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Ricardo Raya honored for work on La Honda fuel break

Conservation district names nature champion

By Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff
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Pacifica resident Ricardo Raya has been honored with the San Mateo Resource Conservation District’s inaugural nature champion award, honoring his work on a 19-mile fuel break project in La Honda.

The fuel break protects approximately 1,000 residents of La Honda, as well as recreational lands and community services, through the removal of dense vegetation and ladder fuels like small trees and bushes that can carry fires into the tree canopy.

Raya, who grew up in nearby Half Moon Bay, has been leading the hand labor crew on the Resource Conservation District fuel break project since July and said safety of employees and the community is always his first priority.

“Safety is our number one priority — just making sure everybody’s safe, making sure nobody gets hurt,” he said. “I like my job, so just for me to be recognized, that makes me feel good, [but] I just do it because I like it.”

Raya, an employee of Brush Hog Tree Care, works with a team mowing debris, taking dead trees out and removing fuel vegetation to protect the La Honda community.

The award — intended to honor on-the-ground laborers carrying out critical conservation work — was presented to him by state Sen. Josh Becker, D-Menlo Park, and Assemblymember Marc Berman, D-Palo Alto, according to a press release from the Resource Conservation District.

“Mr. Raya is an example of how wildfire resiliency can be carried out with precision, dedication, and care for the natural world,” Berman said, per the press release.

The Resource Conservation District provides resources and establishes funding for a variety of conservation-related projects in San Mateo County, including water quality protection, habitat restoration and improving forest health and wildfire resilience, Executive Director Kellyx Nelson said.

The nature champion award was born from a desire to showcase the individuals making those projects possible in a tangible way, Nelson said. Raya’s work has been exceptionally thoughtful and meticulous.

“We wanted to highlight the actual people on the ground, who are doing that work by hand,” she said. “We had a number of projects moving forward this year, and we asked our staff to identify anyone who’s exceptional.”

The Resource Conservation District plays different roles depending on project need, but always offers confidential and nonregulatory technical assistance, Nelson said.

“Sometimes we just provide people with technical assistance. Sometimes we implement projects. Sometimes we help with hazard mitigation,” she said. “It’s a lot of different ways that we work. We’re kind of like a Swiss Army knife of conservation.”

For Raya, the award serves as motivation to continue the kind of work he’s been doing.

“It makes me more motivated to do the job that I’m doing, and makes me want to work even harder and even better than what I’m doing ... and help, maybe, other people do the same thing,” he said.

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