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Credit to: Team Rubicon
Accompanying photos: Courtesy Eric Hart

Team Rubicon Joins Forces with Local Volunteers for Fire Mitigation

Volunteers from Team Rubicon participated in a fire mitigation operation in Mendocino County recently, supporting local communities, fire safe councils, and homeowners’ groups as wildfire season begins in a time of extreme drought.

From April 16-18 Greyshirts – Team Rubicon’s volunteers trained in site assessment and mission planning, chainsaw operations, debris removal, and other skills – felled trees and cleared brush in an event that they coordinated with three local Fire Safe Councils (Pine Mountain Firewise, Ridgewood Fire Safe, and Sherwood Firewise) and the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council.

Greyshirts and volunteers from local Fire Safe and Firewise councils created defensible space and cleared evacuation routes of hazard trees from the January snowstorm. With 50 MPH winds and 14 inches of snow, the storm took down thousands of trees creating impassible rural roads and extreme fuel load and other hazards for residents.

Overall, thirteen Greyshirts in four strike teams along with local volunteers cleared a total of 543 cubic yards of debris. The project was so productive and successful that Team Rubicon plans to be back in the Willits area in June for an even larger effort. Contact information is below if you are interested in participating.

Eric Hart, chair of the Ridgewood Fire Safe Council and an experienced sawyer, who helped coordinate the community volunteers, fire departments, and Team Rubicon, became a Greyshirt at the end of the operation.

“As one of the local liaisons, I worked with Greyshirts all day every day they were here,” he said. “I really identified with Team Rubicon’s service principals and culture. They took the work seriously and worked like hell, but it wasn't just a task for them – they clearly cared.”

Watching Greyshirts climbing a 60-degree slope of sliding dirt and leaves with a pack full of chainsaws, sweating in full protective gear, including saw chaps, he said, “They saw it as a fun challenge. Whether it was how best to fell a tree or staying hydrated, they listened to each other, watched out for one another, supported each other, had each other's back. They treated everyone, inside the group and out, with respect.”
The operation was also an opportunity for sawyer training, as qualified Greyshirts learned new skills and got valuable “trigger time” on the chainsaws. Fire mitigation is a primary mission for Team Rubicon in Northern California, and providing training and field experience builds capacity to expand these operations.

Robert Madrid, Team Rubicon’s operations associate for Northern California, said, “We are really trying to expand our volunteer base in the Willits area. We’re planning additional fire mitigation operations in the area soon, and bringing in more local Greyshirts and providing training are key to helping support the community.”

Greyshirt David Henry of Santa Rosa, who was the lead for Team Rubicon’s assessment of the area and one of the mission planners, said, “We know from our planning that every dollar spent on fire mitigation can save $7 on response. These operations not only help build resilience, but they bring communities together and spread awareness of the importance of this work. Team Rubicon is committed to supporting local efforts by local communities.”

Military veterans, first responders, and civilians can join and deploy with Team Rubicon on domestic and international disaster operations, said Madrid, “If you’re committed to serving those in need, especially in your own community, there’s a spot for you on the Team.”

Eric Hart said, “Team Rubicon’s help opening up rural roads, cleaning up defensible space around houses and evacuation routes, and clearing out the fire fuel left from the storm was not only invaluable to the folks who live here but, if fire season is as bad as predicted, the help could very well be lifesaving.”

Team Rubicon serves communities by mobilizing veterans to deploy their skills and expertise in service of people seeking to prepare, respond and recover from disasters and humanitarian crises. Founded following the Haiti earthquake in 2010, the organization has grown to over 145,000 volunteers across the United States and has launched over 800 operations both domestically and internationally. Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, Team Rubicon has not only pivoted to be able to continue to deliver disaster response and rebuild services in core mission areas but has also expanded its scope of missions to meet community needs brought about by COVID. Visit www.teamrubiconusa.org for more information.

Our local Fire Safe Councils would like to thank Flying Dog Pizza, Mariposa Market, Northspur Brewing and Ridgewood Ranch/Church of the Golden Rule, each of which made generous contributions that helped make the Team Rubicon volunteers know that they were welcome and greatly appreciated by the community.