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Montana

Involving Specialists Builds Support in Dillon

Project success is often defined by numbers. Counting accomplishments seems to be a driving force behind our jobs at times, but it doesn't have to be. Montana's Dillon Field Office fuels program is involving nearly the entire staff in implementing prescribed fire projects, effectively instilling a sense of sweat earned ownership into office accomplishments. The satisfaction of reaching goals comes not only from tallying numbers on a spreadsheet, but also from completing the job at hand.

Until recently the program has been short on "core fuels folks," who are dedicated tool-swingers and drip torch-draggers. This isn't surprising considering the absence of suppression responsibilities and the relative infancy of the fuels program at the field office. Times are changing though. Last year nearly a third of the office staff assisted with prescribed fire projects, and this year close to half are expected to help.

The up-and-coming "core fuels team" is comprised of professionals with a wide array of backgrounds, all sharing a common devotion to sound and proactive land management. Office biologists, archeologists, hydrologists, and range specialists, just to name a few, are showing their dedication by providing skills and energy to the fuels work. They are happy to temporarily put aside official titles and do whatever needs to be done, no matter how menial or difficult the task. For the most part they are laborers for a few days, but their pride and satisfaction is clearly evident after investing hard work on a few hundred acres. Ear to ear smiles worn on the soot-streaked faces of the various "ologists" tells the story.

The involvement of the office staff in implementing fuels projects has multiple benefits. Mandated



Wildlife Biologist Kelly Bocking monitors the burn with a portable pump unit.



Dillon Assistant Field Office Manager Mark Goeden uses a portable water pump during burn treatment.

measures of accomplishment are adding up, and so is the team's pride in seeing a project to its end. Field office specialists expend an enormous amount of time and effort in identifying issues and project planning, but too often aren't a part of project implementation. By contributing some time to field work, they feel the gratification of successfully closing a door on a particular project and moving on to the next. Future planning efforts also benefit by the first-hand knowledge gained during project implementation. Among other things, the interdisciplinary teams are better equipped to estimate the feasibility and results of future fuels management actions.

Today the average BLM employee has a full workload. The ability to get into the field is often a challenge. Though the office time is necessary, field work is where the connection to the land is most enjoyed.

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Rangeland Management Specialist Brian Thrift uses a drip torch during the project. All photos are from the Dillon Field Office.

Alaska

Working With Partners to Protect Life and Property

BLM's Alaska Fire Service is planning several prescribed fire projects to help federal and military partners reduce the potential for wildland fires that could threaten communities or military facilities.

Projects now in the planning phase include removing fuels where a high potential for fires exists around military weapon ranges and training areas. Military activities conducted during dry weather can lead to a high potential for fires around these facilities. Areas where projects are currently planned in Alaska include Fort Wainwright, the Donnelly Training Area adjacent to Fort Greely, and Fort Richardson.

According to Alaska Fire Service officials, receiving approval for a prescribed fire requires much preparation, planning and interagency coordination.

"First, we do our preliminary work involving discussion with the land managers, analyzing available options, and developing a project burn plan," said Alaska Fire Service Military Zone Fire Management Officer Tami DeFries. "We also obtain a smoke permit from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation before proceeding."

DeFries added that process includes precise monitoring of site and weather conditions while adhering to carefully determined site prescriptions. "Ignitions typically occur between late April and early June, when weather conditions tend to be most favorable."

An interagency prescribed fire project in conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is also being planned near Beaver, Alaska, and a project is planned in Alphabet Hills, 56 miles southeast of Glennallen to improve wildlife habitat, particularly for moose.

During all operations, the number one priority is safety. "Public and firefighter

safety is always our top priority," said DeFries. "We only proceed with ignitions if the conditions are conducive to meeting the project goals safely."

Keeping the public informed about the planned projects is also a key goal of the program. "We plan to host public meetings in Anchorage, Delta, Fairbanks and Glennallen where specific information will be available about each project," DeFries said. She added that prescribed burning is an integral part of implementing the National Fire Plan, because it helps restore ecosystems while managing the impacts of wildfires on communities and the environment.



Crews conducting prescribed fires on the U.S. Army Alaska's Fort Richardson during May 2005. The BLM Alaska Fire Service is planning projects for the military to help reduce the potential for fires around weapon ranges and training facilities. Alaska Fire Service photo

