BLM Snapshots

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Idaho

Small Prescribed Burn Serves a Big Measure of Cooperation in Idaho's Wood River Valley

There is a small quiet spot nestled in the southernmost portion of Idaho's Wood River Valley were the river runs clear, the trees and grasses are lush, and the wildlife is plentiful. The rolling hills that characterize the landscape are fitting for the cover of a premier outdoor magazine. This spot is The Nature Conservancy's Silver Creek Preserve, a 40-acre parcel located not far from Hailey, Ketchum and Sun Valley, Idaho. The Preserve, though small, attracts big attention. The citizens, leaders and conservation groups of the Wood River Valley view it as one of the most pristine landscapes in southern Idaho.

For nearly a decade now, the Idaho BLM Twin Falls District has been working with the Nature Conservancy to reintroduce fire to the Preserve's landscape to restore native plant communities and enhance wildlife habitat. Located adjacent to land managed by the BLM, restoration efforts in the Preserve also benefit the public land. Through a cooperative effort, in 1999, the BLM applied mechanical aspen regeneration treatments in the Preserve and in 2001 conducted a prescribed burn.

Last fall, Preserve Manager Dana Smith asked the Twin Falls District to conduct another prescribed burn on an area of the Preserve that posed an imminent fire hazard to a high-use recreation area and several wood cabins. Smith said they wanted to seed the land with native vegetation and had the internal capability to complete the planting, but they first needed a prescribed burn.

Holding crews during the recent prescribed fire at the preserve. The area will be reseeded this spring by the Nature Conservancy.

Twin Falls District fire crews conducting a 40 acre prescribed fire in the Nature Conservancy Silver Creek Preserve.

"They came to us to help complete a task, and we were more than glad to help," said Brandon Brown, fuels specialist with the Twin Falls District. It's a great project that will not only enhance the native vegetation but also the safety and recreational enjoyment of visitors and residents."

When Brown first met with Smith about the project, Larry Shoen, who owns property between Silver Creek Preserve and BLM land, indicated an interest in extending the prescribed burn to his property to help restore the native vegetation and contribute to the goals of the Preserve. Shoen Farms, located on several thousand acres near the Preserve, had reserved 40 acres for maintaining wildlife habitat. In a generous spirit of cooperation, Shoen even offered to pay for the native seed needed to complete planting following the burn.

With everyone involved, last October firefighters from the BLM began work on the cooperative project. Over the course of two days, more than 50 acres were burned in preparation for the reseeding.

Those acres will be reseeded this coming spring to native vegetation, supporting the cooperative conservation efforts of the Silver Creek Preserve. This quality project in Idaho's Wood River Valley exemplifies the growing value and importance of cooperative land management efforts.

One of the many historical cabins in the Silver Creek Preserve showing the blackened area of the recent prescribed fire in the background.

Prescribed Burn Projects Highlight Coordination

The Coeur d'Alene Field Office recently completed two projects involving broadcast burns. The project areas, known as "Donated 80" and Tiger Gulch, had been mechanically treated and required prescribed fire to reduce fuels left from timber sales and natural forest fuels. Broadcast burns would also prepare the areas for replanting and reforestation efforts which will occur later this year.

Donated 80

On September 15, 2005, an interagency team supplemented with three local contractors, completed the broadcast burn across 25 acres of previously treated forest land.

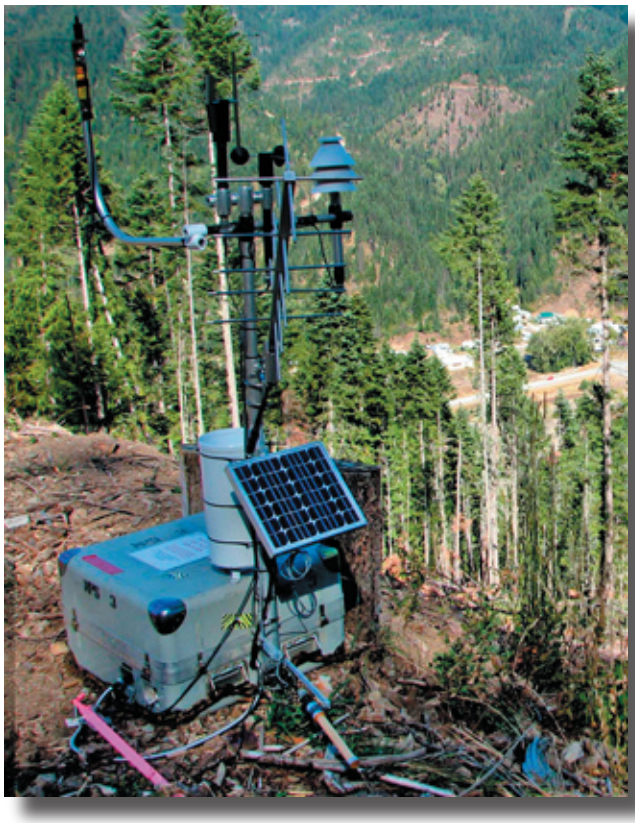
BLM recently acquired an 80-acre parcel of land through a private donation. The parcel is located along the St. Joe Divide between the Coeur d'Alene and St. Joe River basins in Shoshone County. Though the parcel had been logged by the previous owner, this highly productive forest parcel provides wildlife habitat and, with the help of a prescribed burn and planting, will be healthy and productive forest land.

Fuels were successfully reduced from 42 tons per acre pre-burn to 4 tons per acre post-burn. Fuels on the remaining 55 acres will be mechanically piled and burned later this year to provide optimum planting conditions for western larch and rust-resistant western white pine.

Tiger Gulch Broadcast Burn

The 28-acre prescribed burn was initiated on September 22nd and successfully completed on September 24, 2005.

Hazardous fuels were reduced from 38 tons per acre pre-burn to eight tons per acre post-burn which will allow for planting rust-resistant western white pine and western larch.



Looking down the hill toward the community of Murray, Idaho, with a temporary weather station used to assess conditions prior to the broadcast burn.

This project site, located within the wildland urban interface at Murray, Idaho, lies on a steep 80 percent heavily forested north-facing slope.

Personnel from Idaho Department of Lands and six BLM offices in Idaho and Washington conducted the burn along with assistance from local contractors Inland Forest Management, Inc., Northwest Management, Inc., and MAWB, Inc.

With the activity and natural forest fuels successfully reduced, reforestation will begin this spring.

Contact: Kurt Pavlat, 208-769-5038

Burn Program Challenges

BLM in northern Idaho faces several challenges in completing its prescribed burn program. Because all wild fires on BLM land in the Coeur d'Alene District are suppressed by the U.S. Forest Service or Idaho Department of Lands using an offset agreement, BLM has only a few "red-carded" personnel and

limited equipment. In order to conduct a burn program it must rely on and coordinate closely with available partners or cooperators. Jeff Casey, Fire Use Specialist and Brad Wagner, Fuels Technician, in the Coeur d'Alene Field Office have done an outstanding job coordinating with personnel from other BLM offices, as well as other federal and state partners, and local fire departments who have participated in this program. BLM also relies on private contracts to provide services such as water tenders, fallers, piling brush and windrowing the fuels.

Another challenge is the limited "window" of time when burns can be conducted. The moist, dense, and stagnant air conditions common to this area in the spring and fall reduce the optimum timeframes for burning. BLM competes for this "window" along with other agencies conducting project fires; private and contractor pile burning; and residential wood smoke; all of which contribute to air quality issues.

The Coeur d'Alene Field Office has risen to these challenges and developed a burn program that includes multiple partners within the "windows of opportunity".

(Right) Bobbi Sullivan, Nye County Emergency Services, surveys the area before clean up. (Below) A photo of the same area following cleanup.

Nevada

Mowers and Weed-Whackers Help Create Defensible Space

A few days of hard work with mowers and weed-whackers has helped the small community of Belmont reduce hazardous fuels and create defensible space.

The BLM Battle Mountain Field Office has collaborated with Nye County Emergency Services and the Belmont Volunteer Fire Department on the project.

Eight workers arrived at the town in early August 2005, and spent several days working with mowers and weed-whackers to reduce hazardous fuel loads of weeds, cheatgrass and sagebrush from around outbuildings, homes, propane tanks and fire hydrants.

Crews clean up around historical buildings and vehicles.

Nye County Emergency Services was able to purchase two industrial-sized mowers and pay for a five-person crew under the County's "Declaration of Emergency" for extreme fire hazards.

The BLM Battle Mountain Field Office provided two large weed-whackers, complete with operators. Homeowners took advantage of the opportunity to identify areas around properties that needed help to create defensible space against wildfires. The volunteer crew worked on eight of the town's properties.

BLM Battle Mountain Fire Mitigation Specialist Jennifer Myslivy is also working with the communities of Belmont and Manhattan to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans. These plans assess critical areas both inside and outside these communities. The Community Wildlife Protection Plans assess infrastructure, emergency equipment and response times, radio frequencies, vegetation, natural resources, water supply and fire history.

In addition to these assessments, the plans will also include preparation of fire danger and community base maps and development of a pre-attack plan to identify locations that can be used as incident command posts. Evacuation routes, water dip sites and staging areas will be identified.

Manhattan Tackles Second Year of Interagency Forest Thinning

The second year of a project to thin pinyon and juniper woodlands and protect the small town of Manhattan, Nevada, from the dangers of wildland fire has already removed 177 acres of bug-infested, diseased and excess trees near the remote mountain town.

These efforts have made major inroads into the 490 total acres targeted by the project.

The BLM Battle Mountain Field Office collaborated on the Manhattan Wildland-Urban Interface Interagency Wildland Fire Protection Project with its interagency partners, the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and Nevada Division of Forestry, as well as the Manhattan Chapter of the Nevada Fire Safe Council.

The project's aim was to increase tree canopy spacing to 30 feet, because the likelihood of crown fires increases when the canopy spacing is 20 feet or less. Bug-infested and diseased trees were thinned to make more room for healthy trees. Most of remaining healthy trees were larger, but many trees of diverse size also remained.

Initial thinning operations targeted escape routes and the highest-risk areas. Methods used to dispose of the thinned trees included burning 63 acres of vegetation piles, chipping 81 acres of vegetation into piles, and offering large pieces of thinned trees to local communities as firewood through a special permit process.

The thinning project was aimed at protecting the historic mining town of Manhattan from the kinds of wildfires that typically occur in Nevada's pinyon and juniper woodlands. Designed to provide a buffer between the community and the wildlands to protect the town's infrastructure from a crown fire regardless of fire approach direction, the project also creates safe access routes for firefighters and escape routes for residents.

Ridgetop shaded fuel break on private land, funded by a Nevada Firesafe Council grant. Large healthy trees provide shade on surface fuels which help lower temperatures and increase overall effectiveness.

Depending on the availability of funding, the work is projected for completion within two to four years.

Manhattan is located in a heavily forested canyon of the Toquima Mountain Range. BLM and its interagency partners educated the 45-plus residents of the mountain community about the extreme risk their small town faced from wildfires on the surrounding public lands. They also recognized that fires originating in the town could pose a serious risk to the public lands.

Most of the community's permanent and seasonal residents became members of the local chapter of the Fire Safe Council. Community residents also provided significant input for the proposed action.

The back of the treated ridge was thinned up to adjacent property. Canopy spacing was improved to provide for aesthetically pleasing landscape while reducing risk of crown fire.

Local residents also worked on plans to implement a critical portion of a fuel break on private land. They used a grant from the Nevada Fire Safe Council to establish a 20-acre fuel break on the last ridge that stood between the town's buildings and wildlands. Completed in 2004, the efforts on private land tied into the ongoing work on nearby public lands, and strengthened the overall effectiveness of the project.

Interagency partners stand for a photo with the Manhattan Chapter leader during the ceremony.

Representatives of the cooperating agencies and the local Fire Safe Council gathered

at the project site in July 2005 to dedicate a commemorative sign for the Manhattan Wildland-Urban Interface Interagency Wildland Fire Protection Project. The project leader led attendees on a short field trip of the area following the ceremony.

Conditions prior to thinning posed an extreme risk to the community. Tree densities were between 150 and 300 trees per acre. Tree canopy spacing averaged less than ten feet.

In December 2004, the Battle Mountain Field Office received a National Wildland-Urban Interface Award for its efforts to educate and protect rural communities The Award citation recognized Manhattan and other Nevada communities for their outstanding collaborative efforts to reduce the risk of wildland fire to rural areas of the state.

New Mexico

High Priority Community Wildfire Protection Plan Project Underway

If you've spent any time in the southwestern United States you know what a nuisance salt cedar is to land managers and landowners alike. Once this invasive species has become established, it spreads rapidly excluding all other plant life as it forms into impenetrable thickets. Any human dwellings near these thickets are highly susceptible to damage by wildfire as salt cedar burns incredibly hot and fast regardless of the time of year or growing season. Long range spotting is also a real problem due to the unique chemical and physical properties of the plant.

Community leaders, firefighters and land managers have known for some time that the area along the Rio Grande River in New Mexico is a prime target for salt cedar invasions. One area that is of particular concern is the river corridor just below Elephant Butte Dam and adjacent to the communities of Truth or Consequences and Williamsburg, New Mexico.

Old-timers can tell you that forty years ago the areas along the river were dominated by grasses, cottonwoods and willows, but in that short time span, things have changed drastically. Now many of the water-loving, exotic salt cedars are 20 feet tall with trunks over 18 inches in diameter and crown spreads of 25 feet. Their thick stems and branches are so completely interwoven with adjacent salt cedars that would-be fishermen can't penetrate the thicket to access the stream.

The community wildfire protection plan for Sierra County appropriately targeted this area as a high priority for treatment. The problem was that the jurisdiction fell under the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, an agency faced with enormous responsibilities and a shrinking budget. The solution came about as a direct result of the collaborative efforts that made the local plan a reality.

The BLM Las Cruces District funded mechanical and herbicide treatments on 17 acres through the Wildland Urban Interface Community Assistance Program and the U.S. Forest Service funded similar treatments on 98 acres. The Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District is coordinating the project, serving as the Contracting Officer Representative and providing technical assistance and oversight.

The project is currently underway with a local contractor, a crew of sawyers, and a skidder. As salt cedar is removed, large diameter stems are being cut into firewood and made available to local residents free of charge. The Bureau of Reclamation is providing a 275 horsepower Rayco mulcher to treat the remaining slash as their contribution.

Chemical treatment of stumps will prevent re-sprouting.

Community members appreciated a by-product of the project…free firewood.

This project provides an excellent example of how multi-party coordination and cooperation, envisioned in the local community wildfire protection plan, can work. The local conservation district, county government, and federal agencies all contributed to mitigate the hazardous fire situation while restoring the local environment. Similar projects are planned in the area as partners are identified and funding secured.

Removal of salt cedar will reduce the risk of wildfire in adjacent communities.

Contact: Steve Bumgarner, (505) 525-4305

native trees such as cottonwood, willow and mesquite. Hazardous fuel reduction and ecosystem restoration were goals of this project.

Helicopter torching salt cedar.

The burn culminated three years of effort to eliminate the invasive plant from the project site. In 2002 and 2003, the project area was aerially sprayed with a herbicide. However, since the species is a vigorous sprouter, patience must be exercised to allow the chemical to work its way into the entire root system prior to the burn.

The Pecos River Prescribed Burn was conducted by the Bureau of Land Management with assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Forest Service. A helitorch was used for ignition, hand crews covered the perimeter, and the dense thickets of highly combustible salt cedar easily carried the fire as planned.

Carlsbad BLM completed another successful hazardous fuels reduction project with the help of their interagency partners. And, in this case, there was an added benefit. Several county commissioners and regional officials from Texas came to observe the burn in hopes of learning some of the finer details of conducting such a project.

Texas Neighbors Watch and Learn During New Mexico Prescribed Fire

Last year, southeast of Carlsbad New Mexico (near the Texas state line) local, state and federal agencies ignited a prescribed fire to eradicate salt cedar growing on the banks of the Pecos River. Salt-cedar, also known as tamarisk, is a non-native, water-thirsty plant that can consume up to 200 gallons of water a day. It typically forms single-species thickets that displace

Burn along the river.

BLM's prescribed fire expertise along with their interagency coordination served as an excellent model for Texas to follow as they begin planning for a similar treatment along their stretch of the Pecos River.

Contact: Michael Salmon Jr., 505-885-4181

Chemically treated salt cedar easily carries the fire.

BLM crew member serves as look-outs on perimeter of burn.