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Alaska

Hazard Fuel Reduction Plans for Two Alaska Native Villages

Representatives from the remote Alaska villages of Beaver and Stevens Village have requested BLM Alaska Fire Service's (AFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) assistance in reducing hazardous fuels adjacent to their villages. With land selections and conveyances under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (1971) nearly complete, tribal entities are in a better position to prepare land and resource management plans. Key attributes of these plans include protecting communities from wildfire while maintaining a healthy ecosystem that is conducive to the traditional subsistence lifestyle.

Beaver is located on the north bank of the Yukon River within the boundary of the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, approximately 60 miles southwest of Fort Yukon and 110 miles north of Fairbanks. Stevens Village is also located on the north bank of the Yukon River downstream from Beaver, and 90 air-miles northwest of Fairbanks. Village access is by air or boat as there are no roads. Both communities are federally recognized tribes with 95 percent of the populations of each village being Alaska Native or part Native. Almost all residents live a subsistence lifestyle which includes hunting, fishing and berry picking.

Lightning-caused fire is a natural disturbance and a primary agent of change in the boreal forest surrounding these villages. Fire sustains the natural range of variation for plant and animal life. Over the past half-century, water tables have lowered on the Yukon Flats and fire has been excluded. Both have contributed to a build-up of fuels surrounding the two communities.



An aerial view of prescribed fire treatments around Beaver.



Beaver's community store.

The physical settings of the communities add to the cost-effectiveness of conducting fuel treatments. Patchwork burns of 5,000 to 12,000 acres will be anchored from the Yukon River. Along with fortuitous geography, prevailing winds are such that the location of village airstrips are incorporated into the fuel breaks. The clearing of vegetation along runway approach and departure paths has been welcomed by the State of Alaska Department of Transportation.

The current condition class of the forests surrounding these communities lends itself to fuels reduction through the use of prescribed fire. Hardwoods predominate much of the Yukon Flats and are a natural barrier to the spread of fire, except for in the spring and fall when leaf litter is dry. Over time, these stands would naturally convert to spruce forests, fire severity would increase, and ecosystem productivity would be expected to decline. Introducing prescribed fire now gives managers the flexibility to conduct less-severe springtime burns to maintain hardwood barriers. Also, the State of Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation favors spring burning because it limits residual burnout time thereby reducing emissions.

The fuel reduction projects are in the initial planning and implementation phases. Three dry lakebeds totaling 100 acres were burned adjacent to Beaver in spring of 2006. FWS is planning to increase the effectiveness of this fuel break by connecting the burn units with saw-line in 2007. Treatments around Stevens Village would be similar. Large-scale prescribed fires may then be safely implemented. Once these larger units have been treated, it may be appropriate to allow wildland fire within a closer proximity to the villages in recognition that natural fire occurrence would maintain a healthy ecosystem that support the subsistence lifestyle.

Another consideration of interest is that Stevens Village is in the process of establishing a herd of 200 woodland bison on their lands. The herd would not be free range, but would be fenced in so they do not stray onto the Yukon Flats National



Firefighters from Beaver conducted a prescribed fire in spring 2006.



Chipping being done by Mt. Whitney Ranger District and Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation Environmental Department.



Wildlife Refuge. The impounded herd may be at serious risk if a wildland fire should occur. Treating fuels prior to their introduction would allow more latitude in unit selection. Bison were once a part of the boreal ecosystem and, if managed correctly, may further contribute to maintaining fuel breaks.

The AFS expects a number of long-term benefits of these projects: a considerable reduction in suppression costs, less risk overall to firefighters and the communities, smoke mitigation, and greater latitude for the various agencies to pursue management objectives as they manage generally healthy and biologically diverse landscapes.

California

Alabama Hills Chipper Day

A combined BLM and local community hazardous fuels reduction project was completed by the Lone Pine Fire Safe Council on May 20th, 2006, within the Alabama Hills community of Lone Pine, California. The Alabama Hills community area is spread out with many vacant properties between one another. The landscape is made up of continuous decadent sagebrush, except for those private properties that have some professional landscaping. The Alabama Hills community is a very dry area with wells on each property for the water systems. The Fire Safe Council sent out flyers to the 105 residents of the Alabama Hills community two weeks prior to the event.

Due to the inspection by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection earlier that spring, individual households were to complete their Fire Hazard Clearances

and bring their debris to the specified location of Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation. Part of a combined interagency effort the BLM Bishop Field Office and the Mt. Whitney Ranger District of the Inyo National Forest, chippers were set up to dispose of the debris. Even though public participation was minimal, the Fire Hazard Clearance project was a good start and is still a work in progress. The Lone Pine Volunteer Fire Department has produced additional brochures to distribute to local residents on defensible space and clearance, and it hopes for more participation next year.

Inyo and Mono Counties Launch Community Wildfire Protection Plans

Regional stakeholders including local fire department personnel, tribal representatives, U.S. Forest Service and BLM officials, and regional Fire Safe Council members facing the threat of a wildfire in Inyo and Mono counties' met on Monday July 10, 2006. The goal of this agency stakeholder meeting was to produce the counties' Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP).



Stakeholders meeting.

The CWPP is a tool from the 2003 *Healthy Forests Restoration Act* that encourages at-risk communities, those at risk from a potentially devastating wildfire, to begin efforts to mitigate those risks. The CWPP process brings together key local officials, fire departments, as well as other concerned agencies and groups in the area to collaboratively identify the areas at risk for wildfire and to develop a comprehensive local plan for reducing those dangers.

Assisting in coordinating the meeting and spearheading the CWPP studies is the Anchor Point Group LLC, a wildfire-prevention planning company based in Boulder, CO. In February 2006, Anchor Point was awarded a competitive contract to produce two county-wide plans, one for Inyo County and one for Mono County. In the coming weeks, residents in each county may see Anchor Point representatives driving throughout neighborhoods collecting data on wildfire hazards and risk. When completed, the CWPPs will provide a comprehensive assessment of the wildfire threat in each county, present landscape-scale fuels modification recommendations, offer recommendations to reduce the risk of structure ignitability, provide recommendations for evacuation plans, and much more.

Public meetings will be scheduled for later this summer where concern citizens have an opportunity to comment on the draft plan.

The studies will provide the opportunity for non-profit Fire Safe Councils to apply for federal grants, that will be used to help reduce dangerous fuelloads and implement other wildland-fire prevention strategies. In 2005, California

federal agencies awarded more than \$2.35 million to non-profit organizations for fire and fuels reduction projects, education, and fire prevention measures.

For more information about the community wildfire protection plans, contact Debra Hein, Interagency Fire Mitigation Specialist, (760) 872-5057, or Chris White, at Anchor Point, (303) 665-3473 or e-mail chris@anchorpointgroup.com.

Hazard Fuels Reduction Reveals Archaeological Site on California Coast

The “Coast Dairies” property along the Central California coast is a beautiful patchwork of farm and ranch lands located in Santa Cruz County. Managed in partnership with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) newly acquired coastal property offers recreational opportunities as well as the preservation of a historic working landscape.

The Laguna Creek archaeological site on Coast Dairies was known among archaeologists and local ranchers for decades but it had not been formally documented. The site had been in private ownership for well over 100 years and permission to access the site was very difficult to get. With the transfer of Coast Dairies to the BLM and California State Parks in 2006, the needed inventory and documentation of rare resources began – primarily to aid in long-term planning for future recreation and commercial activities. Part of the inventory included a Challenge Cost Share (CCS) project between the BLM and the Archaeological Technology Program from nearby Cabrillo College, well-versed in Central California coastal archaeology and history.



BLM Hollister Field Office fuels module crew members and Pinnacles NP employees remove hazard fuels from the Laguna Creek archaeological site.

The Laguna Creek site is what archaeologists refer to as a “multi-component” site, meaning that prehistoric and historic remains are present. It was known that a large bedrock mortar feature was next to the creek, but it had been covered up over the years by shrubs and other vegetation. A “bedrock mortar” is very common in California archaeology: they are large boulders or exposed portions of bedrock where Indians had once processed acorns (or other seed and nut foods) with stone pestles, grinding the acorns into a starchy mush for easier consumption. Bedrock mortars are frequently found throughout California in the Sierra Nevada, High Desert, Central Valley, and the Central Coast. The Laguna Creek archaeological site also has part of a historic homestead, including an outdoor bread oven dating back to the Great Depression era.



BLM Hollister Field Office fuels module crew members uncover a prehistoric bedrock mortar feature at the Laguna Creek archaeological site.

overgrown non-native vegetation was removed to expose the archaeological site for the Cabrillo College students so they could safely access the area and properly document the historic and prehistoric site attributes. The removal of hazard vegetation around the historic features also reduced the chance of wildfire consuming the wooden artifacts and structures.

The positive benefits from hazardous, non-native vegetation removal at the Laguna Creek archaeological site are clear: exposure of the cultural features made for better site documentation and recordation, which then provides more accurate information about that resource. That information gives managers what they need to make better decisions about archaeological site management and the overall public usage at Coast Dairies.

Contact: Mike Chiodini or Erik Zaborsky, Hollister Field Office (831) 630-5000.

Specialists from the BLM Hollister Field Office including the Fuels Module crew, Fire Mitigation Specialist, Wildlife Biologist, and Archaeologist spent a day at the site to reduce overgrown vegetation immediately around the archaeological site. Employees from the National Park Service (Pinnacles NP) also assisted in the vegetation removal. All participants were careful to remove excess vegetation without harming rare natural or cultural resources, especially ground-nesting birds. The



Cabrillo College Archaeological Technology Program students begin to record the prehistoric bedrock mortar feature revealed by the fuels module crew.



Cabrillo College Archaeological Technology Program students examine the prehistoric bedrock mortar feature revealed by the fuels module crew.

Colorado

BLM Establishes SEAT Reload Facilities

In an effort to boost initial attack capabilities on wildland fires, six interagency Category 2 reload bases for single-engine airtankers (SEATs) were installed by the BLM during May -- five in Colorado and one in Vernal, Utah.

“These SEAT bases are becoming our initial attack stronghold due to declining numbers of heavy airtankers,” said Kent Hamilton, the State Aviation Manager for BLM in Colorado.

The Colorado SEAT bases, which are located at municipal airports in Cortez, Canon City, Craig, Ft. Collins, and Montrose, were chosen by looking at where the greatest number of lower-elevation fires occurred over the past 10 years. The SEATs perform best in lighter fuels and canopy cover below 9,000 feet in elevation.

“It’s most effective to locate SEAT bases within a 25-mile radius of where fires occur so the planes have a quick turn-around time,” said Hamilton.

In the past, a batch-mixer and pumps were brought in on a trailer. Over 2000 feet of nylon hose had to be run from the batch-mixer and forty 50-pound buckets of retardant had to be manually poured into the batch-mixer. Now, with the new facilities, operations can begin more quickly due to the installation of a permanent hydrant at the batch-mixer and a forklift to lift one 2-ton bag of retardant into the mixer. The portable trailers remain available for use in other high-fire areas in Colorado.

The SEATs are capable of carrying about 800 gallons of retardant, foam or water but usually carry only 600-700 gallons at higher elevations, compared to heavy airtankers which carry around 2,550 gallons.



Students learn how to mix retardant in the new batch-mixer at Cortez during the Colorado Wildfire Academy in June.

While the BLM was responsible for the initial agreements for equipment and the purchase of holding tanks and pumps, the operation is truly an interagency cooperative effort according to Hamilton.

“Last month down in Cortez we had a SEAT that was provided by the Colorado State Forest Service, a National Park Service employee that managed the SEAT, a support trailer for office space provided by the San Juan Public Lands Center, and logistical support from the Durango Airtanker Base,” Hamilton said.

The framework for the cooperative effort is established in the Colorado Interagency SEAT Operations Plan which was signed by six agencies operating in Colorado. The new facilities also allow for local training opportunities for volunteer fire departments and federal agency personnel.



A reporter learns about SEATs from the SEAT pilot.