

# Snapshots Special Edition

## President Bush Visits Oregon

### BLM Medford District

#### President Bush inspects the Squires Fire

*All photographs taken by John Craig, BLM Oregon State Office*

On Thursday, August 22, President George W. Bush toured the Squires fire in the BLM's Medford, Oregon district. Accompanied by Interior Secretary Gale Norton, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, BLM Director Kathleen Clarke, and State Director Elaine Brong, the President emphasized the need to conduct forest thinning, fuels reduction, and related National Fire Plan projects. During his visit, the President announced the "Healthy Forests-An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities."

Rex Mann, southwest Oregon Area Commander, updated President Bush on the current fire situation when he arrived at the Medford airport. The President also received a briefing about the hazardous fuel reduction program in the area by Ron Wenker, BLM Medford District Manager. The President toured the Squires fire (about 15 miles south of Medford) to see firsthand the effects of a wildland fire in areas that had been treated with hazardous fuel reduction projects compared with untreated areas.



*President Bush is presented with mementos from his tour of the Squires fire. (Left to Right) Elaine Brong, BLM Oregon/Washington State Director, Kathleen Clarke, BLM Director, President Bush, and Ron Wenker, BLM Medford District Manager.*

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At the Jackson County Fairgrounds, President Bush thanked firefighters, highlighted the need for healthy forests, and emphasized the benefits to the environment and the economy of a sound federal forest management policy.

The state of Oregon's 2002 wildland fire

season is marked as one of the worst in recorded history. The Squires fire began on Saturday, July 13, 2002 with a lightning strike on Squires Peak about 15 miles southeast of Medford. Sixty miles to the west, that same lightning storm sparked what later would become the half-million acre Biscuit fire. The Oregon Department of Forestry, which provides wildland fire prevention, detection, and suppression for the Bureau of Land Management in western Oregon responded to the Squires fire and began managing a fire that had the potential to grow to 25,000 acres.



*President Bush addresses an audience of more than 5,000 at the Jackson County Fairgrounds.*



*Ron Wenker, Medford District Manager and President Bush watch two firefighters extinguish a hotspot.*

The Squires fire burned through a mosaic of oak woodlands, brush fields and forested areas. Under the National Fire Plan, the Bureau of Land Management had previously managed some of these areas to reduce the high fire hazard that built up over decades of fire exclusion. Fuel hazard reduction activities included mechanical and manual brush removal, pre-commercial and commercial thinning of trees, and prescribed burning. Initial



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*President Bush announces his Healthy Forests Initiative at the site of the Squires Fire.*

- **Fire Effects** - Overall tree mortality was greatly reduced in many treated stands. Mortality was not eliminated. Weather, topography, and time of day continue to have a tremendous effect on fire behavior and can elevate fire activity in these stands. The fuel conditions in adjacent untreated stands can also reduce the effectiveness of fuels treatment.

In southwest Oregon, BLM has been planning on-the-ground projects at the landscape scale to meet comprehensive natural resource goals. Treatment

observations on the effect of these treatments on fire behavior have shown significant positive results:

- **Fire Behavior** - Fire behavior was significantly altered upon entering areas that had been managed to reduce fuels. In treated areas, the fire was more likely to remain on the ground as the ladder fuels that help the fire climb into treetops were no longer available.
- **Safety** - Treated areas created safety zones for firefighters who were able to directly attack ground fires. By using direct attack on the edge of the fire, the potential size of the fire was greatly reduced.
- **Suppression Effectiveness** – Oregon Department of Forestry firefighters were able to quickly stop many spot fires in treated areas that may otherwise have rapidly consumed large numbers of acres.



*At the Squires fire, President Bush and Ron Wenker, BLM Medford District Manager walk through an unthinned burned area.*





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objectives for forest health, wildlife and aquatic habitat enhancement, and fire hazard reduction are incorporated into landscape projects.

Traditionally, federal timber sales maximized economic return and production of wood and fiber. Today's projects use timber sales as a tool to meet large-scale restoration goals. Landscape projects now cover much more acreage than traditional sales, making it economically feasible for timber companies to remove primarily smaller trees, which constitute the biggest fire hazard. Project tracking at the BLM Medford District shows that the average diameter of the trees removed in this process is about 13 inches in diameter, substantially less than the 21 inches average diameter of trees removed during the 1980s. Current projects remove about five thousand board feet per acre, compared to 26.6 thousand board feet per acre during the 1980s.

Southwestern Oregon has 26 communities that have been identified as having a high wildland fire risk. These communities at risk have more than 26,000 homes intermixed with heavy, fire-prone vegetation. The BLM has begun fuel treatments in or adjacent to 23 of these



*President Bush is briefed by Luis Ramirez and Steve Armitage of the BLM Medford District on how fuel hazard treatments reduced the damage to the landscape at the Squires fire.*



*President Bush meets with Jerald Hanson and David Goodnough, two firefighters from the Squires fire.*

communities. The Oregon Department of Forestry has established a cost-share fuel treatment program to assist landowners in 18 communities.

Since 1995 the Medford District has actively been thinning with funding supplied by the Forest Ecosystem Health and Recovery Fund Program to commercially treat thousands of acres. These funds are used to treat forests in risk of catastrophic fire or other forest health issues, mostly related



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to dense stands. The area where President Bush visited on the Squires fire, where the fire was possible to control, had received several project treatments made possible by this funding source between 1996-2001.

The Medford District received \$8.6 million in National Fire Plan funds in 2002, which is being used to complete more than 23,000 acres of fuel treatments. Additionally, an aggressive commercial thinning program is underway to reduce stand density in commercial forest stands.

Since 2001, 19 communities and several non-profit organizations in southwestern Oregon have received 29 grants for a total of \$4.3 million. The Oregon Department of Forestry is using \$2.25 million in National Fire Plan funds to assist more than 640 individual landowners in creating defensible space and fire-safe access around homes and schools in 18 communities.

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President Bush participates in Squires fire briefing with Ann Veneman, Agriculture Secretary and Gale Norton, Secretary of the Interior.



Interior Secretary Gale Norton is briefed on rural-urban interface issues in southwest Oregon by BLM Medford District Manager Ron Wenker.

