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Arizona

Re-seeding Research Will Help in Cheatgrass Battle

Funding from the National Interagency Fire Center's Joint Fire Science Program is helping researchers in northwestern Arizona determine whether several native grasses can be used to battle invasive cheatgrass following fire in ponderosa pine ecosystems.



Photo of the area prior to the prescribed fire treatment.

The Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service have been using fire as one tool to reduce fuel loads and improve forest health in ponderosa pine forests on the "Arizona Strip" in northwestern Arizona for more than a decade. This area is now part of the BLM-National Park Service jointly managed Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument.

Cheatgrass, a non-native invasive grass, has become the dominant understory following some of these initial burns, and managers are concerned that it will become more widespread with additional burning. Cheatgrass is a major concern because it not only reduces native plant diversity, but also creates a highly flammable bed of light fuels which can burn much more frequently than desirable.

Managers and researchers have noted, however, that cheatgrass does not typically grow well in the same areas as two grasses native to the region: bottlebrush squirreltail and blue grama.



Seeding of the area following treatment.



Prescribed fire underway in Arizona.

"This suggests that these native grasses may successfully compete with cheatgrass, preventing it from dominating the understory," said BLM Arizona Strip Fuels Program Manager Tim Duck.

Establishing an understory of native grasses increases the probability of restoring historical fire regimes in ponderosa pine forests, one of the management goals in the region.

Funding from the Joint Fire Science Program will allow the U.S. Geological Survey to continue monitoring the vegetation following a fall 2003 prescribed fire and reseedling in the Pine Valley Meadow area in the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument. Researchers will be evaluating the variety of reseedling methods used on this burn for the next three years. U.S. Geological Survey researchers are working closely with BLM and park staff.

"There's currently very little science available on the design and effects of post-fire seeding treatments. This project should help fill an important information need for managing forests in the West following both wildfire and prescribed fire," said Dr. Matt Brooks of the Western Ecological Research Center in Las Vegas, who is the lead researcher on the project.

Firewise Shared with Arizona Fire Districts

The Arizona Interagency Coordinating Group's Firewise Subcommittee recently presented a Firewise Seminar, shared the Billy Brushwacker survivable space interactive computer disk program and literature at a Firewise booth, and displayed a large National Fire Plan display at the firefighter annual conference. The state's Fire District Association had their largest crowd ever in Laughlin, Nevada for their annual conference. Over 430 people from 126 fire districts were in attendance.

During one of the conference breakout sessions the Arizona Firewise Subcommittee presented a seminar to 60 fire fighters. Speakers included the fire program manager from the Arizona State Land Department's Forestry Division, program manager for the National Firewise Communities/USA, Navajo County's Sitgreaves Community Wildfire Protection Plan Administrator, Gila County's wildfire risk reduction specialist and a wildland fire specialist from the Summit Fire Department near Flagstaff.



Arizona Fire District Association had their largest crowd ever in Laughlin, Nevada.

Topics focused on programs that the Arizona Firewise Subcommittee is either working on or available to the public. Work is underway on production of over 180,000 updated tabloids, fire education binder and dual computer disk project. A BLM Firewise trailer is available for statewide use and four different Firewise signs are being placed around Arizona for communities at risk. A Firewise Advisor and Firewise Assessor program was recently approved by the State Forester.

Judith Leraas Cook came from Washington State to attend the quarterly Firewise subcommittee meeting, and to share with firefighters how communities can organize grassroots Firewise boards and projects. Judith shared how over 130 Firewise Communities/USA have been recognized nationally, specifically the eight communities in Arizona. She also shared her personal Firewise successes with her community in the San Juan Islands.

The Summit Fire Department shared specifics of home assessments and why fire districts can be instrumental in the success of a Firewise program. The community wildfire protection plan administrator in the White Mountains shared how communities on the Sitgreaves National Forest have organized to implement a comprehensive mitigation plan. The group also learned from an instructional specialist how to complete the steps necessary to become a Firewise Community.

Contact: David Peters, Gila District Fire Mitigation Specialist, Tucson, Arizona at (520) 258-7207

BLM Recognizes Tucson Power Company Contributions

Patrick Madigan, Tucson Field Manager, presented a recognition award to employees of Tucson Electric Power in Tucson on February 14 for their contributions to the Gila District's fire mitigation and prevention program. Over the past four years the company has contributed more than \$30,000 in labor and supplies to build a Firewise Exhibit in Tucson at the Pima County Extension Office, as well as three fire danger signs in southeastern Arizona. The signs were built by the company's construction department.

Two Tucson Electric Power fire danger signs were placed at Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, while the third was installed on the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. All three of the agency signs were installed by power company employees and their families as weekend volunteers.

One of the signs was a joint agency sign with the U.S. Forest Service, since it is on BLM land adjacent to the Coronado National Forest. The company also built a fourth sign for the Forest Service which was placed on the forest.

"This is an example of an outstanding partnership with our community," said Madigan at the recognition event at Tucson Electric Power Tucson office. "Not only have the company and its employees become involved, but their families and friends have volunteered. They are to be commended for their efforts in fire mitigation, especially since this year's fire season may be long and very active."



BLM Tucson Field Manager Patrick Madigan makes the award presentation to Tucson Electric for their contributions to the fire mitigation and prevention program.



Tucson Electric Power employees with the award presented at the BLM ceremony.

To drive the prevention message home further, the Gila District recently purchased a few fire danger signs for three of their fire management vehicles, as well as a several Smokey messages for the Arizona BLM Firewise trailer. The message on the trucks reads “Today’s Fire Danger Is” and has the five fire danger adjectives above the statement. An arrow with Smokey’s head on it points to the current level.

To encourage more people to visit the Arizona BLM Firewise trailer several large stickers with Smokey’s head states “If Not You, Who?” that were added to the outside of the trailer. Billy Brushwacker, a new Firewise character, will be placed below Smokey soon, with one of Billy’s favorite lines, “Survivable Space - Makes a Firewise Place.”

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Oregon

Oregon Conservation District Oversees Fire Pond Construction

Firefighters in the rugged Cascades Mountains of western Oregon need water to knock down blazes before they reach catastrophic proportions. The Douglas County Soil and Water Conservation District is helping to assure an adequate supply.

In cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, the district constructs fire ponds accessible by helicopters and trucks. The ponds are located on private lands and are available for use in fighting fires on both public and private lands. Land ownership in the county follows a checkerboard pattern, with BLM, Forest Service and private lands intermingled across three million acres.

Douglas District Manager Walt Barton, who has a degree in forest engineering, designs the ponds. In addition to contracting for design and survey work, the district hires contractors and supervises construction. Standing near one of the ponds on a mountainous site owned by the Seneca Timber Company, Barton reflects on the \$38,000 project. “I suspect it would be paid for with one fire,” Barton says.

Forestry remains a major industry in the county, despite the loss of several mills over the past few decades. With an unemployment rate of about six percent, protecting resources and productive timber

land is important. Most of the remaining mills have retooled to accept smaller diameter wood products. Much of the wood comes from private lands.

In addition to constructing three fire ponds in recent years, the district also constructed a water tank. Plans call for about 20 more ponds, possibly more, in coming years. Funding for the projects comes from Title III of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. Other partners include the Douglas County Forest Protection Association and private landowners.

Ponds are a minimum of eight to 10 feet deep and contain at least one million gallons of water, which fills in naturally once they are dug. “The locations are prioritized based on fire frequency and hazard. It all goes into a GIS system, and we make maps for pilots and trucks,” Barton says. “The goal is to have dippable water every two to three miles.”

The Douglas District works with numerous local, state and federal partners on a variety of forestry, invasive species and riparian restoration projects. It works closely with the BLM on several projects, including the fire ponds. “They’ve been a great partner,” says Barton.

Barton’s special design skills also led to development of a six-acre wetland enhancement project in the county. Called a “duckie doughnut,” the project was made possible by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Partners with Wildlife Program.

*Source: National Assoc. of Conservation Districts
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Douglas County Soil and Water Conservation District Manger Walt Barton oversaw construction of this fire pond in the Cascade Mountains. The district does survey and designs work for the ponds and oversees construction.

National Fire Plan Grants Support FireFree Days in Central Oregon

In 2005, even pouring rain failed to diminish the enthusiasm and involvement of residents in central Oregon participating in the FireFree program. FireFree is a public education campaign designed to increase homeowner participation in wildfire defense, mitigate losses due to wildfire, and increase awareness about steps to take to reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfires reaching homes and neighborhoods. The intense education campaign culminates with the Clean-Up-Weekends, which allow local residents to dispose of flammable vegetative debris from around their homes and property at no charge.

The FireFree program received \$36,000 from the 2005 National Fire Plan Community Assistance program, and will receive an additional \$100,000 from the same program to the 2006 effort. National Fire Plan Grants greatly enhance the ability for local efforts like FireFree to reach a diverse audience and educate significant numbers of residents in high risk communities. "Central Oregon is no stranger to the risk of wildfire, and the FireFree program gives community members an opportunity to do their part in reducing the risks on their own property," said Katie Lighthall, FireFree Coordinator.

Over the course of two weekends at the primary landfill site and a few extra days at local transfer stations, residents brought in over 33,500 cubic yards of debris. Had the dump site been located at the nearby high school, the entire football stadium would have been hidden by a 20-foot high pile of brush, grass, needles, and branches. In 2005, the program collected debris from the equivalent of 167 acres, providing a significant financial benefit as well. Assuming an average treatment cost of \$1,000 per acre, FireFree saved residents and landowners approximately \$167,000.



Local residents turn out in force despite cold and wet conditions.



FireFree Coordinator Kate Lighthall takes a turn greeting vehicles as they enter the landfill.

The Central Oregon FireFree committee is sponsored by Project Wildfire and includes volunteers and partners from Prineville District Bureau of Land Management, Deschutes National Forest, Oregon Department of Forestry, the Bend Fire Department and Rural Fire District #2, all Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook County Fire Agencies, Deschutes County Department of Solid Waste, Deschutes Recycling, and a number of local government organizations, private businesses and individuals.

In 2006, FireFree will continue to use their National Fire Plan grant funding to implement and expand their highly successful program. As they head into the tenth year of sponsoring free yard waste and debris Clean-Up-Weekends in central Oregon, television, radio and print advertising funded through the National Fire Plan grant program will educate and inform residents about the dangers of wildfire, and the need to create defensible space around homes and property. This year FireFree anticipates even greater success and will provide nine consecutive days at the local landfill, as well as continuing to offer free days at local transfer stations.

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New MOU Generates Options for Fuels Treatment and Local Energy Needs

Federal and tribal officials gathered at the historic Pioneer Courthouse in downtown Portland to make a commitment to viable energy options. The Memorandum of Understanding signed on January 25, 2006 between BLM, Forest Service and the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs provides a market-based method to dispose of woody debris from public lands and assure a stable supply of material for the energy generation site at the Warm Springs mill.

In recent years federal land management agencies are focusing their efforts on treating hazardous fuels and restoring the



Present for the signing were from left to right: Gary Larsen, Forest Supervisor, Mt. Hood National Forest; Barron Bail, BLM Prineville District Manager; Elaine Brong, State Director, OR/WA BLM; Ron Suppah, Chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs; Jody Calica, Secretary Treasurer CTWS; Bill Anthony, Deschutes National Forest; Linda Goodman, Regional Forester, Pacific Northwest Forest Service; and Jeff Walter, Forest Supervisor, Ochoco National Forest. Photo by Tom Iraci, USFS

health of forests to minimize large catastrophic wildfires. Over the past decade, central Oregon and the inland West have experienced unnaturally large wildfires that have put many values at risk, including people's lives and homes, sensitive or protected fish and wildlife habitat, culturally and tribally significant resources, critical infrastructure, soil productivity, aesthetics, clean air and other valued components of forests and communities.

In central Oregon, federal land management agencies have identified a need to reduce fuels on approximately one million acres over the next ten years at 100,000 acres per year. Presently, agencies treat an average of 60,000 acres each year by mowing, underburning, thinning and piling of dense and overcrowded stands. The cost for many of these vegetation treatments can be expensive. While much of this vegetation could be used as biomass fuel, the current markets for biomass material in central Oregon are limited primarily because of a reliable sustained supply and a lack of nearby facilities that can economically utilize the material. Creation of a market for typically unmerchantable and underutilized material generated from vegetation treatment activities will provide agencies and



Linda Goodman, Regional Forester and Elaine Brong, State Director, sign the MOU with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs. Photo by Tom Iraci, USFS

communities with economic opportunities to utilize woody biomass that has historically been piled and burned.

The memorandum provides a framework for a long term resource management program on BLM and Forest Service lands. The agreement arranges for the agencies to offer residual woody biomass from approximately 8,000 acres per year of thinned forests within the geographic scope of the memorandum. That converts to approximately 80,000 "bone dry tons" of biomass per year.

The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs hope to double their megawatt yield at the plant, and the federal agencies can deal effectively with "slash" and other non-commercial material. Elaine Brong, State Director for BLM Oregon and Washington commented on the benefits of the agreement, "The woody debris that used to go up in smoke or clog landfills will now be converted to heat, light, and economic engines."

Colorado

Homeowners Learn to Write Subdivision Wildfire Protection Plan

In November 2005, the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado and the Colorado State Forest Service teamed up and offered homeowners a workshop on how to write a community wildfire protection plan for their subdivision. The goal of the workshop was to provide participants with the tools, information, and confidence to motivate community members to develop a plan.

Southwest Colorado is fortunate to already have community fire plans in place for its five largest counties. These plans are currently being revamped to be compliant with the 2004 Healthy Forest Restoration Act. The plans are good umbrellas for community planning, but don't offer the level of detail needed to guide



a homeowners group in how to protect their subdivision from a devastating wildfire.



The main presentations were made by State Forest Service personnel and focused on the current situation and what can be done about it.

They explained three legislatively directed requirements of a community wildfire protection plan, and the eight steps needed to write it. Speakers stressed the importance of the plans being driven by local needs and priorities, and that they fit the community's unique situation.

The key to an effective plan that can be implemented revolves around a collaborative effort. Participants were told to identify community "spark plugs," and then build a core group around those people. They were encouraged to be sure there was enough depth in the core group that implementation of the plan wouldn't depend on one person. The core group has the responsibility to engage other collaborators who have a vested interest in the protection of the community and its landscape.

Other Fire Council members talked about how they could help in the preparation of the plans. Fire Departments offered to attend homeowners meetings; federal agencies discussed working cooperatively to reduce fuels on adjoining federal lands and Colorado State Forest Service offered technical assistance in reviewing subdivision plans. The county planning department said they were available to talk to new subdivision owners about risk mitigation, discussed GIS layers that were available, and said they could provide contact information for absentee landowners. The Office of Community Services at Fort Lewis College talked about available GIS layers, mapping assistance, and noted that Montezuma County is interested in getting GPS coordinates for mitigated parcels of private land.

After the workshop, participant Philip Walters said, "Elk Stream Ranch is starting to develop its Community Wildfire Protection Plan this winter, so the timing of the workshop was great. The guidelines, materials, and advice will really help focus our kickoff efforts."

Participating homeowners serve in the Fire Council's "Subdivision Ambassador" program so they all brought a general awareness of wildfire issues to the table and many have participated in educational programs on defensible space, implementation of defensible space around homes and common property, and community efforts to improve ingress and egress and evacuation routes.

Conservation Corps Protects Local Fairgrounds

In a small town like Cortez, Colorado the fairgrounds serve as the hub for many activities and events within the county. Thanks to the Southwest Conservation Corps, Montezuma County residents no longer have to fear losing their fairgrounds complex to a wildfire.

"We really like projects like this where we can partner with a community to help protect community infrastructure," said Harry Bruell, Executive Director of the Southwest Conservation Corps. "It becomes a win-win situation for everyone."

Using a community assistance grant from the BLM, the conservation corps teamed up with Montezuma County to complete a mitigation project that removed about 20 acres of beetle-killed piñon adjacent to the fairgrounds. The county provided some funds for the crew as well as an in-kind match of the fairgrounds manager's time and the use of a skid loader and bob cat for moving and stacking materials.

The piñon-juniper forest that surrounds the fairgrounds was hit hard by the *Ips* beetle over the last several years, after a long-term drought left the trees weakened and vulnerable to insect infestation. The beetles killed approximately 50 to 60 acres of trees visible from the fairgrounds, which sit just south of Highway 160 along a scenic byway.

Some of the dead trees had been removed in 2005 by the Southwest Conservation Corps and San Juan Hotshots.

During the two-week project the crew experienced several challenges. Working outdoors in the bitter cold temperatures that plagued southwest Colorado in early December was no picnic. Additionally, many of the trees were up to 25 inches in diameter, and the wood was hard and encrusted with sand,



Work crew on site.

making sawing difficult. The wood was cut to length then piled for firewood for local residents.

The Southwest Conservation Corps is a non-profit organization founded in 1998 that provides young men and women with structured, safe, and challenging work and educational opportunities through employment projects that promote personal growth, development of social skills, and an ethic of natural resource stewardship. Their Wildfire Prevention Program provides comprehensive fire mitigation and prevention services while training members for a wildland fire management career.



Tree material was cut to length and piled for firewood use by local residents.