

State parks, Coca-Cola, Stater Bros. to help 'reforest California'

BY MIKE LEE

TUESDAY, APRIL 7, 2009 AT 2 A.M.



California State Parks Ranger Heidi Addison observed Jeffrey pine seedlings yesterday in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park. It is hoped the seedlings will replace trees that were wiped out by wildfires. (Laura Embry / Union-Tribune)

EAST COUNTY — California State Parks will launch a partnership with Coca-Cola and Stater Bros. Supermarkets tomorrow to plant up to 1 million seedlings at two state parks, including Cuyamaca Rancho in East County.

Parks Director Ruth Coleman said her agency doesn't have the money to replant thousands of acres burned by wildfires in recent years, so it's turning to the private sector for help with Cuyamaca and Chino Hills State Park northwest of Corona. "Reforest California" is State Parks' first major fundraising partnership for tree planting.

"Coca-Cola and Stater Bros. are handing us a crucial lifeline at just the right time," Coleman said, referring to state budget cuts.

DETAILS

"Reforest California"

What: Fundraising campaign to pay for up to 1 million new trees at two state parks, including Cuyamaca Rancho

Who: Partnership involves Coca-Cola, Stater Bros. Supermarkets and California State Parks

When: Will run tomorrow through May 19

Where: All Stater Bros. stores in Southern California

Online: reforestcalifornia.com

The campaign will run through May 19 at all 166 Stater Bros. stores in Southern California, including the 11 in North County. Money will come from two main sources: Customers will be asked at the checkout counter if they want to contribute, and Coca-Cola will donate \$1 for every \$10 of purchases of its soft drinks and Dasani water at Stater outlets.

People also can contribute online at reforestcalifornia.com or through a Facebook cause page.

It will take roughly \$500,000 to pay for 1 million trees. The seedlings will be planted in stages to develop multi-age

forests at Cuyamaca, which burned in 2003, and Chino Hills State Park, which burned last year.

Money raised by the campaign also will pay for signs about fire prevention at a handful of state parks in Southern California.

The 2003 Cedar fire essentially wiped out the conifer forests at Cuyamaca, which reports more than 1 million visits annually.

State Parks officials generally avoid replanting efforts in favor of letting nature take its course. But the blaze scarred Cuyamaca so deeply that the fir forests mostly have not regenerated after more than five years.

In 2008, parks officials started a pilot planting project using inmate labor. That program has barely made a dent in the 25,000-acre park.

“Right now, we are going hand-to-mouth ... using money taken from other parts of the budget,” said Mike Wells, a top parks official in the region. “To have a commitment of resources (from the promotion) would mean being able to plan for several years in advance.”

The reforestation campaign will pay for Coulter, Jeffrey and sugar pines at Cuyamaca. The plantings at Chino Hills include black walnut, live oak and sycamore.

Stater Bros. CEO Jack Brown has a long association with Southern California forests, including as a “hot shot” firefighter in the region more than 40 years ago.

“Reforesting the area where we have had fire damage is absolutely the right thing to do . . . so future generations can enjoy what we had,” Brown said.

During the promotion, his chain will feature Coke products and special displays.

For the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Southern California in Los Angeles, the sponsorship signals a move toward community-driven efforts.

“We really took a mindset shift from giving away vehicles and giving away TVs to more 'cause' marketing,” said Terence Fitch, the company's vice president and general manager. “This is going to be the first of many efforts along this line.”

The reforesting partnership was pieced together by Government Solutions Group, a Pasadena-based company that matches private firms with public agencies. The arrangement doesn't allow Coca-Cola and Stater Bros. to advertise in the parks.

“It's not like we are naming anything or putting up ads,” Coleman said. “It's one of the things that makes state parks different from baseball diamonds.”

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