Website: <http://www.calaged.org/stateconvention>

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Clarification

In a story on page 9 of last week's Capital Press about a state auditor's report on the use of federal grant money at Washington State University, the "principal investigator" refers to the researcher in charge of the grants.

Also, it should be noted that the university disputed the auditor's findings, and that administrators were concerned that "(g)eneral state funds were being improperly charged by the principal (investigator) for work performed by research support personnel on federally sponsored projects," according to the audit. They "instructed personnel to assign employees to appropriate sources of funding, meaning work performed on federally sponsored projects should be charged to sponsored funding."