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New Mexico

Hazardous Fuels Reduction Projects Protect Communities and Complement Wildlife Habitat Improvement Efforts at Wild Rivers

Hazardous fuels reduction (HFR) efforts designed to remove large stands of decadent sagebrush adjacent to the Community of Cerro, New Mexico, and the BLM Wild Rivers Recreation Area are reducing wildfire risks while simultaneously improving rangeland conditions for wildlife.

The West Guadalupe Mountain Sagebrush Treatment and the North Wild Rivers Sagebrush Treatment, separate projects that comprise a contiguous area of about 1300 acres, were planned and implemented in 2005 and 2006 by the Fire Management program of the BLM Taos Field Office. These projects include mechanical discing of sagebrush rangelands followed by seeding with native grass species to facilitate recolonization of the treatment site. In the project design, location of archaeological sites and maintenance of sagebrush corridors for wildlife cover created a pattern of treatment that simulated a more natural mosaic of sagebrush and grassland on the landscape, while still accomplishing HFR objectives.

The areas where these HFR treatments have been done are located in key forage areas for wintering herds of Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer. "These fuels projects complement habitat management efforts throughout the Pot Mountain/San Antonio Mountain Habitat Management Area, which lies just west of the project area", said Pam Herrera-Olivas, Sikes Act Project Coordinator for the Taos



Treated site on the West Guadalupe Mountain HFR project.

Field Office. Close proximity of the HFR project site to the Rio Grande gorge and nearby forested areas on Guadalupe Mountain and Pot Mountain also make it an excellent forage area for elk and mule deer, primarily for winter range utilization.

Future HFR projects in the area, including sagebrush control efforts and mechanical thinning of pinyon-juniper woodland in the Wildland Urban Interface adjacent to the community of Cerro will also contribute to enhanced winter range conditions for deer and elk. "The Fire Management Program here at the Taos Field Office has done an excellent job of coordinating and incorporating wildlife management objectives into their hazardous fuels reduction projects," said Herrera-Olivas, "and we look forward to planning joint projects funded by both HFR and Sikes Act throughout the Wild Rivers Area".

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A tractor discs sagebrush on the North Wild Rivers HFR project.

A Sampler of Fuel Reduction Treatments from Southeastern New Mexico

The Roswell BLM Field Office has an aggressive and successful fuel reduction program being implemented in both Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) and non-WUI environments. The projects highlighted below offer a glimpse into the variety of treatment methods and contracting options used regularly within this hazardous fuels program.

Fort Stanton WUI Projects

Dairy Pasture Project:

Fort Stanton was established in 1855 and remains an integral part of the local community drawing tourists, historians, and recreationalists to the area.

The 200-acre Dairy Pasture project is located on BLM lands surrounding the historical Fort. The purpose of the project was to reduce fuel loading in an effort to reduce wildland fire risk to the Fort and the adjoining regional airport. The project generated a large amount of firewood that was given to the public. The entire project was completed through the use of a special contracting tool called an IDIQ contract.



(Left) Ft. Stanton (foreground, center) with the burn being conducted in the background.

(Below) Fire crews conducting a pile burn to remove slash material left over from the thinning project.



Some of the firewood made available to the public. The Roswell Fuels Crew moved this wood down out of the tree line to a road for easy access.



Completion of phase 1 and phase 2 prescribed burning in the background.



The project area prior to burning

Cemetery Pasture:

The nearby Cemetery Pasture project was completed through the use of a stewardship contract. Stewardship contracts are authorized by the Healthy Forest Initiative as a tool to allow agencies to enter into multi-year contracts that encourage the trading of goods (wood products) for services to achieve land management goals. Following an ecological restoration prescription, the contractors mechanically thinned out pinyon and juniper trees, removed the wood products, and then lopped and scattered the remaining slash to benefit understory plant diversity. In addition to restoring rangeland health, the project also reduced the heavy fuel loading in the area that posed a risk to nearby communities and Fort Stanton.



Fuel loading in project area before treatment.



Project area after initial thinning. Piles will be burned later when within prescription.

of saltcedar and in the process regain endemic plant diversity, valuable springs, and naturally functioning floodplains.

Along the Pecos River, an excavator has been used to extract saltcedar plants and place them in windrows to be burned at a future date. The Melena Project involves the treatment of 300 acres that have been inundated by saltcedar growth. This project was designed to reduce the fuel loading and the fire risk it creates as well as reclaiming the area for native vegetation. On the Wooten hazardous fuels project, contractors mechanically pulled saltcedar from the 342 acres. BLM fire crews then came in and burned the resultant slash. The resprouts were then treated with an approved herbicide. As a result of the treatment, young cottonwoods that were once overshadowed by the dense salt cedars are now thriving in their natural environment.

Hazardous Fuels Reduction Projects

Saltcedar Projects:

The exotic and invasive saltcedar plant is a prominent but unwelcomed component in the floodplains of many of New Mexico's waterways. The Roswell BLM Field Office is working to gain a foothold in the control

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The extrication process involved with saltcedar.



The excavator at work with a windrow of downed saltcedar behind it.

Washington

BLM Fights Reed Canary Grass in Spokane District Wetlands

Until recently, areas in BLM Spokane District's Fishtrap allotment were subject to a hostile takeover. Reed canary grass was choking the wetlands there, and soil and hydrology functions suffered. Trees, shrubs, ducks and other species were short-changed by the takeover. Spokane District's wildlife and range staff along with fire management's assistance came to the rescue.

The district enlisted a lot of help to repel the invaders and reclaim the wetlands. Their story is a how-to of cooperative conservation. Other agencies and groups were enthusiastic about the benefits of the project and expect good results this spring.

Reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) is a Class C noxious weed and when it invades wetlands, it can replace up to 100 native wetland plants that would otherwise be present. Although it has value as pasture grass and is sometimes hayed for livestock forage, its effects on wetland habitats can be severe. Reed canary grass soaks up lots of soil moisture, sending it into the air. That potentially affects groundwater hydrology and impacts riparian species such as quaking aspen. The sod-forming nature of reed canary grass limits invertebrate food availability to wildlife and provides poor habitat structure for nesting birds. In the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, nesting ducks built 3% or fewer of their nests in reed canary grass (depending on duck species), even though this grass dominates much of their wetlands.

Through these processes, reed canary grass may be one of the most important limiting factors to the health of wetland



Volunteers from the Inland Northwest Wildlife Council plant trees and shrubs through a water-permeable weedmat and protect them with cylinders of hardware cloth.



The Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge heavy equipment crew scalps away the sod because it contains seed and rhizomes that would re-invade the wetland.

systems on BLM land – in fact it has been called the “cheat grass of wetlands”. Thirty miles southwest of Spokane, in the Fishtrap BLM allotment, reed canary grass is dominant at 99 of 239 wetlands (41 percent), but wildlife and range staffs are working to reclaim some of these for wildlife. In 2005, the District did prescribed burns as well as sprayed and mowed three canary grass meadows. Next, the meadows were scalped of the rhizomatous sod and a seedbed was prepared by discing and harrowing. By mid-fall, the meadows provided a clean seedbed to broadcast three different mixes of native wetland seed including meadow barley, tufted hairgrass, western mannagrass and herbaceous plants such as dagger-leaf rush, spikerush, iris, and camas.

Because trees and shrubs provide cover, food, and nesting structures for a variety of wildlife including songbirds, game birds, bats, and big game, volunteers from the Inland Northwest Wildlife Council planted 750 native trees and shrubs that normally grow around wetlands to add even more habitat diversity to this project. The canary grass project also involved Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) soil scientists, Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife habitat specialists, US Fish and Wildlife Service wetland managers, the BLM range and wildlife professionals, and the BLM fire management professionals. The strategies used on these meadows, along with the combined ideas of many experienced professionals who worked cooperatively show great promise. The success of their efforts will be evident this spring.



The Spokane District fire crew burns reed canary grass to simulate new growth thereby making the grass more susceptible to the herbicide treatments that will follow.

Wyoming

Lander Field Office's Lysite Prescribed Burn

The objective for the Lysite prescribed burn was to improve mountain sagebrush habitat and reduce heavy fuel loading in the area. This planned prescribed fire will benefit big game species such as elk and mule deer, as well as improve the forage base for livestock that seasonally use the area. The project will also enhance the habitat requirements for greater sage-grouse. The planning area is located in the Lander Wyoming Field Office, about 15 miles north of Lost Cabin, east of Cottonwood Pass and north of the Sioux Pass road. Local BLM fire crews conducted the burns.



(Above) During the Lysite prescribed fire.

(Left) Tim Kramer, Natural Resource Specialist (Fire), conducting the Lysite prescribed burn.



After the Lysite prescribed fire.