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Here come the goats!

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy Andree Soares/Star Creek Land Stewards

defensible space, according to DFSC representative Cheryl Miller.

Last year the goats cleared 65 acres of the 144-acre open space in the Downs. "The goats get at what weed whackers can't," Leonard said. "They eat all the way down to the soil so you don't have any erosion."

Andree Soares, president of Star Creek Land Stewards, said that 450 goats will truck into Orinda on gooseneck trailers between May 8-10, depending on the weather. The first herd will stay for two weeks, then will be relieved by a new herd to finish the job. The project will last three weeks.

Soares explained that each goat removes nearly 5 pounds of organic dry matter per day, totaling over 45,000 pounds - more than 22 tons - of vegetation during the 21-day assignment. The goats will also excrete and deposit natural fertilizers and work them into the soil with their hooves.

The goats eat the majority of the time, sleeping as a group at night within their enclosures. An on-site herder, living in a trailer for the duration of the grazing project, mobilizes the animals to target the most high-risk areas identified within the Downs. A livestock protection dog lives with the goats and provides safekeeping from predators.

"Ultimately, these combined efforts improve soil health which increases its ability to absorb and retain precipitation and reduce erosive risks. It is really a win-win natural cycle on our landscapes," Soares said.

The scene at the grazing site last year brought visitors to the Downs for an unexpected reason: to view the action. Families stopped to look at, and listen to, the incessant chomp-chomp-chomp of the goats, and even learn a thing or two about focused job performance.

"MOFD is pleased to continue our partnership with engaged homeowners associations and the Diablo Fire Safe Council to encourage proactive fuels reduction projects," said Fire Chief Dave Winnacker. "The return of goats to graze the hills of the Orinda Downs is emblematic of the strength of these relationships and the community's commitment to creating a safer environment."

The Orinda Downs project is part of Winnacker's outreach to pull together various public agencies and neighborhoods to protect the district from wildfire threat. The chief has coordinated the district fire prevention efforts of PG&E, the East Bay Municipal Utility District and Cal Fire, and he encourages interested neighborhood associations to contact Leonard for fire prevention information.

For those who follow the chief's advice, the goats may soon become part of an annual tradition in their own Lamorinda neighborhoods.

MOFD Open House on May 5

Before the arrival of the goats, another harbinger of spring occurs in Lamorinda - the May 5 Moraga-Orinda Fire District Spring Open House. The event takes place from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. at Fire Station 45 at 33 Orinda Way in Orinda.

The theme of the open house is wildfire preparedness, and the district goal is to educate the public to prepare families and properties well in advance of a wildland fire, increase awareness of wildfire season, and

encourage residents to develop and implement a family disaster plan.

Open house attendees can learn how to administer CPR, tour fire apparatus, meet Smoky Bear and Sparky the Fire Dog and have lunch with the firefighters. The Moraga-Orinda Professional Firefighters Association donates all proceeds from the hot dog lunch to the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation.

The district holds a similar event in Moraga during October Fire Prevention Week.

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[back](#)

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