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Colorado

Students learn about Wildland Urban Interface Planning

On April 15, 2001 approximately 70 students from the Montrose Centennial Junior High School took a field trip to the Pinon Hills Estates subdivision, a wildland urban interface area 20 minutes from Montrose, Colorado. Their task for the day was to develop a fire mitigation plan for one of the homes in the subdivision. The homeowners have been working with the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) district forester and the Montrose Interagency Fire Management (BLM/FS) fire ecologist to complete a mitigation project around their home. They were enthusiastic about having the students develop a mitigation plan for their property.

To prepare the students for the field trip, a core team of teachers (science, social studies, and language arts) at the Centennial Junior High School worked with the Montrose Interagency fire education specialist and fire ecologist, the CSFS district forester, and the Montrose County Under Sheriff to conduct a series of five classes taught at the school to introduce the students in that block to the basics of fire behavior, maps and land/agency ownership, firewise/mitigation planning, and community emergency planning. Throughout the classes, the students completed a fire mitigation plan for their school to familiarize them with the components of the plan and to help them understand the multiple levels of planning in the wildland urban interface.

Fire ecologist teaching science students about fuel moisture.

Shortly after the classroom sessions, the students embarked on the field trip to the Pinon Hills Estates. They rotated among four stations on site where they conferred with federal, state, and county fire and emergency managers to produce or gather information on: weather and topography, fuels and burning conditions, firewise/home protection, emergency preparedness and evacuation. Five volunteers from the local chapter of the American Red Cross were also on site to help them develop their plans.

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They talked to homeowners to get information about the area, returned to the school and had the remainder of the day to work in teams to complete fire mitigation plans. The students had the next three weeks to develop a public presentation of their findings. Some developed websites, while others developed brochures or put together posters, which were presented in class to the fire education specialist and the homeowners. Plans now are to present their work in a public forum.

Students worked with American Red Cross volunteers and Colorado state forest service official to complete mitigation plans.

Students talk to a homeowner to gather information about the subdivision.

This fire mitigation education project was funded by a grant from GreenWorks!, environmental education and community action program of the American Forest Foundation's Project Learning Tree (PLT). BLM also contributed a portion of the funding for PLT fire education programs.

A partnership among the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS), the Montrose Interagency Fire Management Program (BLM/FS), and the Montrose Centennial Junior High School made the project possible. The Montrose County Sheriff's department and the local chapter of the American Red Cross also played a vital role. The objective of the project was to require students to learn and apply science, math, social management, and language arts within a natural context that would engage them in the complex interrelationship between human and natural communities.

Preparatory classes and the field trip were designed to integrate learning across these disciplines. The immediate goal of this project was to have the students understand and complete a fire mitigation plan. However, the more global goal of the project was to introduce students to the complexity of planning in the wildland urban interface.

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Montrose Centiennial junior high students present their findings with poster aids and model homes.

County Fire Planning Proceeds, BLM is Partner

This is the second installment in a series on county fire planning and off-shoots from this project in Moffat County, Colorado. For background information on the Moffat County Fire and Fuel Management Plan please refer to Snapshots, Feb. 7, 2002, Colorado.

The Moffat County Fire Plan has been a springboard for collaborative efforts that go beyond planning meetings. A progression of public open houses, presentations and partnerships continue to develop as those needs have been identified. Fire staff from the Little Snake Field Office BLM in Craig, Colorado attend and participate in public meetings hosted by Moffat County as it continues the scoping process of local fire planning.

At BLM's invitation, the County Fire Planner attended the BLM staff meetings on hazardous fuel reduction projects located in the Phase 1 area of the county fire plan to gain insight on the various issues considered (such as wildlife, cultural, range) while still in the planning stage. Within the Phase 1 area of the county fire plan is Greystone, a community which has been identified as "at risk" from wildland fire.

BLM hosted a public open house, March 10, to discuss details of proposed hazardous fuel reduction projects that border or involve private land and ties-in with the county fire plan. Moffat County Commissioners and the natural resource advisor for the county were invited to participate. Other partners and interested agencies included the Moffat County Sheriff's Department, Fish and Wildlife Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and the local volunteer fire department. All wanted to learn more about the BLM fuel reduction projects and show support for the county fire plan.

Moffat County taking a role in on-the-ground fire management is a new concept and questions concerning the county fire plan and its relationship to BLM's proposed

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hazardous fuel reduction projects and fire management plan are being asked. The open house format provided an ideal opportunity to exchange ideas and answer questions about fire use, hazardous fuel treatments, planning and avenues available to accomplish mitigation work on private land. Moffat County Commissioner, T.Wright Dickinson, did an outstanding job addressing the public during an informal discussion that developed before closing the open house. He gave an overview of how the county and federal fire plans complement each other, benefits of managing fire on a landscape scale across ownership boundaries, and future partnership possibilities.

As a result of the open house, a field tour was set up by the BLM fire ecologist who met with private land owners May 10, to talk about fire behavior, long range effects of fuel reduction projects, and differences between using mechanical means and fire to conduct fuel treatments. This provided another opportunity to share knowledge about fire effects and encouraging people to think for the long term. Landowners were able to understand and see the process taking place in regard to the encroachment of juniper trees, which are creating a continuous fuel bed leading right to their homes. In return, BLM realized the need to present proposed actions in plain language so the public can visualize the outcome of the projects. This collaborative effort is and continues to be an evolving educational process on all levels.

BLM fire ecologist Charley Martin, landowners Kathy and Tom Bassett, on ATV, John Vaughn and Tom Burton.

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Oregon

Bly Mountain Interface fuels reduction project – Oregon/ Washington BLM Lakeview District

The small rural community of Klamath Forest Estates is located on Bly Mountain, approximately 20 miles northeast of Klamath Falls, Oregon. The rural subdivision is adjacent to BLM lands on the east and south sides, and there are small parcels of BLM land within the community. The town of Bonanza is approximately five miles south of Klamath Forest Estates.

Klamath Forest Estates is a small rural subdivision that has several hundred home sites carved out of the dry landscapes on the east side of the Cascades. The homes are surrounded by decadent brush, overcrowded timber stands, and ground and ladder fuels. There are many undeveloped lots next to homes that may not have defensible space for wildfire protection. There is no natural fire break around most of the subdivision.

Typical home in Klamath Forest Estates, a wildland-urban interface.

Bly Mountain BLM land adjacent to Klamath Forest.

The Bly Mountain Interface fuels reduction project consisted of more than 4,000 acres of tree thinning, brush removal, slash piling and burning on public land in and around Klamath Forest Estates. Most of the work was done by contract crews using chainsaws and piling the slash by hand. The piles have been covered and will be burned after drying. Shaded fuel breaks were created beside existing roads, and concentrations of brush and trees were thinned to break up continuous fuels.

The summer of 2001 was a difficult year for agricultural workers in the Klamath Basin due to water shortages; increased unemployment was an important problem for local communities. Although the primary goal of this project was to reduce dangerous fuel loadings in the wildland-urban interface area, a very important secondary objective was to provide temporary jobs for displaced farm workers in the Klamath Basin. Increased funding that was allocated to the BLM Lakeview District was spent through an existing contract awarded to two private contractors, who recruited approximately 35 local workers and two local subcontractors to complete the work. This project was conceived in an effort to be responsible land managers, and good neighbors.

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Contract crew performing chainsaw thinning and hand piling on BLM land at Bly.

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) is a cooperator in this effort through the existing Master Assistance Agreement between the State of Oregon and the BLM, and has taken the lead in public outreach, community relations and assessment of risk for the Bly Mountain project. ODF employees went to every house to inform the inhabitants about the purpose in reducing the fuels on public lands surrounding the subdivision, and to ask for their cooperation in clearing defensible space around their houses. ODF also rated each home for its ability to survive a wildfire, in order to allocate resources in case of a wildfire emergency.

BLM has initiated a computer program that will help ODF in keeping and analyzing the information on each individual home, including the fire danger posed by their occupancy, need for improvements, and the cooperative efforts gained through this contact. The program consists of a map of the subdivision that is linked to a spreadsheet. ODF personnel have entered the pertinent facts about the home and grounds, date of contact, and results. This information is linked to a GIS database so that the exact lot location and relevant data can be pulled up at any time, including in a wildfire situation, to identify where prevention measures have been completed, and where suppression personnel can be most effective.

There are more acres remaining to be thinned and piled, and the piles will be burned after they have cured and dried. The ODF is working with private individuals and rural fire departments (RFDs) to provide small grants to homeowners who agree to do their own work to ODF standards, to help defray the cost of cleaning up fuels from the private lands. ODF and the RFDs will even help with the physical labor for individuals who are unable to perform the work themselves.

Access to subdivision showing young juniper encroachment before treatment.

BLM's actions under the National Fire Plan will encourage many citizens in the effort to make their homes fire safe, and will gain patience and understanding when BLM conducts prescribed burns around the subdivision next year.

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California

Fuel Reduction Research Underway

High severity wildfires are very common in chaparral communities throughout California. As more and more people move into this natural community, the complexity of chaparral management is multiplied because of increased ignitions from people and the potential for losses of life and property.

In an effort to better understand which fuel reduction treatments are most effective and efficient in chaparral, the Bureau of Land Management's Ukiah Field Office initiated a research project, funded in part through the Joint Fire Science Program. Working with the University of California, Berkeley, the project includes a research demonstration site located at BLM's Cow Mountain Recreation Area. The objectives of the study is to evaluate the effects of fall, winter, and spring prescribed fire on fire hazard reduction, resurgence of fuels, and costs of different treatments.

The study will also contrast the efficacy of prescribed burning with mechanical methods in reducing the fire hazard in chaparral. Post treatment shrub and herbaceous cover and density will be measured and compared with pre-treatment vegetative data. The project has multiple phases and is on-going.

On April 24, 2002, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), in cooperation with the BLM, implemented the first phase of the Red Mountain Prescribed Burn located near Ukiah, California. The burn was conducted to reduce the fuel hazard along the wildland-urban interface and conduct the chaparral research discussed above. A helitorch was used to implement this phase of the project. Approximately 700 acres of chaparral were treated within the 1700-acre project area.

California Department of Forestry helicopter with helitorch lighting the Red Mountain prescribed burn.

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As each phase of this project is implemented, fuel loading is reduced and the area is better protected from the risk of a catastrophic fire. And, in the long run, the research project will provide the science we need to better understand the environmental effects and cost effectiveness of various fuels treatment techniques applied to the chaparral ecosystem. This knowledge can then be used to better protect other communities from the risk of unwanted wildfire.

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California Department of Forestry helicopter and helitorch lighting prescribed burn.

Fuel Break Fuels Local Support

Highway 299 west of Redding is a major highway corridor connecting the Central Valley of California with the North Coast. A high number of human-caused fires originate along this frequently traveled route endangering homes, businesses, and the natural resources of the area. In an effort to slow the spread of such accidental starts and prevent large, catastrophic fires from originating at the roadway, Bureau of Land Management's Redding Field Office has coordinated the creation of a shaded fuel break that runs parallel to the highway.

Heavy fuel loading was typical prior to treating the area.

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Bill Crothers, BLM Redding Park Ranger igniting piles along the fuel break.

Four miles of this project has recently been completed in the Lewiston, California area. Local, state and federal cooperation has been evident throughout the project. The Hayfork Watershed Training Center, a program that offers training to local residents in a wide variety of resource fields, provided the crews that were used to build the fuel break. The break, located on the north side of the highway, averages 200' wide and was achieved by removing ladder fuels, increasing the spacing between trees, and opening up the tree canopy. Vegetation removed was then piled and burned with the assistance of California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's fire crews. Several BLM offices also assisted in the project including the Redding Field Office, the Alturas Fuels Crew, and Engine Captains from both the Alturas and Surprise Field Offices.

Community protection, improved forest health, and reduction of catastrophic fire potential have all been achieved with this wildland-urban interface project. In addition, the project has inspired a local effort to continue the fuel break onto private lands. The Trinity County Resource Conservation District has applied for grants to fund new sections of fuel break that would tie into, and extend, the work recently completed on federal land.

Completed section of fuel break with piles of removed vegetation ready to be burned.

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