BLM Snapshots

December 15, 2006

Table of Contents

Jenna Sloan, editor
Sheri Ascherfeld, layout and design

California

Esperanza Fire and Collaborative Fuels Treatments

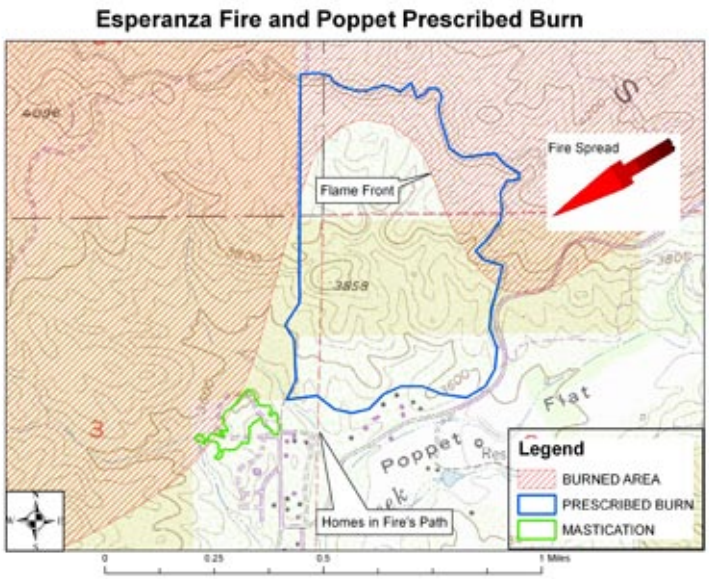
In 2000, the BLM and California Department of Forestry (CDF) began working on a large-scale, interagency community fuel break to protect the communities of Poppet Flat, Rancho Encino, and the Silent Valley RV Club. The strategic placement of this fuels treatment project on both public and private lands protected the communities from the Esperanza Fire in addition to slowing the fire's progress. Federal and state agencies worked together across jurisdictional boundaries to complete an effective fire defense system around the communities.

On the west side of the communities was a large area of chaparral between the homes and the fuel break. A prescribed burn was planned to reduce the fuel loading in this area. In 2005 the first unit was burned along with the fuel break north and west of town. The morning of October 26th the Esperanza Fire spread beyond Highway 243 and began to threaten the area. As the fire approached the community, its progress was slowed by the fuel breaks and diverted by the prescribed fire. When the fire hit the prescribed burn it was diverted north around the community giving the residents the ability to remain in the community or "shelter in place" while the fire burned past. This saved people from needing to evacuate on Highway 243 through the fire in the area of Twin Pines and down hill to Banning.

POPPET FUELS TREATMENT

Acres:	BLM	Private
Mastication	22	60
Dozer	60	5
Prescribed Fire	180	205
Fuel Break	approx 5 miles	
Planned Treatments		
Prescribed Fire	300	100
Mechanical	25	75

Landscape-scale treatments across jurisdictional boundaries are planned for an additional 500 acres in the coming years to maintain the fuel breaks and continue to protect the communities.



The map shows the direction of the fire's spread and the location of the most recent fuels treatments including mastication and a prescribed burn.

Mastication work at Poppet Flat.

Edge of prescribed burn where Esperanza Fire stopped.

Prescribed burn units that helped to divert the Esperanza Fire around the community.

During the Esperanza Fire morning briefing, the incident command team thanked those responsible for the fuels project and acknowledged its strategic importance in helping firefighters save the communities and allowing approximately 250 citizens to shelter in place. Approximately 140 homes and 500-600 RVs were spared from the fire. One mobile home was destroyed that was on the far west end of the community in an incomplete portion of the project and one unoccupied outbuilding was destroyed.

The last figure is a map of the fire showing a large unburned island in the fire, the saved Poppet Flat area. The gratefulness of the local residents for their safety and their unburned homes makes this one of the most rewarding projects I have been involved with. With the growing population and development in Southern California, interagency fuels projects such as this are crucial in protecting communities and resources.

Treatment behind home.

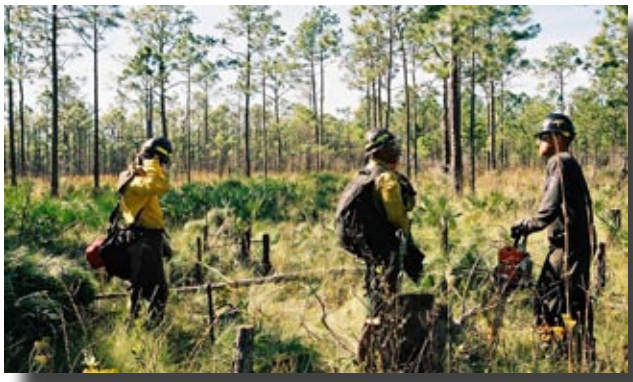
Eastern States

Fuel Reduction at Lathrop Bayou

Eastern States continues to follow the management plan that was developed for the Lathrop Bayou tract in Florida. Addressed in that plan is habitat improvement through the use of prescribed fire, monitoring of special status species, control of exotic species, and regional coordination in support of federally listed species management. This BLM-administered tract is already closed to mining, is a right-of-way avoidance area, and is closed to motorized vehicle use as a result of earlier planning decisions. The first prescribed burn was completed and a second burn is being planned, hopefully for spring 2007.

In the interim, the Jackson Hotshots have been putting their sawyer skills to good use. They spent several days during the week of November 27 working at Lathrop. They removed ladder fuels and thinned overly dense slash pine. They successfully thinned a large portion of the tract in preparation for the spring burn. All their hard work also helps to improve the habitat conditions for the red-cockaded woodpeckers known to live on the tract.

For more information, call Shayne Banks (601) 977-5405.



Jackson Hotshots helping to improve red cockaded woodpecker habitat by thinning slash pine.

Jackson Hotshots thin slash pine at the Lathrop Bayou tract in Florida.

Idaho

Tour Brings Awareness about Bannock County Fuels Reduction Projects

On October 3, 2006, Bannock County residents and other interested parties jumped into vans at Pocatello's Fire Station #5 and took a tour of six local projects to see firsthand what Three Rivers RC&D has been able to accomplish with its fuels reduction projects to create "Firewise" communities.

Approximately 32 people attended, including Bannock County Commissioners, numerous local Fire Departments personnel, Congressional aides to Congressman Mike Simpson (ID-2), representatives of the Three Rivers RC&D Council, and personnel from the BLM Idaho Falls District and the Caribou-Targhee National Forest.

The purpose of the tour was to show current wildland fire problems in Bannock County and to update tour participants about what is being done to mitigate risks in the area through fuels reduction, development and enforcement of Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) codes, and public education. It also provided an excellent forum to share information about funding opportunities for these projects and programs that are available to homeowners residing in the Wildland Urban Interface.

"A large part of the problem with individuals moving into the Wildland Urban Interface is that they don't know what programs and support are out there to help them reduce the dangerous fuels around their homes," said Kevin Conran, Idaho Falls District Mitigation Specialist. "We hope this tour will provide the resources and materials they need to create changes in their own communities."

For the past six years, Three Rivers RC&D along with the Gateway Interagency Fire Front (GIFF) - a consortium of agencies that includes local emergency services, fire departments, Forest Service and BLM staffs – have combined to reduce the risk of wildfire in the WUI on both public and private lands in Bannock County. With several grants from federal agencies, the RC&D has been able to implement critical fuels reduction projects which will reduce the intensity of wildfire in areas near homes.

At each of the stops on the tour, participants discussed and defined the fire issues. They also identified and discussed mitigation projects to reduce the risks to communities. One stop on the tour allowed participants to view several projects from Center Street, where they also saw four scars on the landscape where fires previously threatened homes in the WUI. These visible scars gave participants a dramatic sense of how dangerous fires can be in Idaho's arid climate.

Projects are strategically connected to each other to create a consistent and effective fuel break between WUI areas. For example the Buckskin II Project includes private lands adjacent to the BLM's Camelback Project. With the help of 21 property owners, various fuel break openings will be completed to tie into the existing Camelback fuel break. Fuels specialists hope to have Buckskin II completed by October 2007.

An example of the wildland urban interface issue in the Portneuf West Bench area.

Three Rivers RC&D Fire Education Team Leader Gretl Class described a defensible space project around a home in the Buckskin area.

Chubbuck Fire Department Chief Eric King describes development plans in the Pocatello Creek area and their impacts on the fire service.

"The Pocatello area has been a leader in homeowner education and interagency cooperation in Idaho for years and the fire community over there is making a big difference in the way people build and live in the wildland urban areas that are at risk from wildfire," said Jon Skinner, State Fire Mitigation Specialist.

The Johnny Creek Firewise Community, tour stop number six, represents an amazing effort by homeowners to improve their defensible space. "In this community alone, 167 homeowners and volunteers have put in over 2,000 hours making their community safer from wildfire by removing hazardous fuels around their homes and neighborhood," said Gretl Class, RC&D Fire Education Team Leader. Although much is being done, there still exists a significant need for public help. Many homes are still at risk in the WUI.

Money and time are always issues for completing projects. Funding for these projects is provided from a number of grant sources primarily funded by the BLM Communities at Risk Program and through the Idaho Department of Lands Program. Working on these projects is time intensive and has required numerous resources. Over 3,500 volunteer hours have been contributed to making these projects a success. About 1,260 cubic yards of un-chipped material, 117 tons of chipped material, and 25 tons of un-chipped woody material were removed. In addition to the mechanical treatments, over 120 acres were treated with prescribed fire for resource protection and benefit.

The Three Rivers RC&D Bannock County Fuels Reduction Project Tour stressed that funding from grants is available to homeowners to help them improve their landscape. Many projects include a cost share aspect to reduce the out-of-pocket expenses that landowners may incur, reimbursing them up to 50%. Furthermore, if a homeowner can convince a neighbor to participate, they can increase their reimbursement rate to 60%, and if they can convince two neighbors, it goes up to 70%.

At the end of the tour, the group convened at Pocatello Fire Station #5 for a barbecue and short meeting to address any questions individuals might have.

For more information about these projects near Pocatello, see back issues of Snapshots (September 16, 2005, July 8, 2005, August 13, 2004, and November 14, 2003).

Wildland Fire Education in Local Libraries

In an effort to promote wildland fire education the West Central Highlands Resource Conservation and Development Council (WCHRC&D) has initiated a project to place books about wildland fire in local libraries in the Idaho counties the WCHRC&D serves: Adams, Boise, Gem, Payette, Valley, and Washington. The project is funded by the Boise District

Pocatello Fire Department Division Chief Roger Sears describing fuels reduction needs and accomplishments in the Johnny Creek area.

West Central Highlands RC&D President Morris Huffman and Boise District BLM fire mitigation specialist Bob Narus presenting books to Emmett Library Director Alyce Kelley.

Fire education display developed by West Central Highlands RC&D.

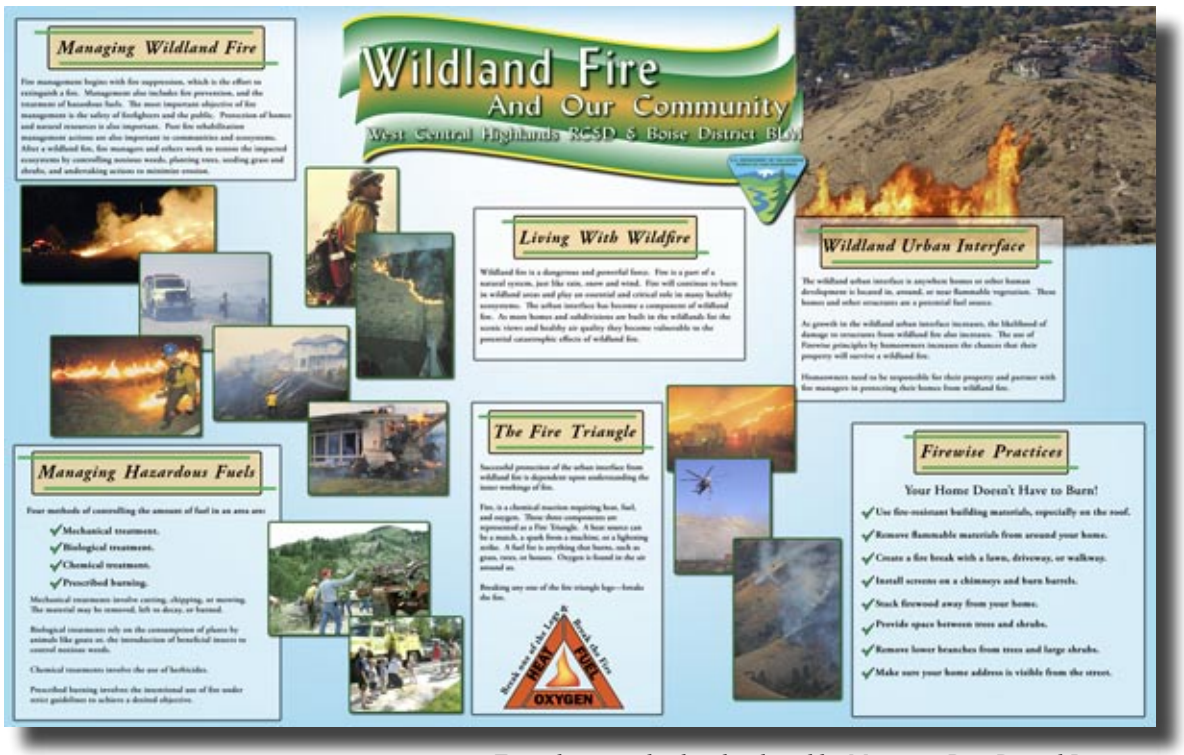
BLM through an assistance agreement. The eventual goal of the WCHRC&D is to become part of every willing library's permanent collection by donating approximately 250 dollars worth of books in the six counties they serve. The books cover a wide variety of wildland fire issues including history, science, tactics, prevention, homeowner safety, and wildland fire-themed children's books. In order to receive books, each library must agree to exhibit an educational display for a minimum of two weeks. During this time the books are placed with the display and are available for circulation.

In August of 2006, the WCHRC&D initiated the library project at the Emmett Library. The WCHRC&D developed the display used during the summer and fall of 2006 at the Emmett, Payette, and Weiser libraries. Currently the WCHRC&D has contracted with Mountain Post Digital Imaging to develop a new display that will be more durable and portable, so the display can be used at other WCHRC&D events and programs. The WCHRC&D plans to donate books to the Council, Horseshoe Bend, and Idaho City libraries during the winter of 2006/2007, and during the spring of 2007 the WCHRC&D plans to donate books to the Cascade, McCall, and New Meadows libraries. The books should be a valuable resource for many years as the WCHRC&D plans to rotate the display in the future, and Boise BLM fire mitigation specialists plan to provide information about the books during programs they implement in the communities served by the libraries.

BLM and Partners Make Strides to Prevent Future Threatening Wildfires along the North Rim

Hearing about a wildfire during the summer, even one that threatens homes, is a fairly common occurrence every summer. Hearing about what the homeowners do after the fact generally isn't.

This past summer, on June 13, 2006, a wildfire started along the north rim of the Snake River Canyon, not far from houses just west of the Jerome Country Club. A fierce wind was blowing and smoke mixed with the bluster was the last thing Dean Kulm and his family wanted to see.



Fire education display developed by Mountain Post Digital Imaging.

Neighbors and interagency partners use a "mule" vehicle to clean up and conduct seeding in the North Rim area.

North Rim homeowner Dean Kulm operates a hand spreader to assist in re-seeding the land around his and other homes that was burned this past June.

The fire started approximately half of a mile from their home and traveled rapidly with the wind, causing $20,000 worth of damage to their home and property. Six different homes were plagued with smoke damage, had to evacuate in a hurry, and loss of out buildings and fences. Before the smoke had time to clear, Kulm was interested not only in getting back to life, but in seeing specifically how this could possibly be prevented from happening again. The Twin Falls District BLM and Mid Snake Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) organization became involved, and a project was put into motion.

Mid Snake RC&D is a non-profit organization that works with communities, counties, fire departments and agencies to accomplish work that is needed on the ground in a natural resource atmosphere. The organization operates using grant money within the National Fire Plan's Communities at Risk program. They are able to step-in and treat the private land that a wildfire has burned on to.

Homes like the Kulm's along the north rim are located in what the BLM refers to as the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), or the space where public and private lands meet. With a WUI distinction, BLM fuels and mitigation specialists became involved and assisted in making a fuels project become a reality.

As plans started to be formed to conduct a seeding project in the area that had recently burned, two homeowners meetings were held. The sessions were well attended and all of the property owners involved gave their consent to have the land seeded. Along with the BLM, Mid Snake RC&D and homeowners, project cooperators included the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and Jerome Rural Fire Department.

"All plants can burn," Julie Thomas, Director from Mid Snake RC&D said. "But the seed mix that we chose to plant near these homes along the north rim is more fire resistant."

On a recent cool November morning, the project partners arrived to complete the work of seeding. Over the course of two days, a four wheel drive "mule" vehicle, a four wheeler and two hand spreaders were used to seed the land that had burned just months before.

The seed mix was comprised of four different grasses to help ensure that cheat grass, which is highly flammable and quick to burn, wouldn't return to pose the same threat next year. The time of year was also just right for the seeding to take place. Fall weather enables a greater chance of success for the new seeds.

"Everything just went really well," Kulm said. "We got a good rain right after we finished and we just felt great about the whole effort."

"This wasn't the first fire that has happened in that area," Thomas indicated. "Education we'd done the summer before had really helped the homeowners to assess their need for fire protection."

During the summer of 2005, the BLM, Mid Snake RC&D, and Fire Departments had staff contacting homeowners along the north rim and in many other areas to conduct mapping and share information about Firewise landscaping.

"Everything about this project was just really good," Thomas said. "These homeowners were very receptive because of what they had been told earlier and the timing to get the work done was great."

With both homeowners and natural resources better protected from a similar scare in summer fire seasons to come, the project can certainly be termed a success.

For more information, contact Heather Tiel, (208) 736-2352.

Nevada

Tamarisk Removal Mitigates Flood Damage to Nevada Communities

Tamarisk removal efforts along Southern Nevada's Virgin River couldn't have come at a better time for the rapidly growing communities of Mesquite and Bunkerville. Only a few months after treatments were completed, the flooding of late 2004 and early 2005 struck both communities at 100-150 year magnitude levels.

In riparian areas where the BLM Las Vegas fuels project had removed massive amounts of Tamarisk, the Virgin River was once again allowed to mimic its historic flood pattern of over-bank flow, channel braiding and other hydrological traits favorable to native plant species germination, reproduction and population re-establishment. Sound project design and hard work resulted in large, broadcast removal of volatile thickets of the invasive tree Tamarisk, which is also known as Salt Cedar.

Tamarisk has adversely modified the natural hydrology and flood regimes of riparian river systems throughout the Southwest, and has in turn altered the fire regime and condition class of riparian vegetation. But for riparian areas near Bunkerville and Mesquite, BLM tamarisk removal efforts have not only reduced the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) fire threat to these rapidly-growing communities, but have also achieved sustainable restoration of the fire regime and condition class for the Virgin River's high-value riparian habitats.

BLM's treatment acreage is far ahead of schedule for the long-term Healthy Forest Initiative Project, which began in 2003. The treatment areas have expanded to 1,300 acres, covering 70 percent of public land in the Bunkerville and Mesquite WUI area. Fire occurrence and acres burned within the project area have been reduced to zero.

The Tamarisk Project used integrated treatment tactics and adaptive management principles to meet challenges posed by the highly dynamic project environment. Crews completed more than 5,000 acres of mechanical, hand-cutting, herbicidal, seeding and prescribed pile burning treatments, resulting in significant acres of native plant reestablishment. Multiple resources benefited directly, including threatened and endangered species.

BLM Las Vegas made significant progress toward restoring the Virgin River riparian condition class from a III to a I, and restoring the fire regime class from a II to a III.

The synergy between the Tamarisk Project and the record flooding achieved far greater savings in ecological restoration costs than anticipated. Soils were flushed of the tamarisk salt crusts that are toxic to native riparian plants. Site productivity was increased by deposition of new silt soils.

City of Mesquite photo from 2004 shows Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) mechanical treatment area before flooding.

City of Mesquite photo from January 2005 shows 100-150 year flood covering same HFI fuels treatment area. Residents credit BLM tamarisk fuels removal with saving the homes on the left.

In place of flat, dry tamarisk monocultures, an array of diverse native riparian habitat types grew, including perched oxbows and flood-scoured gouges that today are ground-water fed lagoons. The new lagoons are beneficial to wildlife, including threatened and endangered animals as well as migratory bird species.

Some Mesquite residents gave the Project credit for saving their homes from the 2005 flood, which tamarisk infestations would have otherwise deflected sidewise into their neighborhoods.

BLM collaborated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to exploit the floods of 2004-2005 and create an opportunity to expand the Project and save $600,000 in threatened and endangered species surveys and first-phase mechanical treatment costs. The BLM also initiated project design cooperative practices with local U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff that pre-dated Section 7 Counterpart Regulations/Alternative Consultation Agreement (ACA).

BLM Las Vegas took advantage of the collaboration and assets of such agencies and organizations as: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, the National Park Service and the University of Nevada Reno Nevada Conservation Corps, as well as other BLM sub-activity programs and contractors.

Crews dispose of mechanically cleared tamarisk along the Virgin River in September 2006. This 190-acre treatment was the largest prescribed fire project completed on by the BLM Las Vegas Field Office since 1988.

BLM also shared lessons learned about large-scale Tamarisk removal operations with such federal, municipal and tribal organizations as: the Walker River Paiute Tribe, the Washington County (Utah) Water Conservancy District, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Ash Meadows Refuge, The Nature Conservancy, the Amargosa Land Conservancy and the BLM California Desert District, as well as the BLM Arizona Strip, Ely and Carson City Field Offices.

For more information, contact Tim Rash (702) 515-5035.

New riparian habitat has replaced dry, flat, 20-foot tall tamarisk monoculture.