

Snapshots

August 5, 2005



Successful BLM Projects
Supporting the National Fire Plan

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New Mexico

Tackling Russian Olive in Largo Canyon

The Farmington BLM office recently launched treatment on Russian olive trees in New Mexico's Largo Canyon in San Juan County. Russian olives are invasive, non-native plants introduced from Europe as shade, windbreaks and ornamental trees. Unfortunately they have taken advantage of the multiple rivers and drainages that run through the county and are choking out natural, desirable vegetation and limiting human, wildlife, and grazing access to waterways. They are detrimental to the watershed because of their high water demands in comparison with native plants.

Russian olive grows thickly along Largo Canyon waterways throughout the checkerboard ownership where federal and state lands intermix with private parcels. Thick overgrown olives create a high fuel loading and extreme fire behavior when burned. Treatment mitigates some of the hazard from future wildfires that could threaten ranch houses along the river.



Fire crew member removing mature Russian olive trees.

Removal of Russian olives is a two part process. Trees are first cut down, and then the remaining stump immediately treated with herbicide. The second step is needed because olives are a root sprouting species. Simply cutting out a mature tree often results in four or five sprouts, compounding the problem. Selective herbicide treatment avoids the problem and completes the treatment process. Thus far, the Farmington BLM fuels crew has treated 12 miles of Largo Canyon, reducing fire hazards for area homeowners and on neighboring public lands.



Crews apply herbicide to stumps as the second step to eradicating invasive trees



This project required planning and coordination between BLM fuels, wildlife, and range staff. Chemical treatment was coordinated by the Invasive Weed Specialist-Rangeland Management Supervisor Eddy Williams who provided chemical application training and ensured requirements for safe application were met.

This year's treatment was partially funded by off site mitigation funds voluntarily paid by oil and gas companies when public land is taken out of grazing use to produce oil and gas. They voluntarily pay up to \$1,000 per acre to achieve land health standards.

Public reaction to the project has been favorable. Homeowners appreciate efforts to reduce exotic fuels creating additional fire hazard. Other areas in the field office boundaries are plagued with similar problems and will be programmed for treatments as staff and funding permits.

Contact: Kelly Castillo, Fire Management Officer, BLM Farmington, (505) 632-2956 (x208)

Mutual Benefits Result From Prescribed Fire Collaboration

The Four Corners Interagency Fire Program frequently uses prescribed fire as the tool of choice to reduce hazardous fuels and improve the health of public lands. Recently, interagency

staff from Farmington BLM and Carson National Forest have been working with staff and volunteers from the San Juan County Wildland Fire Team to implement prescribed fires on both BLM and U.S. Forest Service lands.

San Juan County team members assisted with multiple burns this past year. They gained valuable experience working in the Incident Command System organization in multiple fuel types and exposure to a variety of ignitions, holding, and monitoring positions. They were crucial to the completion of over 100 acres of slash burning and 20 acres of broadcast burn through grass units on BLM. They were also involved in a 1,400 acre burn on the Carson National Forest in mixed oak brush and pine stands.

In addition, several BLM burns were prescribed for late fall and early spring when the federal seasonal work force was on winter furlough. The San Juan County liaison, Fire Chief Larry Marcum, was able to provide enough volunteers and staff to met the burn plan requirements and eliminate the need to order additional personnel from outside



Crew members working slash burn.

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Prescribed May 2005 fire.

the unit, which allowed burns to proceed without additional expense or logistical requirements.

Both agencies look forward to continuing this cooperative burning in the future. Prescribed fire experiences have strengthened the fire suppression partnership in place between the federal and county fire agencies. It has become easier to coordinate suppression efforts now that a working relationship has been established and the federal agencies are familiar with the skills and abilities of county team members.

The experience of working with the San Juan County team has built a solid base for future wildfire suppression and prescribed fire use. So far in 2005, due to the abundance of light fuels, fires

throughout the response area have been spreading more readily than in past years when winter moisture was minimal. The good working relationship and valuable fire behavior experience gained by county team members has made a difference in effective fire strategy and tactics resulting in lower acres burned on several wildfires this year.

BLM and U.S. Forest Service fire staff and county wildland fire team members look forward to continued cooperation and collaboration in the Four Corners area of New Mexico, resulting in the safest and most effective fire suppression and prescribed fire operations possible.

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Fire Crews Helps Out With C.A.S.T. for Kids

Fire crews with the Four Corners Interagency Fire Program from BLM's Farmington Field Office and U.S. Forest Service Jicarilla Ranger District took part in helping the 8th annual "Catch a Special Thrill" event at Navajo Lake become a major success. The May 21st event, in conjunction with the Bureau of Reclamation and New Mexico State Parks, gave disabled and disadvantaged kids from the Farmington area an opportunity to spend a day on Navajo Lake and learn the joys of fishing. Adults with special needs also attended.

Fire crews provided much needed staffing for the popular

event. Fire staff found themselves setting up tents, distributing fire prevention materials, playing the characters of Smokey Bear, Lenny the Lizard, and Olley the Otter, helping load and launch the fishing boats, and assisting with barbecue duties. The event offered a break in their normal routines and an opportunity to contribute to their local community.

The fire crew's time and energy for the event helped make for a special day for community members.

Contact: Kelly Castillo, Fire Management Officer, BLM Farmington, (505) 632-2956 (x208)



Fire staff bring Smokey Bear and his friends alive during community event.

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Oregon

Thinning Trees Improves Habitat for Bighorn Sheep in Northeast Washington

As many as 150 bighorn sheep once roamed 5,200 acres of mostly state and federal lands in the Little Vulcan Mountain range of northeast Washington, near the Canadian border. In 2001, only 17 sheep were counted in this area. This drastically reduced population was partially attributed to a high density of conifers, due to exclusion of fire and limited harvest over several years. Habitat loss is compounded by the fact that over 60 percent of the critical lambing habitat is located on BLM lands.

Wildlife, range, and forestry staff of the Spokane BLM office participated in a two-fold planning effort to improve the bighorn sheep habitat, and reduce potential for widespread wild fire that would further degrade the vegetative resources in the area. The goal was to create forest stand conditions similar to those 60 years ago.

About one-half million board feet of Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine was harvested through a thinning prescription over about 115 acres. This prescription was applied to provide 600 feet of sight distance through the timber stands. The prescription also called for removing non-commercial understory trees. These trees were cut, and all branches severed to provide a

continuous fuel bed for later burning. A prescribed burn is scheduled to reduce the onsite fuel loading. The prescription also identified lower branches of retained trees to be pruned.

Underburns will be used periodically in the future to reduce fuel loads and maintain the vegetative community.

Forestry and wildlife staff of the U.S. Forest Service Ranger District in Republic, Washington and the BLM Spokane District met jointly in the field and coordinated with interdisciplinary teams in both agencies, along with the district ranger, big game biologist, and fuels specialist.

Funding partners for the Bighorn Sheep Enhancement Project included BLM, U.S. Forest Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Federation for North American Wild Sheep, Safari Club International, Inland Northwest Wildlife Council, and local landowners.

The goal is to improve habitat in traditional bighorn sheep range and lambing habitat in the Little Vulcan Mountain area. The project complemented previous projects implemented by the Forest Service and state



Part of the Bighorn sheep enhancement project area.

agencies in the area in the past decade.

Reducing fuel loads lowered the wildfire hazard for a dozen residences and community of Curlew within five miles of the project area. It also reduced potential for a wildfire to destroy vegetation that supports domestic grazing in the general area.

Immediately after thinning, bighorn sheep were observed using the areas. The first phase of the project was thinning of merchantable overstory through helicopter and tractor logging in 2004. The second phase thinning the understory was accomplished in 2005 through a service contract. A third phase will include additional thinning and underburning scheduled for fiscal years 2006 and 2007.

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Little Vulcan Mountain area thinning area, before and after.



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Planting Seedlings Helps Restore Burned Forest Lands

BLM Nevada's Elko and Battle Mountain Field Offices completed a four-year forest restoration project in April, planting more than 500,000 seedlings on burned forest lands in Elko and Eureka Counties.

The massive shrub and tree planting effort targeted burned areas which would hold moisture and had deep enough soil for successful planting. All planting sites were located on slopes with north and northeast facing aspects. The springtime "planting window," was taken advantage of by placing seedlings immediately after snow melt.

The project was designed to improve forest health and mule deer habitat in the burned areas.

Nearly 1.5 million acres of

forest and rangelands burned in northeast Nevada from 1999-2001. Much of the burned area was in habitat critical to the survival of mule deer herds. Restoration efforts had to get going as quickly as possible to slow soil erosion and get the seedlings in before cheatgrass could take over.

The project was divided into phases with the first step to collect native seed. In 2000 and 2001 Nevada Division of Forestry crews helped BLM forestry staff gather bitterbrush, pinyon pine, Utah juniper and mountain mahogany for upland sites. The BLM forestry staff also gathered quaking aspen and narrow-leaf cottonwood for riparian areas.

Phase two was to send the local native seeds to a Forest Service nursery in Placerville, California, where they were sown from 2001 to 2003, grown as container or bare root stock, and lifted for planting from 2002 through this year.

Phase three was planting. Most riparian species were planted in 2001 and 2002. With the first major shipment of 103,000 bitterbrush seedlings in 2003, a commercial planting contractor was hired. In 2004, the majority of planting stock was shipped and

commercial planting crews planted more than 600 acres with 300,000 bitterbrush seedlings, 70,000 pinyon pine seedlings, 7,000 mountain mahogany seedlings, and several thousand Utah juniper seedlings.

This year was relatively easy. The BLM contractor only had to plant 47,000 bitterbrush seedlings and a few thousand Utah juniper seedlings. Commercial contract planting crews from Oregon not only planted the seedlings, but also mulched and tubed the seedlings to give them the best possible chance of survival.

"The planting window is usually very short; only two to three weeks for most years," said Tyson Gripp, rangeland management specialist and currently acting forester in the Elko Field Office. "It's the period of time between snowmelt and before the soil dries up. We were fortunate this year and had good planting weather."

Severe drought combined with high winds over three consecutive fire seasons beginning in 1999 played a key role in burning about 2.8 million acres in Nevada. Fire is a natural process. It has historically renewed vegetation types and habitat, but three consecutive



Bitterbrush and pinyon pine seedlings in Pony Creek, 20 miles south of Carlin, Nevada.

non-typical years consumed large expanses of forest and critical wildlife habitat, especially mule deer winter range, causing major concern among federal and state agencies and public.

When large expanses of forest types are killed by wildfire, those sites may take well more than 100 years to regenerate naturally because of a lack of seed source, and because sites are fairly dry.

Another major issue that land managers face with wildfires is the spread of exotic plants such as cheatgrass. These exotic plants quickly invade disturbed sites such as burned areas, and rob critical soil moisture from the soil before native species can germinate. In the aftermath of the 1999 fires, it was apparent that both forest stands and crucial mule deer habitat would need help.

Partners in the project included several volunteers, BLM, Mule Deer Foundation, Nevada Division of Forestry and U.S. Forest Service.



Pinyon pine seedling planting in the Pony Creek area. The chimney shaped "tree pees" provide protection for seedlings. "Mulch mats" retain moisture and reduce plant competition.