

Snapshots

Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



February 13, 2004

California

Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council Community Assistance Grants Help Save Homes in Southern California

The 2003 firestorm in southern California will be remembered for its victims, heroes, destruction and strife. Also remembered are the lessons about empowerment and collaboration, where preparation and planning played an important role in protection from wildfire. Such is the case of the Lytle Creek Fire Council.

In two out of the three years since its inception, the Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council has received funding through the Bureau of Land Management's Community Assistance Program. These grants help empower local non-profit groups with guidance and resources to reduce wildfire threats in their community. Projects emphasize hazardous fuel reduction, fire protection planning, community risk assessments, and community fire prevention education.



The 2003 fire came all the way up to the defensible space created behind these homes. None were burned.



Chuck Hewitson and Ryne Hoepfner, members of the Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council, work with neighbors to remove hazardous fuels.

With BLM funding, Lytle Creek's Fire Safe Council was able to work with residents in a community of about 1,000 people in an area approximately eight-miles long to create defensible space around 95 percent of the homes. The fire safe council defensible space project, in combination with U.S. Forest Service fuel breaks along national forest lands adjacent to the community, was their saving grace during the 2003 firestorm.

As the fires fed on upon the hills during the warm and windy days of October,

Lytle Creek evacuations progressed until firefighters were pulling out of town. Jack Kennedy, a fire battalion chief, who'd worked with the council, spoke to the fire incident commander about holding firefighters in place. The community had done their job in creating defensible space and

now the firefighters would use that space to defend it.

"At one point, this community had been completely surrounded by wildfire" recalled Ellen Pollema, Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council president. But, with the heroic efforts of firefighters, and the planning and preparations done by the council membership, only 18 of 350 homes were lost to the fire.

Similar success stories throughout California are being collected by the California Fire Safe Council, demonstrating the importance of community-level collaborations in creating a fire safe environment.



The fire safe council worked with a disabled homeowner to remove branches away from her house and garage just weeks before the fire. Homes across the street were lost, but hers was saved.

For more information about the California Fire Safe Council contact Bruce Turbeville, Chairman, at (916) 762-2757. Questions related to the Lytle Creek Fire Safe Council can be directed to Ellen Pollema at (909) 466-7388.

BLM contact: Miriam H. Morrill, Fire Mitigation & Education Specialist, California State Office (916) 978-4436

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Hazardous Fuels Project Brings Rural Community Together for Fire Prevention Week

In October 2003, the Bureau of Land Management Bishop Field Office led an interagency group of firefighters, volunteers, and homeowners in a project to reduce hazardous fuels across a square mile of private property adjacent to BLM land.

This hazardous fuels project helped protect the communities of Chalfant, West Chalfant, and White Mountain Estates and



Bishop BLM fire personnel and Inyo National Forest Crew 3 hard at work feeding a chipper during the Chalfant Hazardous Fuels Removal Project.

brought them together in support of Fire Prevention Week. By overcoming attitude barriers BLM was able to help create defensible space around houses and educate the community about fire safety behaviors such as installing smoke detectors and developing escape plans.

With interagency collaboration, and public support, this project went off without a hitch. After project completion, a community party was thrown in celebration of Fire Prevention Week efforts which started in 2002 to help educate Californians about the dangers of

fire around the home and how to prevent them. BLM works to find new and innovative ways each year to engage local communities in collaborative projects for wildfire safety and preparedness.

Contact: Robert Bertolina, BLM Bishop Field Office (760) 647-3028

Rural Fire Assistance Program Rates High in California

The heart of fire protection in many California communities is the rural and volunteer fire department. These local stations are staffed by neighbors, friends and family members who care about the safety and welfare of their community. They are often understaffed, under funded and lacking training and fire equipment.

With an ever increasing wildland urban interface, bug killed forests, and altered fire regimes, California firefighters need up-to-date training and equipment to be safe and effective in these extreme wildfire conditions. The critical need for rural departments is to be self-sufficient in order to lead their communities in wildfire preparedness.

Many grassroots efforts in fire safety and preparedness receive much needed funding through the National Fire Plan. An important component of the National Fire Plan is Rural Fire Assistance, which offers partnerships and funding toward improving rural fire department safety and fire fighting capabilities.



Rural fire departments provide critical public safety response to local communities. Here, a firefighter uses the "jaws of life" at an automobile accident.

The Bureau of Land Management's Rural Fire Assistance program in California has been expanding to meet the growing needs of local communities. In 2001, BLM



Henri and Darren from the Butte County Fire Rescue, one of the 2004 RFA grant recipients, pose with new firefighting and rescue equipment.

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provided funding to 16 rural fire departments. In 2002, it reached 25, and by 2003 expanded to include 83 departments across the state. These cumulative efforts have improved fire fighting capabilities in well over 100 communities across the state.

Rural fire departments and local fire safe councils continue to sing the praises of BLM's Community and Rural Fire Assistance Programs. Communities are growing stronger and becoming more self-sufficient in their Firewise activities and the BLM continues to support and collaborate in their efforts.

Contact: Miriam Morrill, BLM California State Office, (916) 978-4436

Montana

Flint Creek Watershed Assessment, Western Montana

The BLM Missoula Field Office, in conjunction with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Pintler Ranger District, has conducted a watershed assessment in the Flint Creek drainage surrounding the towns of Philipsburg and Maxville, Montana.

The Flint Creek Valley was historically a mining and ranching community but has now grown to include many vacation and recreation homes scattered throughout the area.

Philipsburg is home to 930 people and the Maxville area has 150-200 year around residents. The majority of the land surrounding these towns, associated subdivisions and outlying ranches is in federal or state ownership. The U.S. Forest Service is the major public landholder with BLM and then the Montana Department of Natural Resource and Conservation managing adjoining fragmented ownership.

Collaboration with federal and state agencies as well as private individuals and ranches is necessary in order to achieve large scale hazardous fuel reduction objectives and restore forest health on the landscape level. The watershed assessment highlighted areas changed from their historic natural vegetation resulting in increased susceptibility to catastrophic wildfire or insect and disease epidemics. These areas needed a form of vegetation treatment to assist in restoring historic patterns, species mix and density. Records include photos taken in some of

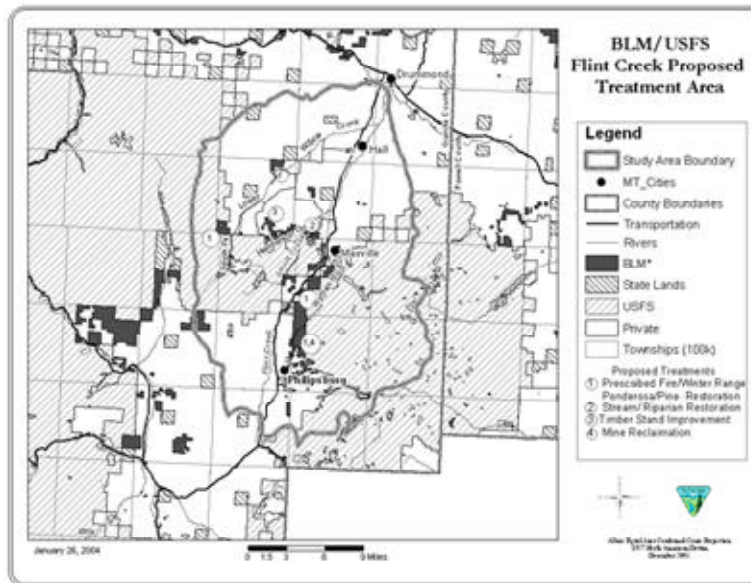
the project area between 1906 and 1908 that show open bunchgrass parks and meadows with conifer stringers. Current conditions in the same area are continuous second growth conifer coverage of stagnant, dense Douglas-fir stands with very few meadows and parks present.

The interdisciplinary team consisted of resource specialists from both the U.S. Forest Service Pintler Ranger District and BLM Missoula Field Office. Foresters from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation were included in team field trips and meetings in order to facilitate planning of joint projects on adjacent land.

The watershed assessment and associated environmental assessment have identified approximately 2,100 acres for landscape burning treatment. Of this, 60 percent is BLM, 25 percent forest service and 5 percent private ownership. The remaining ten percent is managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and

Conservation, which is also planning on participating in the burn implementation but has done separate planning and National Environmental Policy Act analysis.

The three agencies and multiple private owners and ranchers will work together to organize and implement the burns. Additional treatments will involve timber sales to remove commercial value wood, burning, and pre-commercial thinning along with additional stream restoration and weed control.



Flint Creek Watershed Assessment: An overview map of the BLM/USFS Proposed Treatment Areas.

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Implementation is proposed to begin in 2005 to 2006. The U.S. Forest Service is working to add 1,500 acres of hazardous fuel reduction treatments and burning on land near some of the joint treatment areas.

This planning and implementation process emphasizes a multi-agency and ownership collaborative effort to restore and improve the health of the forest and rangeland while reducing hazardous fuel and risk of catastrophic wildfire near and within the wildland urban interface of Philipsburg and Maxville, Montana.

Contact: Shelagh Fox, (406) 329-3909

Lower Blackfoot River Corridor Hazardous Fuel Reduction Projects, Western Montana

Montana's Missoula Field Office has been implementing fuels projects since 2001 within the Lower Blackfoot Corridor. Landscape and environmental assessments identified wildfire, disease and insect infestation threats. The hazardous fuel

reduction projects located in strategic areas between public and private land are designed to act as fuel breaks to reduce the rate of wildfire spread and to assist in containment of wildfires. Additional objectives include improving big game winter range by stimulating shrub species. The fuel treatments incorporate a variety of fuel treatment methods. The planning identified 1,300 acres for prescribed burning and 2,500 acres for pre-commercial thinning needed in the first 5 years.

The Lower Blackfoot Corridor contains a 12,000 acre parcel of BLM managed land adjacent to the Blackfoot River. BLM manages approximately 12 miles of frontage along the river which is a popular summer recreation area near Missoula receiving 15,000 to 25,000 visitors a year, primarily during peak fire season. Private homes are clustered along the river adjacent to BLM boundaries.

The BLM public lands in this area are characterized by ponderosa pine stands with Douglas-fir encroachment scattered

throughout and Douglas-fir/western larch on the moister north slopes. Historically, low elevation ponderosa pine stands burned at a low intensity but with fire exclusion the area is now overstocked with relatively dense stands of small



Spring hand ignition burn. The majority of the larger ponderosa pine with the bark on fire in the photo survived this burn.

diameter trees and at high risk for severe wildfires or insects/disease epidemics.

During the last 3 years 850 acres have been prepared for prescribed burning and another 200 acres will be prepared in 2004. Limited burn windows have existed in the last two years but 62 acres of burning have been accomplished so far with 788 acres designated for burning through helitorch and hand ignition this year and 200 acres to be burned in 2005. The burns were prepared and implemented on an interagency basis consisting of three U.S. Forest Service district fire crews, smokejumpers, Lolo Hotshots and BLM personnel from the western zone. The prescribed fires have reduced ladder fuels under the mature ponderosa pine and created openings in the canopy. They will encourage new shoot growth on serviceberry and increase fescue production.

Mechanical treatments have or are occurring over 1,373 acres in visually and sensitive areas containing fisheries and cultural resources. The number of trees per acre was reduced by an average of 60 to 80 percent. Ponderosa pine and western larch were favored over Douglas-fir trees



A chipping machine at work in the Lower Blackfoot River Corridor.

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to move species composition towards historical conditions.

Mechanical fuels reduction utilizing saw work has been completed on 1,013 acres. A contract with local small business completed 850 acres with the remainder treated by the Lolo National Forest Missoula Ranger

District Fire Crew. An additional 115 acres of saw work will be completed this year. Mechanical treatments also include thinning, then chipping or grinding the residual slash in the highest recreational use areas including the main travel route through the Lower Blackfoot River Corridor. One hundred sixty-three acres of this project has currently been completed by a local contractor with another 82 acres to be completed in 2004.

When complete, these hazardous fuel reduction treatments will create canopy



A sawyer works at thinning a patch of Douglas-fir.



A grinding machine thinning and reducing residual slash at the same time.

breaks, lighter fuel loading, and significantly reduce fire hazard and the risk of catastrophic wildfire in this popular recreation area.

Contact: Shelagh Fox, (406) 329-3909

South Dakota

Wildland Urban Interface Fuels Reduction Project

Work is continuing over the winter months on an interagency fuels reduction project in South Dakota. The project is a cooperative effort between BLM, Meade County, State of South Dakota and private landowners in the Blucksburg Addition subdivision near Fort Meade.

The main purpose of this project was to create a fuel break around the subdivision by treating BLM, state and private lands. The area was overgrown with ponderosa pine regeneration, and created a fire hazard not only on the surface but also the

possibility of a crown fire because the larger diameter trees had close crown spacing. The objectives were to clear out most of the small regeneration and open the spacing between the tops of the larger trees to within 20-25 feet. Most hardwoods in the area were left standing to create a natural fuel break, because hardwoods such as aspen and oak are less susceptible to fire ignition.

The homeowners in the area have supported the project. With the help of the Meade County Commission, Blucksburg homeowners can qualify for a cost share program to help reduce hazardous fuels around their property. Fuels loads, topography and survivable space determine who is eligible to be reimbursed for approved fuels reduction projects. There are 191 primary structures in the addition, and the most recent numbers show that 78 homeowners qualify for the program. So far 17 have submitted requests for cost sharing assistance.

The South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire Suppression is assisting by treating 46 acres with commercial thinning, 20 acres with pre-commercial thinning and ten acres of pine encroachment by clear cutting. When the treatments are done, they will be hand piled and burned.



BLM land adjacent to the subdivision prior to treatment.

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BLM's Fort Meade Fuels Module is currently burning approximately 500 hand piles in a 40 acre area. These piles were constructed last summer with the assistance of a 20 person crew from the South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire Suppression and three members from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The eight foot cubic piles of material are being burned over the winter as conditions permit. Local residents can also use the material for firewood. Once all the piles are disposed of, the pile burn areas will be raked and seeded to prevent the spread of noxious weeds.



After thinning, piles were constructed.



South Dakota Division of Wildland fire burned mechanically constructed piles.



A BLM Fort Meade module crew member lighting off one of the hand piles.



A BLM Fort Meade module crew member lighting off one of the hand piles.

Alaska

Fuels Project near Delta Junction Resumes

BLM's Alaska Fire Service, working with the U.S. Army, is converting a stand of forest from black spruce to hardwoods. The conversion project involves an area about five miles long and 75-150 yards wide, and will protect residential areas near Delta Junction from potential wildfires sparked by training activities on Fort Greely.

Alaska Fire Service and U.S. Army crews worked last summer to hand-thin and remove the spruce component from existing hardwood stands and to thin out spruce in pure spruce stands. They thinned 37 acres, making 630-plus piles that were burned over the winter. Work will resume in March, when a contractor will treat another 88 acres with a shear blade and a hydroax.

The treated area blends with the landscape in a lazy curve design. The work is expected to make the stand less flammable and create a point from which to begin attack on a fire. A three-phase process was designed, including ecosystem manipulation and community involvement. Different mechanical treatments are being applied in other areas to determine which is the most effective and cost efficient. The one that meets the criteria will dictate what happens along the rest of the curve.

The second phase involves community participation. Alaska Fire Service and the army will work with Alaska Division of Forestry and private homeowners to encourage community fire preparedness by stressing homeowner's responsibility in

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taking the initiative to prepare their houses and property for fire.

The third phase will involve clearance of black spruce stands in a series of polygons that will be used to break up the continuity of the fuels and reduce likelihood of high-intensity crown fires. A detailed assessment will be conducted of wildland fire fuels south of the project.

Once the three phases are completed the project will require occasional maintenance. Hardwood regeneration is expected within the first two years. Any spruce growth will be removed every five years to maintain the hardwood component.

Delta Junction and Fort Greely, located in the Tanana Valley near the confluence of the glacier-fed Delta River and the Clearwater River, have experienced some close calls from wildfires. In addition to the volatile black spruce, which surrounds the communities like a sea, the area is subject to frequent chinook winds from the Alaska Range.

The North Jarvis Stand Conversion Project is one of several joint initiatives that underway to prepare military lands for fire. As the urban-wildland interface continues to grow and as U.S. Army in Alaska expands its mission, managers must think ahead for fire-readiness. The BLM Alaska Fire Service-U.S. Army partnership has allowed them to move forward in this challenge.

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Alaska Fire Service Denali Hot Shot Crew in an area of thinned spruce.



An area treated with the shear blade promotes hardwoods.