

Snapshots

Successful BLM hazardous fuels projects ...

Idaho

Decreasing the Risk of Fire in Sun Valley



Nordstrom's cutting machine was designed to work on steep slopes to remove fuels.

The city of Sun Valley is one of 11 towns in South Central Idaho that was designated in 2001 as a "Community at Risk." The designation makes them eligible for money from the National Fire Plan to make their town more fire safe. Of those 11 communities, Sun Valley is one that is now putting the money to work.

For the past 14 months, Sun Valley has been actively involved in developing a unique plan to reduce fire fuels and make the town more defensible.

"The first step is to explain to residents that there is actually a fire risk," Phil McCaffray, project coordinator with the Sun Valley Fire Department said. "Once they realize that, then we can start to get serious."

Sun Valley is unique due to resident's strong desire to maintain the area's natural, aesthetic surroundings. From the beginning, Sun Valley Fire Department understood that using herbicide or back burning to reduce fire fuels was not an option.

They then got in contact with Jay Nordstrom of Nordstrom Mechanical in Kingston, Idaho. Nordstrom's company designed and built a machine to be used specifically for forest treatment. Sun Valley Fire Department contracted with Nordstrom and began a 20-day project to create a "buffer strip" around homes at risk in Sun Valley.



The unique design allows a 270 degree cutting radius for sage and other fuels at a six inch height.

The company charged \$270 an hour for the Sun Valley project, which included an operator, a standby service vehicle and one other person. McCaffray said the machine can operate on grades as steep as 35 to 40 percent.

July 10, 2002



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Homes in Sun Valley that are now protected with a buffer strip from clearing of hillside fuels.

Nordstrom's machine makes two passes over the sage-covered ground, cutting and then mulching. Snow pack will cause the soil to absorb the debris, eliminating continued fire hazard. The head of the arm is much like a giant weed eater, cutting 6 inches above ground, while the machine itself rotates 270-degrees and keeps with the contour of the land. Grasses are left essentially untouched, while the overly mature sage surrounding Sun Valley is knocked down, leaving a clearing that could save homes from wildfire.



Two photos showing adjacent treated and untreated areas for the project.

"We are achieving our goal and meeting expectations for Sun Valley with this project," McCaffray said, "Sightliness was a concern and we took that into consideration. Both the citizens and the fire community are benefitting with this method."



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