

Table of Contents

Utah

A Proactive Approach To Wildfire: Fighting Cheatgrass With Fire 1

Wyoming

Interagency Team Works Together For Fire Management 1

Utah

A Proactive Approach To Wildfire: Fighting Cheatgrass With Fire

In June, 2006, firefighters from the Salt Lake Field Office (SLFO) of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) used a prescribed fire to reduce the cheatgrass fuel loading in Tooele County. Roxanne Tea, fuels team leader with the SLFO was very happy with the events preceding, during and after the 255-acre Salt Desert Shrub #1 and #2 burns.

Tea explained why the SLFO chose to burn in hot temperatures when firefighters are working to contain several wildland fires. "The cheatgrass in Skull Valley had just reached its volatile period. If the burn had been set any earlier the grass was less likely to have burned as hot as it needed to be. We need to have a hot, clean burn to destroy not only the standing cheatgrass but the seeds in the ground," Tea said. They knew they had to burn the cheatgrass in the designated area at medium-high intensity for the seeds in the soil to be destroyed. Some of them have been sitting for more than three years. "Otherwise the seeds just sit like a sleeping dragon; we had to strike hot," Tea said.

Tea further explained the extra precautions that were put into place given the time of year and the fire activity in the Salt Lake District thus far. For example, instead of using a single 12-foot dozer blade line, crews reinforced the perimeter with a 24-foot line with the added security of a road on the north.



Keith Olive, Fuels Technician, Salt Lake Field Office, checks out the cheatgrass fuel loading at the Salt Desert Shrub #1 site.

On the day of the burn Tea reported, "We started dropping flame by 3:00 p.m. and were wrapping it up by 6:00 that evening, flames were pushed by a cooperative north/northwest wind." Tea explained that many variables are considered when conducting a prescribed burn including: fuel moisture levels, temperature, resource availability, and humidity. "It's a very satisfying feeling when everything goes as planned," Tea said. The timing of the Salt Desert Shrub #1 & #2 prescribed fire was perfectly sandwiched between the demands of wildfire season. Engines, crews, and other apparatus were all available to assist with the burn.

Forage Kochia seeds will be planted this fall when moisture levels are up and soil temperatures are down. The resulting "green strips" will break up the fuels and reduce the size and complexity of future wildland fires. Proposed fuel reduction projects such as Salt Desert Shrub are part of implementing the National Fire Plan.

For more information on living with fire in Utah check out www.utahfireinfo.gov.

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Wyoming

Interagency Team Works Together For Fire Management

The Wyoming Fire Action Team held an interagency press conference in June to highlight the interagency approach taking place within the state to deal with wildfire, fire prevention, fuels mitigation and training.

Representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Wyoming State Forestry Division and the Wyoming Rural Firefighters Association made presentations on a variety of topics including: 2006 Wyoming wildfire predictions, fuels mitigation projects around the state, prescribed fire, wildfire prevention and preparedness programs, wildland fire training and the interagency approach to wildfire suppression.

"Working together has been key" said John Glenn, BLM State Fire Management Officer. "It's more cost effective to work together. None of the agencies have the resources to do the job alone. Everything we do is based on interagency cooperation: training, fire planning and even wildland fire initial attack. We base the initial response on which agency is closest."

BLM will be working closely with the other agencies to combat wildland fires during the 2006 wildfire season.

Although the state hasn't seen as many fire starts as expected, the representatives believe Wyoming is experiencing similar hot and dry weather conditions as the extreme fire season of 2002.

"We are currently 40 days ahead in heat and dry weather conditions compared to the average," said State Forester, Bill Crasper. "Weather predictions also indicate above normal temperature and below normal precipitation for the next six weeks in Wyoming."

One of the speakers, Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Medicine Bow National Forest, Clint Kyhl, addressed prescribed fire and the reduction of hazardous fuels in Wyoming. Prescribed fire, a fire ignited by management actions to achieve specified goals, is an efficient way to reduce dangerous accumulations of combustible fuels in a controlled environment. The Wyoming firefighting agencies require acceptable wind, temperature, and humidity conditions before using prescribed fire.

A major concern when using prescribed fire is changing weather conditions. Agency officials worked to ensure that firefighter preparation and safety training addressed this concern.

"Prescribed fire is an important tool for fuel reductions, but firefighters have to be qualified," said Crasper. "Firefighter and public safety is our first priority."

Prescribed fires have less environmental impacts than wild fires. A wildland fire may reach intense temperatures that could result in soil damage, and other negative impacts to the environment, while prescribed fires are planned to benefit resources.

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Fuels Mitigation Coordinator, Jim Webster, discusses National Fire Plan objectives at interagency press briefing.



Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Medicine Bow National Forest, Clint Kyhl, addresses prescribed fire and the reduction of hazardous fuels in Wyoming.



John Glenn, BLM State Fire Management Officer, and Bill Crasper, Wyoming State Forester, address fire season issues at interagency press briefing.