

National Fire Plan

Successes of BLM Hazardous Fuels Projects ...

Prescribed Burn Clears Hazard Slash at Jack Wright Summit



A BLM and US Forest Service firefighter cooperatively burn the southern flank of the Jack Wright Burn.

The BLM Nevada Carson City Field Office used prescribed fire in March to successfully reduce fire hazard fuels on a 60-acre tract in the Pine Nut Mountains. The prescribed fire targeted slash (smaller branches, twigs, pine needles) left over after public wood cutting during the Jack Wright Summit Woodcutting Project, which was completed in 1999.

The three-day prescribed fire in Douglas County was the first phase of a multi-year project to clear more than 400 acres of scattered slash piles and cheatgrass, and to thin the

density of young pinyon and juniper trees too small for harvesting during public wood cutting. The original purpose of the wood cutting project was to reduce the density of pinyon and juniper trees to improve the condition of key mule deer winter range.

However, after public wood cutting was completed a considerable amount of branches, twigs, pine needles and other slash was left behind. The amount of dead fuel in the wood cutting area increased from less than one ton per acre to between five and eight tons per acre. The dramatic increase in the amount of dead pinyon and juniper slash on the ground greatly increased the risk of catastrophic results from future wildland fires. A wildland fire at the height of summer would rapidly spread through the piles and dead fuels and cheatgrass, posing a danger to both firefighters and nearby homes.

The prescribed fire was planned to burn the slash during the cold and snow of winter, to avoid the threat of catastrophic fire sweeping through large tracts of both slash and healthy brush and pinyon and juniper stands in July and August. During the past ten years, hundreds of rural residences have sprung up within five miles of Jack Wright Summit, which is located at the southern end of the Pine Nut Mountains.



BLM firefighter refills drip torches which proved to be the most efficient tool to light the slash.

BLM land in the Pine Nut Mountains totals more than 400,000 acres. In order to reassure these rural residents who had concerns about the use of prescribed fire as a management tool, the Carson City Field Office:

- Held several open-house public meetings;
- Conducted field tours of the proposed burn site; and,
- Briefed county commissioners in Lyon and Douglas Counties.

BLM received more than 60 responses in the form of letters, e-mails, and phone calls during the public comment period on the Jack Wright Fuels Treatment Environmental Assessment, including letters from the two affected counties. Many of those who responded were concerned that the prescribed fire might escape the burn zone boundaries and threaten both the watershed and nearby homes. The Carson City Field Office carefully considered all public input before finalizing plans for treating the slash piles.

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The BLM plan for the 60-acre prescribed burn involved wildland firefighting hand crews and engine crews working with either standing snow on the ground or during rain showers or snowfall. The crews would also take advantage of such environmental conditions as natural fuel breaks and existing roads. BLM also mitigated the danger of prescribed fire escaping the project area by reducing the scope of the project and targeting only those sections of the wood cutting project that are accessible by fire engines. In order to minimize the danger of high winds during the prescribed burn, a Remote Automated Weather Station was installed near the site during the winter of 2001-2002.

The RAWS station has been providing such data as wind speed and direction for use in pre-ignition analysis and spot weather forecasts. It has also provided on-site, real-time data for burn and rehabilitation operations.

Prior to implementing this plan, BLM closely examined two alternatives:

- Removing the slash from the sites for burning or grinding elsewhere. The average volume of slash at the site was 38 cubic yards per acre, and much of the site was only accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicles. Both the costs and the logistics of removal by these smaller vehicles rendered this alternative impractical. Larger vehicles like dump trucks could haul more slash, but much of the area was inaccessible to such vehicles. Removal of slash piles from the site would require loading and hauling off 4,640 full-size pickup truck loads or 1,837 10-wheel dump truck loads of material.
- Mechanically treat the slash by chipping and scattering on-site. Since the slash had been on the ground for anywhere from two to nine years, it would be hard to treat with a wood chipper without causing damage to the equipment's knives or teeth. Even if the slash were still green and could be chipped, the cost, availability and dependability of chippers would still make the alternative less than ideal.

The Jack Wright Fuels Treatment is consistent with the Carson City Field Office Consolidated Resource Management Plan for 2001. It states that the desired outcome for fire management is to restore fire as an integral part of the ecosystem, improve the diversity of vegetation and reduce fire hazard fuels.



BLM firefighter keeps watch on piles of juniper and pinyon pine slash left over from the old firewood cutting project.

Wyoming

BLM Prepares to Release Funding to Rural Fire Departments



Assistance totaling \$400,000 will soon be distributed to Wyoming rural fire departments by BLM. “The money from Congress will be divided among agencies, and distributed to their local offices,” said Larry Trapp, the Bureau of Land Management lead for rural firefighting assistance distribution. The field offices, working with local partners, will develop a process to disburse the money.”

Al Pierson, Wyoming BLM State Director said, “Wyoming BLM received \$400,000 for rural fire assistance. This is a great opportunity to provide support to

Wyoming’s rural fire departments. The money will be used for training, equipment and fire prevention work.” As part of a National Fire Plan, money was allocated by Congress for a second year to the DOI fire agencies - Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Fish and Wildlife Service - in the 2002 Appropriations Bill and is intended “to enhance the fire protection capability of rural fire districts.”

BLM will be working with the Wyoming Wildland Fire Plan Action Team to distribute the money to local fire departments. The Wyoming Wildland Fire Plan Action Team is a joint venture between county, state and federal agencies. The team works in full partnership in decision-making with regard to wildfires and future planning for Wyoming. To participate in the program, rural fire departments must meet several eligibility requirements:

- Have a statewide agreement with the state forester who maintains cooperative agreements with the rural fire departments or volunteer fire departments; or, absent that, a cooperative fire agreement with an agency in the DOI.
- Must serve a community with a population of less than 10,000.
- Use funding only for training, equipment and prevention activities.
- Must have the capability to share a minimum of 10 percent of the total cost. In-kind services may be included as part of the cost sharing.
- Must serve a community in the “wildland-urban interface,” which is where development occurs near federal land that is vulnerable to wildfire.

A ceiling of \$20,000 in assistance per rural fire department has been set by Interior Department agencies. The assistance to rural fire departments is part of a larger national fire plan to reduce wildfire risks in communities in the wildland urban interface. For more information, visit the web site at:

<http://www.wy.blm.gov/whatwedo/fire/wwfpat/wwfpat.html>

Montana

Elkhorn Mountains Hazard Fuel Reduction Nearly Complete

A fuel treatment project that has spanned four years and 6,500 acres will be finished this year. The Elkhorn Mountains south of Helena have seen a build up of hazardous fuels and conifer encroachment over the last few decades. Several years ago the BLM in Butte and the Forest Service recognized the fuel problem and started a four-year program of fuel treatment using both mechanical treatment and burning. Three units totaling 1,000 acres will be burned this spring in a cooperative effort with the Forest Service. Since one of the goals of the burn is to restore elk habitat, personnel from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks are using the area for study plots and long-term monitoring. Contact: Chris Hoff, Fire Management Officer, 406-533-7600.



Fire at work as a treatment in the Elkhorns.

Montana Gulch Campground - Landusky, Montana



Montana Gulch Campground before thinning treatment. Dead pine is from beetle-kill.

Thinning for Forest Health and Hazard Fuels Reduction As forest health and fuels treatment work progresses in a campground near Landusky, discussions with resource specialists and the public have been supportive of an unevenaged management plan. Aesthetics are high priority in the urban interface, so every discussion results in new ideas that can be incorporated into the next treatment stage.

The objectives are to reduce the risk of a crowning wildfire, create a defensible space, decrease the spread of mountain pine beetle, and maintain

aesthetics and privacy at the campsites. The first treatment stage included 10 acres of BLM project work in the immediate campground area, and 16 acres of a service thinning contract

in an adjacent area. Beetle-killed and infested pines were removed along with suppressed second and third growth Ponderosa pine and ladder fuels. In the contract area, there were 1,650 trees per acre with an average diameter of 2-3 inches. The post-thinned canopy has approximately 150 trees per acre with an average diameter of 6 inches. In the campground area the local community used much of the slash for firewood, while the small debris was hand piled for later burning.



Montana Gulch Campground after first stage of thinning treatment. Notice untreated area on the other side of the fence.

The next stage of thinning will further open the mature Ponderosa canopy to complete the crown fire objective.

Discussions about the final appearance of the forest structure led to the idea of flagging the trees that will be removed. There are three flagged 1 acre plots: one shows a final result of 35 trees per acre, the second shows 55 remaining trees per acre, and the contract area shows 100 to 120 remaining trees per acre.

This will help resource specialists and the public to visualize the future forest structure before treatment continues. The flagged trees show how thinning may reduce the uniform canopy cover by increasing the spacing between individual crowns and by creating small openings.



Flagged trees show what would remain if area was thinned to 35 trees per acre.

The next field trip to visit the flagged areas will help to define the final thinning objectives.

When thinning is complete and slash piles are burned, the area will be treated with a broadcast burn. The burn will help control Ponderosa regeneration, reduce surface fuels, and regenerate decadent chokecherries and other brush. The new deciduous growth will enhance privacy between campsites and stimulate chokecherry fruit crop.

Contacts: Jennifer Walker 406-538-1982
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Flagged trees show what would remain if area was thinned to 55 trees per acre.



Fence line forestry: the area to the left of the fence is part of the service thinning contract; BLM will continue treatment on the right side. The flagged trees represent those that could be removed for an end result of 100 to 120 trees per acre. In this scenario, small openings would be created to break up the continuity of the canopy.

For additional information on the National Fire Plan, visit www.fireplan.gov