

Snapshots

April 15, 2005



Successful BLM Projects
Supporting the National Fire Plan

New Mexico

Communities Come Together to Complete Wildfire Protection Plans

BLM's Las Cruces, New Mexico field office serves a six county area that includes dozens of communities at risk from wildfire. When these communities learned federal assistance was available through initiatives such as the National Fire Plan and Healthy Forests Restoration Act, they were anxious to participate. The problem for communities was getting through the confusing procedures to access federal funding and technical assistance. The BLM fire and fuels program staff from BLM's Las Cruces Field Office jumped in to help. BLM is committed to helping communities in southern New Mexico by participating in various groups with shared interests in reducing the threat of unwanted wildfires. With the Community Wildfire Protection Planning component of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act now considered a pre-

requisite for federal funding of fire mitigation activities, communities at risk throughout the area were galvanized to action.

The small, unincorporated communities in southwestern New Mexico banded together to navigate the variety of programs available to assist them. They attended county fire plan meetings with the U.S. Forest Service, BLM and State of New Mexico, and asked questions. The strong interest of the communities helped BLM decide to commit existing fuels funding to help initiate community wildfire protection planning efforts. In an atmosphere of collaboration, all entities agreed on a focal point for data and information-sharing required by the community wildfire protection plan. As a result, federal funding, along with a significant cost share arrangement, pays for county wildland fire coordinator staff to provide focus and attention needed to complete the planning process.

Grant County was first to take advantage of this funding opportunity, with neighboring Sierra County following suit.



BLM fuels specialist Ryan Whiteaker (center), works with community members.

The New Mexico Association of Counties is facilitating the pass through of funds to counties. Once plans are in place, mitigation strategies will be used to help prioritize where federal fuels dollars will be spent. BLM is pleased to see the level of interest shown by the counties and communities of southwestern New Mexico and hopes that their enthusiasm to reduce their risk of wildland fire spreads throughout the state.

Taos Field Office Rural Fire Assistance Protecting Communities and Building Partnerships

Reciprocity is the standard operating procedure for the Taos BLM office. Assistance agreements and rural fire assistance are key components of the program and an important way for the field office to be a good neighbor. The Taos field office manages more than 700,000 acres throughout north-central New Mexico. This BLM land is scattered over an extensive area and is adjacent to dozens of small communities throughout the Rio Grande and Chama River valleys, the Tusas

Mountains, and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Potential fire hazards found on BLM lands pose risks to the surrounding communities, and assistance agreements and rural fire assistance programs help provide solutions in mitigating those risks. More than \$230,000 has been granted to 17 different fire departments by the Taos field office over the past few years.

One of these fire departments is the Taos Volunteer Fire Department with six full time employees and 16 volunteers on call for emergency response. Running the department is an expensive task, and requires funds for training personnel, replenishing safety supplies and tools, maintaining facilities, and keeping four fire engines in top condition. Operating budget comes primarily from the Town of Taos. However, the town funds operations only for structure protection. Funds for wildland fire response, which pay for wildland fire training and wildland fire specific equipment, must come from reimbursement for wildfire responses and BLM grants such as rural fire assistance.

Relations between BLM and the Taos Volunteer Fire Department began in 1998, when they began sharing resources for local wildfires, exchanging equipment and personnel for a variety of suppression needs. Since that time, the volunteer department has supported BLM in suppression operations, implementing prescribed burn projects for hazardous



Community members attending fire planning meeting.

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Shown from left to right; Taos BLM Engine Foreman Kyle Sahn, Taos Valley Fire Department staff members Gerard Martinez, Eric Montoya, Bobby Joe Spears, Paul Allen, Leroy Gonzales, and Fire Chief Jim Fambro.

back to Billy-the-Kid days. The technique used to treat the invasive salt cedar including leaving stumps cut one to two feet above ground to encourage re-sprouting on the stump rather than at root level. This provides the second opportunity to treat the unwanted species – the stump is cut a second time then treated with chemicals. This two stage process has proven to be a successful deterrent to the aggressive re-sprouting capabilities of salt cedar. The site has been monitored throughout the 2004 growing season and follow up treatment to eradicate the salt cedar will be scheduled if needed.

The West Spur Project is a 132 acre area contributing to the creation of a fuel break along the western boundary of the Fort Stanton Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The purpose of the project is to reduce threat of property loss from wildland fire between Fort Stanton and the Ranches of Sonterra and Rio Bonito Estates subdivisions. Fuel wood was removed and made available to the public with remainder piled



Roswell fuels crew chipping thinned vegetation on site.



The West Mesa Prescribed Fire project finally underway after a three year delay due to fire conditions and drought.



Salt cedar re-sprouts from stumps left above ground. This process allows for two phase treatment to kill the plant.

fuels reduction, and wildlife habitat improvement. In addition to resource sharing and funding through the Rural Fire Assistance Program, Taos BLM has offered advanced fire training for department members, strengthening the local skill base to assist in fire management operations.

Taos Volunteer Fire Department Chief Jim Fambro said, “I think that we have a great relationship (with the Taos BLM) and it’s sad that other agencies are not as cooperative, because we don’t have near the relationship with other federal and local agencies - not just during the fire season but year-round.”

Efforts Continue to Reduce Wildland Fire Risk in Lincoln County

Lincoln County is a diverse and historic part of New Mexico. It is also an area experiencing

increasing residential development into what had previously been open space. The BLM Roswell Field Office fuel reduction work in Lincoln County began before the National Fire Plan was adopted then melded into the plan as it was implemented.

Projects being accomplished include the Lincoln Tract II as part of the Wildland Urban Interface Memorandum of Understanding signed between Roswell Field Office BLM and the residents of the Lincoln Historical District. Because of the high potential for property loss from wildfire, Roswell BLM has been working with landowners to remove heavy fuel loads with chainsaws and the use of a chipper. The Roswell fuels crew cut and removed salt cedar, Russian olive, and juniper this past June on a critical three acre parcel of land that borders the Rio Bonito public lands and historic buildings dating

for burning later in the season.

Another portion of the fuel break was also recently completed. The West Mesa project involved prescribed fire and was delayed for three years

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due to high fire danger and fires that occurred near Ruidoso and Alto, New Mexico. Severe drought also hampered the project. However, with perseverance being the key, mechanical treatment was eventually conducted on 137 acres, followed by prescribed fire to extend the fuel break between the Ruidoso subdivisions and BLM public lands.

Finally, the Airport Mesa project has almost completed the series of fuel breaks along the west and southwest border of Fort Stanton. The 198 acre project is located just north of Eagle Ranch and adjacent to the U.S. Forest Service Smokey Bear Ranger District on the Lincoln National Forest. Trees along the fuel break were spaced at 75 to 100 feet, with larger material removed from slash piles and made available to the public as fuel wood. A two acre fenced plot was untouched during treatment to serve as a study area.

Collectively, these four projects are focusing much needed

attention on a high risk area and will hopefully reduce the risk of wildland fire from spreading into or out of subdivisions from nearby heavily used public lands.

Eastern States

Hotshots at Home

The Jackson Hotshots are currently moving into their new home. The Southern Regional Fire Training Center complex has been completed and will be fully operational by late spring. Two buildings make up the complex located in Pearl, Mississippi. One building is home to the Jackson Hotshots, which will serve as their operational center and will warehouse equipment and vehicles. The other building is the training center.

This state of the art training facility will service not only the Jackson Hotshots but will help to train firefighters all across the southeast United States. Training classes will begin this spring and many

courses will be taught by the more experienced Jackson Hotshot crew members. The Southern Regional Fire Training Center will be used as an interagency location to train fire crews in fire suppression and prescriptive fire use. Federal and state crews from the southeast are expected to benefit from courses offered at the facility. The completion of this project is the culmination of a partnership between BLM, the U. S. Forest Service and the Mississippi State Forestry Commission.

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The Southern Regional Fire Training Center will train firefighters from the southeastern United States.



Jackson Hotshots have moved into their new home at the Southern Regional Fire Training Center. The building will serve as their command center and warehouse.



Reducing grasses and enhancing herbaceous browse for wildlife were two additional benefits to the West Mesa treatment.

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