Snapshots

Successful BLM hazardous fuels projects in the wildland urban interface...

November 29, 2001

Idaho

Lava Ranches Project

The Pocatello Field Office in Idaho BLM's Upper Snake River District is implementing the Lava Ranches fuels project. The goal is to reduce hazardous fuels that create intensive fires and increase fuels that are more fire resistant. This will be accomplished through the installation of "shaded fuel breaks." The project scope encompasses a four-mile stretch of public lands that are surrounded by many private landowners.

Lava Ranches project before prior to the project.

Much of the area consists of dense conifer stands and a mixed overstory of Douglas fir, maple, Utah juniper, Rocky Mountain juniper and mountain mahogany. This project will reduce the fuel load and crown carrying capacity in conifer and mixed overstory stands by opening up these areas with mechanical thinning and then following up with some burning where appropriate (i.e., pile burning and small broadcast burns). This will aid aspen regeneration with a maple understory and aid mountain mahogany regeneration through the disturbance of clearing out juniper and conifer encroachment into decadent stands that fall within these treatment areas. Much of the terrain is steep and rocky. Private landowner cooperation is assisting with access. Given the project conditions, a patchy treatment scenario is more realistic than a continuous one.

Crews cut, clear and pile brush and trees for lava ranches project.

A demonstration area for the public is already underway, and a visible and accessible area to public lands has been chosen. Local public interest is gaining momentum from our Communities at Risk meetings and through the NEPA process. Inquiry by private land owners regarding the capability of the BLM to help them perform this type of work on their property is also being received. Reducing the fuels on the public lands adjacent to Lava Ranch will do little to reduce the

direct threat to homes and private property unless the project can anchor to and include private lands. Public participation is a vital aspect in reaching project success.

The goal, while not to make an area fire proof, is to make it more fire manageable. Instead of an intensive stand-replacing fire, the goal is creating a low ground fire. The success of this project revolves around mitigation assistance, education and community outreach.

Lava Ranches project area after thinning. Prescribed fire will be used to treat remaining understory.

Wyoming

North Zone Fuels Crew Adds Capability

Wyoming's BLM North Zone has established a nationally-recognized fuels treatment program in the Bighorn Basin over several years. To enhance the ability to the program, a ten-person fuels management crew was added to their operation during the 2001 field season. The driving force was the need to accelerate mechanical fuels treatments. The crew, composed mainly of college students, used treatments to removing juniper from ponderosa pine stands and riparian areas.

Untreated ponderosa pine stand.

After rigorous training, the crew started with a juniper removal project in an area known as Maggie's Cabin. The project entailed cutting the juniper understory in ponderosa pine. Juniper limbs and boles were pulled away from the ponderosa pine to

Treated ponderosa pine stand.

protect these desirable trees during a prescribed burn. Also, the crew limbed the ponderosa to a height of four feet.

Another mechanical project completed by the crew was the cutting of juniper in a riparian area adjacent to Grass Creek. The location had been burned previously, but the burn failed to clear out the riparian zone. So the crew went in and cut the remaining juniper along a five-mile stretch of the creek. No removal of the cut trees was necessary since the cut material will provide a certain level of streamside shading and bank stability.

The crew has also given a much-appreciated boost to the prescribed fire operations during the autumn burn window. The crews were used on numerous burns in various capacities, from holding, to ignition, to providing an extra set of eyes during tricky ignition sequences.

During the height of fire season when the use of chainsaws are restricted, the fuels crew increased the strength of force of the existing suppression organization.

Overall, this young crew was a great complement to the North Zone mechanical fuels treatment program. At the same time, an equal accomplishment was the team building that occurred among these ten college students. The students proved that you can take ten different individuals' collective experiences and build an effective team for the fire program.

Alaska

Chena Lakes Burn

The Chena Lakes Flood Control Project protects Fairbanks-North Pole area from a repeat of the disastrous 1967 flood, when the Chena River overflowed its banks and thoroughly doused the community.

A long spillway was built to divert floodwaters from the Chena to the much larger Tanana River. Grass growth is encouraged on the spillway, to help glide the floodwaters along.

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Willows and underbrush retard the grass growth and impedes water flow, so prescribed fire is needed every year or two to keep brush from taking over the spillway.

For the BLM's Alaska Fire Service, the exercise provides a great training opportunity. After hand-lighters torched the 130-acre parcel in May, helicopters were brought in and training and recertifying in aerial firing practices were held.

Later, AFS crews came back and staged another prescribed burn in a remote arm of the spillway. They burned about 60 acres of mature willow and 100 acres of grass. The purpose was to promote grasses in the grassy area, and also to encourage the resprouting of burned over willows to improve moose browse. Monitoring plots have been established to study the effects of fire in controlling their growth.

Hand-firing the spillway at the Chena Lakes Flood Control Project (Lynn Emerick photo).

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