

The Newsletter of the



January 2022

President's Message

I started writing this message while camping in the desert of southern California. We were gone for pretty much the entire month of December. I thought it would be borderline dishonest to trumpet my love for Fitch Mountain and its inhabitants in this President's Message while not even being here. But thanks to the myriad ways to stay connected, we've been tracking the rainfall, the "snow" on Fitch Mountain, the rise and fall of the river, and quite a lot about the goings-on of our friends and neighbors.

Staying in touch and staying informed about what's going on in our community is important to most of us. Whether you live on the Mountain fulltime or just a few weekends a year. Whether you own or rent. Or maybe you've got an aging parent living on the Mountain that you care dearly about. To try to meet the need for information, the Fitch Mountain Association is evolving its communication strategy. The transition to MailChimp for our emails was the first step. We also plan to update the website to make it more useful for accessing up-to-date, relevant information and letting you communicate with the FMA trustees and officers. At its essence, the FMA is only useful if it can connect with every individual who lives on and/or cares about Fitch Mountain in the way they want to be connected with.

As we develop this communication plan, we'll continue to send MailChimp "eblasts" as things arise that we think you'll want to know about. And it's a two-way street—if there's something you think the FMA needs to know about, send me a note: patabercrombie@comcast.net. See you around the Mountain.

—Pat Abercrombie

Exclamations from the Editor

This was a Fun newsletter to work on! There's late-breaking news about our Zoom Fun Night on January 29th—it's on! See page 5. And there are many photos (I love photos!) of people doing great things for fire safety on and around the Mountain. See the COPE articles on page 2. And don't miss the amply illustrated guest article by Fire Marshal Linda Collister that starts on page 7!

Speaking of photos, here's one taken on the north side (? I'm geographically challenged) of the Mountain in January of 2021. You have to look closely! Let it be my '22 Happy New Year's exclamatory wish for all of us!

Yours, Ellen



Fitch Mountain Citizens Organized to Prepare for Emergencies (COPE)

Are you connected to COPE? Do you know who your neighborhood leader is? A visit to fitchmtn.org will link you to vital information related to your safety on the Mountain. Your Fitch Mountain COPE is affiliated with COPE Northern Sonoma County. We remain active, even in the winter months, meeting regularly via Zoom. Recent topics include septic regulations, wooden tank replacement, progress on the So. FM Rd. work, vacation rental ordinances review, relay radio project, annexation with the Northern Sonoma County Fire District, and fire hazard signs. What about those goats on the Mountain—fuels reduction, Sonoma County style!

Have you seen our Community Wild Fire Protection Plan (CWPP)? Check it out on our website (fitchmtn.org) under **Fire Prevention**. Another thing you can do right now: Does your home have reflective address signs? If not, go to fitchmtn.org and choose **Reflective Address Sign Program**. Be sure to read the testimonies from ambulance EMTs, firefighters, sheriff, and police about the challenges of locating addresses in a rural locale. Our goal for the start of 2022 is to increase the number of reflective house signs on the Mountain. COPE and FMA will partner on this project.

And speaking of signs....

Fire Hazard Signs for Fitch Mountain

You've probably already noticed the redwood frameworks at the north and south entrances to Fitch Mountain that were installed in early January. These **Fire Hazard Signs** were part of a larger project initiated in 2019 by Chief Marshall Turbeville's son Bryce, as part of his Eagle Scout project. With major support from the North Sonoma County Fire Protection District, Bryce and his mentor, Wes Brubacher, have installed six signs throughout the County. COPE and FMA championed the Fitch Mountain project through the initial phases, with many starts and stops along the way. The City of Healdsburg approval was a big part of the process. Two years later, it is finally completed.

Bryce's Eagle Scout project is behind him, but he stepped up to get the job done for Fitch Mountain during his winter break from college. We can all appreciate the eye-catching signs at both entrances, reminding residents and visitors alike that they are about to enter an extreme fire zone.



Above: Fire Department helps out; Center: Wes Brubacher and Bryce Turbeville; Right: Pat Abercrombie, Rhonda Bellmer, and Bryce



—Rhonda Bellmer

Roads Update

As anyone traveling around the Mountain the past few months knows, Fitch Mountain Rd. has gotten a lot of attention from Ghilotti Bros., thanks to funding by the County. After the paving and striping of South Fitch was completed, the FMA Road Safety Committee was informed that a couple significant portions of the road are, according to road code, too narrow for a center stripe. We have pushed back on this and hope to get at least some minimal striping approved. Driving this road at night without some indication of where the middle is, just seems unsafe. A section of the viaduct was damaged during paving. This will take some time to fix.

The culvert-repair portion of the North Fitch Rd. project is complete. The repaving and striping there have to wait until the infamous Slump and Slide projects are done. These large projects are funded by FEMA and administered by the Federal Highway Administration. Janice Thompson, the Deputy Director of Public Works, must work through CalTrans to get any information and has not been able to give us a date when construction will begin. As we all know, these projects are years behind schedule. We'll let you know as soon as we hear anything.

Given the abysmal condition of North Fitch, the FMA Road Safety Committee asked if the segment of the road from Del Rio to The Slide could be moved up and repaved right away. We were told no, the fixed costs of breaking North Fitch into two projects were prohibitive. As an aside, the Committee was told that the design for The Slide repair appears to spare the redwood trees across the road, "but no guarantees."

Septic Update

In their regular meeting on December 2nd, the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board unanimously approved the imposition of a pathogen Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) on most of the Russian River from Fitch Mountain to the ocean. The main ramifications will be:

- A full inventory of septic systems in these areas (i.e., every parcel with an Onsite Wastewater Treatment System (OWTS) within 600' of the river or a tributary must respond to a questionnaire certifying the characteristics of their system.
- A requirement that each OWTS owner have a basic operational inspection performed every 5 years and mitigate any negative findings.
- Replacement of all cesspools and other "substandard" OWTS with code-compliant systems within 15 years.
- Possible addition of "enhanced treatment components" to systems on parcels within 200' of river or tributary.

This must now be approved by the State Water Board next summer, the State's legal beagles by the Fall, and finally the Federal EPA, before it can be implemented. The FMA, as a member of the OWTS-Russian River Residents coalition, will continue to emphasize the need to make funding accessible for major repairs and upgrades.

CSA41—Our Fitch Water System

Water conservation and water loss along with system resiliency continue to be the main areas of focus of the FMA's Water District Advisory Committee (WDAC). The 338 homes within our system have done their part to conserve water since the April 2021 Governor's Emergency Declaration.

Despite the recent series of storms, the state water agency declares, "We are not out of the woods yet." As of January 3rd, Lake Mendocino is at 66% capacity and Lake Sonoma is at 68%.

The City of Healdsburg (from whom we buy our water) achieved a newsworthy 40% reduction in use while in a stage 3 conservation plan. That success has allowed a rollback to stage 2 (20%) since November. Our own CSA41 conservation figures indicate a 31% reduction across the system compared to last year. Thanks to all our users who did their part to reduce our consumption by almost 1/3! Keep it up!

The required Prop 218 hearing on adjustments to our water rates was held in November. Your WDAC requested that increases be held to the state-mandated minimum linked to the Consumer Price Increase (typically 2% - 3%). There were 25 protests from Fitch Mountain water customers. Since the WDAC serves only in an advisory capacity, we do not know the nature of the comments, so cannot address them. The virtual hearing with the Board of Supervisors gave our advisory Chairman, Pat Abercrombie, the chance to acknowledge the dedication, cooperation, and transparency of the Transportation and Public Works staff who work with our committee. Long-timers here will recall that we were without an active committee for nearly 20 years from 1993 until 2011 when Mike McGuire reinstated it.

Major accomplishments in 2021:

- Resolution of non-reporting meters.
- Installation of back-up generator and propane tank at South Fitch Mtn. pump station so that a power outage such as occurred during the Kincade Fire doesn't jeopardize our system.
- \$290,000 contract awarded for Storage Tank design (eventual replacement of redwood storage tanks).
- SCADA system (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition [monitoring?]) replacement and expansion.
- Approval of \$17,000 contract with Piazza Construction to increase the defensible space around the Madrone and Del Rio storage tanks.

Challenges: Our water loss figures, while within acceptable EPA standards, have begun to creep up once again. We are actively seeking to explain and resolve this issue. The California State Water Board notes that 92% of the state's 7,500+ public water systems each serve fewer than 1,000 connections. "Small public water systems are often less resilient to natural disasters, such as drought and fire, have more difficulty adjusting to regulatory changes, and may struggle to fund infrastructure maintenance and replacement due to poor economies of scale and lack of staff." The accomplishments above speak to the success and dedication of TPW and the committee operating and maintaining your 33-year-old system. We are doing well.

—Donita Proctor

Notes on Del Rio Woods

Our fall meeting of the Del Rio Woods Park Committee featured guest Ilana Stoelting, the new Supervising Park Ranger working at Memorial Beach. She said that Sonoma County Regional Parks (SCRP) appreciates our volunteers (Tim Pile and Tom Goodman) who open the gates at Del Rio every morning. We learned that the County is working to address “sign blight” via a multi-year project to streamline and create consistency in messaging at the parks. A new ordinance prohibits spraying, so Del Rio and other parks may appear weedy. This spring there will be some new plantings, and the EXIT letters and arrow on the parking lot pavement will be repainted. The funding that was projected to complete Phase II improvements described in my last report is no longer adequate; the additional amount may be accrued by 2024.

After this meeting, the Committee delivered a note of thanks to the SCRCP staff members for their important work. We plan to thank SCRCP staff members with a lunch in the summertime. As committee members and your neighbors, we welcome your participation, thoughts, and opinions—and we have snacks! Let me know if you’d like to be notified of our next meeting.

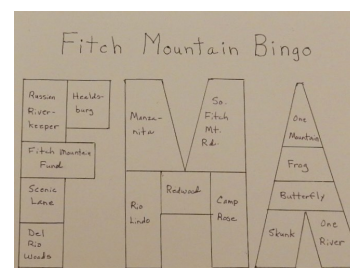
—Cathy Hodgson (thegatescompany@verizon.net)

Fun Night Is On!

Our Zoom Fun Night is on for the evening of Sat. Jan. 29th at 6:45/7:00. The Bingo part (*see sample card at right*) may be more modest in terms of games and prizes than on previous Fun Nights, but the Fun element of getting together this way with your Mountain neighbors and friends should be undiminished!

There is still time to sign up; email me by the 24th. And if you think you’ve already signed up but haven’t received confirmation from me, **let me know at ellensilge@yahoo.com**. I need all the e-mails so I can send out the Bingo cards and directions and cross-reference them with Zoom-creator Pat, who will send out the link as the time approaches.

Yours, Ellen



FMA Trustees and Officers Roster

Officers:

Pat Abercrombie, President 2018-2022 (707 473-8217, cell 415 509-4589; patabercrombie@comcast.net)

Grayson Hartley, Vice-President 2021-2023 (707 287-1631, graysonhartley@gmail.com)

Dana McKnight, Secretary 2021-2022 (cell 510 919-3129; mcknightdana2@gmail.com)

Marty Silge, Treasurer 2016-2023 (707 431-0814; martinsilge@yahoo.com)

Trustees:

Rhonda Bellmer 2020-2025 (cell 707 529-8383; rbellmer@me.com)

Cathy Hodgson 2020-2023 (cell 805 698-2633; thegatescompany@verizon.net)

Fergus O’Sullivan 2021-2025 (707 473-8335, cell 415 240-5588; kilbree@gmail.com)

Heather Pilatic 2021-2025 (707 723-4171, cell 415 694-8596; heather.pilatic@gmail.com)

Background and Update on the FMA's Restated Articles of Incorporation

As you know, in addition to electing new Trustees and Officers in the FMA Annual Meeting in July, we also asked you to approve a restatement of the FMA's Articles of Incorporation. The FMA was incorporated 42 years ago as a 501(c)(4) Nonprofit Corporation.

Fast forward to 2019. The FMA Board of Trustees decided to explore "converting" to a more flexible 501(c)(3) nonprofit. This was pursued mainly because a 501(c)(3) charter would enable the FMA to raise funds more easily in the form of grants specifically because those donations would be tax-exempt and most grant-making bodies restrict funds in this way.

A bit more background for those who care: While both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizational charters are nonprofit forms, a "c3" is defined as a public-benefit entity whose activities are exclusively devoted to educational, religious, or charitable works, whereas a "c4" is defined as a mutual-benefit entity whose activities may also include recreational and political lobbying activities. 501(c)(4)s are often civic organizations devoted to serving a specific community's interests.

To "convert" from a 501(c)(4) to a 501(c)(3), FMA would first have to restate our Articles of Incorporation to bring them up to date and align them with the Internal Revenue Service's requirements for 501(c)(3)s. These changes were proposed to the membership at the 2019 Annual Meeting and they passed. But when the Board delved deeper into the details of what the IRS was going to require in the way of restructuring and overhauling our bylaws, they decided not to pursue the 501(c)(3) designation.

In early 2021 the Board discovered that, since the 501(c)(3) designation was never pursued, there were a couple of changes made to the Articles of Incorporation that needed to be changed back to the way they were to be consistent with 501(c)(4). This re-restatement of the Articles of Incorporation, along with a few semantic changes, is what we asked the members to vote on this past July.

By virtue of some boilerplate legal language that made its way into the draft 2019 revisions, the threshold for approval was misstated as requiring a unanimous "yes" vote. We corrected this artifact in conversation with the FMA's attorney. Based on the true threshold of a simple majority, the resolution passed. The restated Articles of Incorporation document has been filed with the California Secretary of State, and we anticipate certification.

Healdsburg Fire Department Fuels Management Update

A Guest Article for the FMA Winter Newsletter by Linda Collister

Wow, we made it through the end of fire season with rain instead of “Red Flags.” I want to make sure to first thank Senator Mike McGuire’s office for their support to receive the Coastal Conservancy grants. We jumped in with both feet. Also, Healdsburg Fire was able to complete one of seven CalVTP (Vegetation Treatment Program - CEQA streamlined) projects approved in the State thanks to forester Jacob Harrower from Frontier Resource Management (FRM) and funding from Sonoma County Fire Prevention Division. With the support of Ag + Open Space, Fitch Mountain COPE, FMA, Northern Sonoma County Fire District, FRM, Healdsburg City Management, City Council and Chasin Goats Grazing, we were able to start fuels reduction on Fitch Mountain with herbivory (goats and sheep). With the rains and native seed replacing invasive species (poison oak, English ivy, Himalayan blackberries, etc.), we see a beautiful green carpet on the ground.

The grazers made their way around the perimeter of the Fitch Mountain Open Space Preserve. There were some areas that had to be avoided due to erosion or protected species such as the “Napa False Indigo.” Water during drought conditions was supplied by the Fitch Mountain Water System or City of Healdsburg. A big “thank you” to the community for keeping the hard-working animals hydrated. The grazers did escape on occasion and the owner was always responsive in coming to get the animals. The herders lived on City property during the project in travel trailers that are inspected by the health department.

We did have one person complain about the treatment of the dead and dying goats. The case was turned over to Northern Sonoma Animal Control. Chase Cianfichi, Dr. Stephanie Larson, and Sarah Keiser have created best management practices when working with the animals in public areas to avoid negative public perception.



Owner Chase Cianfichi is shown here walking with the animal control officer that inspected the herds.

The grazers completed 62.5 acres of clearing on the Fitch Mountain project. They laid the foundation for the fuels crew to follow.



Before and after pictures of grazing that the sheep and goats have done around the Villa Chanticleer.

The Northern Sonoma County Fuels Crew was able to start at the Villa Chanticleer and then moved to the top of Fitch Mountain to complete fuels removal. They worked along the Butterfly Trail and around the fire road at the top.



NSCFC made burn piles along the fire road following the grazers

The NSCFC did amazing work along the Butterfly Trail and around the north side of the fire trail at the top. This was the plan to burn the fire fuels at the top.



The NSFC made and covered burn piles to cure.

The piles were left to cure, and were then burned the weekend of December 11th during a dry spell. Yes, you heard that right. We burned on Fitch Mountain safely. We have two go-to persons that help Fire Marshal Collister from Healdsburg Fire. They are Reserve Fire Engineer Eric Smith and Reserve Battalion Chief Mark Basque. Engineer Smith helps with herders and firing operations, and BC Basque helped oversee the burning operations. Hopefully, we will see a lot more clearing on the top of the mountain. This is to stop or slow a fast-moving fire at the top of Fitch Mountain no matter what direction it comes from.



Smoke showing on Fitch Mountain. We received no 911 calls. That's good social media at work. This was taken courtesy of City Manager Kay.



The piles were burned with the help of Healdsburg Fire, Northern Sonoma County Fuels Crew, and CalFire.



BC Basque watching over the operations.

So what is in store for the future? Well, we are requesting for the community to have open minds. With the CalVTP completed, and with the approval with Ag + Open Space, we would like to follow a plan that will be created by our registered forester. This update to the existing vegetation management plan would address ongoing forest health, wildlife conservation, and fire resiliency. We are looking at this forest on the mountain surviving a fire. But we must work hard now to make this a healthy forest so the plants and wildlife can survive. As we listened to Clint McKay, the Indigenous Ecologist, we were reminded that letting the Open Space go wild is not healthy for the plants, birds, or wildlife. Fire has always been there throughout history, and we have stopped that. To get the forest where we can do a prescribed burn, we must get some fuels on the ground, and create separation between healthy trees. This is done carefully and with a lot of planning.

There is much more to do on and around Fitch Mountain to improve its defenses against fire. For example, we are seeking funding to remove *Arundo donax* from the banks of the river from Rio Lindo to south of Memorial Bridge. *Arundo* is both a fire hazard as well as a water waster. Mastication, grazing and hand-crew work is also planned for unimproved parcels around the border of the Fitch Mountain Preserve on private lands. Both projects can only be completed where property owner approval can be secured. So, we want to keep the community engaged in what we are doing. We will keep you posted as these projects mature. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to me, Linda Collister, Fire Marshal/Division Chief for the City of Healdsburg (lcollister@Healdsburg.gov).