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U.S. grant rescues state tree nursery;
The Forest Service will provide \$150,000 to cover seedlings' care for one year.

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The federal government sent California some holiday cheer Wednesday in the form of a \$150,000 gift to keep open for another year a state-run nursery harboring more than 2 million native tree seedlings.

The longtime program, to provide genetically suitable seedlings for forests devastated by events like fire or insect infestations, was closed Oct. 1, a casualty of state budget cuts. The future also looked shaky for an irreplaceable seed bank representing wild conifers growing throughout the state's forests.

But when Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, a former California state official, read about the financial threat to the program, which has been running since 1887, she asked if the federal government could help, according to Mark Rey, agriculture undersecretary.

Rey said he called budget officials with the U.S. Forest Service, which is a part of the Agriculture Department, and they said yes.

California Resources Secretary Mike Chrisman praised the "rapid response" by the USDA and the Forest Service in providing emergency funding.

Bill Snyder, deputy director of resource management for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, which runs the nursery and seed bank, expressed gratitude.

"This was a very unusual and generous outreach on their part," Snyder said. "That will give us enough to keep a heartbeat in the program."

The funds mean nursery Manager Bill Morrison and his staff can start pruning and, later this spring, fertilizing, watering and weeding the more than 2 million seedlings of native oaks, pines and firs - among other species - growing at the state's 15-acre nursery in Magalia in the foothills of Butte County.

Before the funding was announced, Morrison had planned to minimally tend to the trees, on the chance that state funding would be restored in the coming fiscal year. If not, the seedlings were destined to die.

Instead, seedlings in robust health will be available next year for purchase as bare-root stock by forest owners in the state.

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The nursery fills a role that no commercial nursery can afford to take on, as it plants seedlings "on speculation" for areas deemed most at risk for devastating events, such as forest fires or disease outbreaks.

The importance of planting tree seedlings genetically suited to a region can't be overemphasized, said Rick Standiford, associate dean for forestry at the University of California, Berkeley.

He said one of the first lessons new foresters learn is to never plant trees that are adapted to another region or elevation, as they're more likely to die when stresses such as drought, cold or pathogens strike, leaving dead wood that raises fire danger.

"It creates more fuel hazards; it creates a vicious cycle," he said.

The surprise federal funding also gives the state's seed bank a reprieve. Foresters consider the bank an invaluable resource, as the 36,000 pounds of seeds in cold storage in Davis contain the entire genetic legacy of the state's coniferous forest species.

"The seed bank was certainly the priority," said Snyder. The unique resource was considered so important that the department was ready to "beg, borrow or steal funding from some other sources" to keep it open. But the federal aid keeps the state forestry department, whose primary mission is fire protection, from cutting into another already strapped program. The federal funding will pay for staff to maintain the seed bank.

The millions of conifer seeds in the bank come from forests throughout the state and represent a form of genetic insurance for the state's forests. There's no commercial equivalent to the state seed bank.

The \$150,000 federal grant provides enough for another year's operation, but the program's future still remains uncertain.

Considering that the state's budget woes may last for years, it's possible the state nurseries may merge operations with similar nurseries run by the U.S. Forest Service, the USDA's Rey said.

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