

WHITTIER DAILY NEWS

Restoring the hills



Photos by Keith Durlinger Staff Photographer

Francisco Ramirez, with Nakae and Associates, sprays hydroseed material as a part of a restoration of a portion of the Whittier Hills near Colima Road in Whittier on Tuesday. The area is being restored with sagebrush, buckwheat, prickly pear and sage.

Native plants replacing 3,000 eucalyptus trees

By Mike Sprague Staff Writer

WHITTIER — Two years after 3,000 eucalyptus trees were removed from the Whittier Hills, crews are now preparing to restore native plants to the area.

Since last week, work crews from Nakae and Associates of Irvine have been planting seeds in the hills, over a 15-acre area just east of Colima Road and north of the Murphy Ranch Little League field.

The seedlings include California sagebrush, California buckwheat, prickly pear cactus and white and purple sage.

"This is part of our mission — to re-establish a native habitat," said Whittier Mayor Bob Henderson, who also is chairman of the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority. "That in turn eventually will restore native animals into the area and put it back the way it was originally."

The project, which costs about \$1.7 million, is being paid for by Orange County Waste and Recycling, which operates the Olinda Alpha landfill in Brea. The company provided the money because it is expanding its landfill operations.

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Shannon Lucas, an ecologist for the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority, looks at a recently planted California buckwheat. The planting is in part to re-establish habitat for native wildlife.

RESTORE

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Providing the money to the preservation authority for the restoration project makes up for land that will be lost to the landfill expansion, said John Arnau, habitat program manager for the landfill.

"We had some coastal sage scrub in our expansion area and we're required to mitigate for that," he said.

The preservation authority removed the trees two years ago to make the area more fire safe, Henderson said.

"There was a concern that if a Santa Ana wind blowing from Hacienda Heights caught the main brush in Turnbull Canyon, it would hit this forest of eucalyptus trees and cause this firestorm,"

Henderson said.

"They were afraid it could take out all the houses down to Whittier Boulevard," he added. "This is, in effect, a fire break."

But for two years, the area has been barren. Irrigation lines were installed last spring.

For a while, the area was watered to allow weeds to grow. Herbicide then was used to kill them. The goal was to exhaust the seed bank, Henderson said.

This week, crews have been doing what's called hydroseeding: spraying a mix of water, native seed and a fiber mulch. The process also includes a green dye that allows workers to know what area has been completed, said Shannon

Lucas, the authority's ecologist.

Once that's completed, actual plants will be put into the ground, because they will sprout up faster than seeds, Henderson said.

Once the plants are in the ground, the area will be watered for about two to three years. Crews from the company also will be doing hand weeding to remove the non-native plants that sprout up.

Eventually, the irrigation lines will be removed and the coastal sage scrub will be on its own.

The plants don't need much water, because they are considered drought-tolerant, Henderson said.

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