

# Snapshots 2004

Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



October 22

## California

### San Diego County Ordinance Helps Save Homes from Wildfire

San Diego County's Weed Abatement Ordinance requires a 100 foot clearance from residential structures. This ordinance was implemented after the Pines Fire in 2002 which burned into homes through heavy brush fields. In 2003, San Diego County gave local fire districts or fire protection agencies the authority to require a degree of brush clearing that would be necessary to protect homes from wildfire. With thousands of homes spread across a wide expanse of land, fire departments have found it difficult to make regular inspections, especially to remote locations along the Mexican border.

The Bureau of Land Management has been working collaboratively with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and U.S. Forest Service

to spread the workload of home inspections under the county weed abatement ordinance. This spring, the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office hired a Student Conservation Association team to assist with inspection efforts along the United States-Mexico border where remote homes about BLM land.

In July and August 2004, the BLM Student Conservation Association team inspected numerous remote homes and worked with property owners to meet county requirements. The approach earlier proved successful in protecting homes during the Border 16 Fire. That fire started in Mexico and burned a total of 1,880 acres mostly in the United States. One home was lost and 15 saved



*One of the homes inspected by the BLM contracted Student Conservation Association team in which homeowners worked to meet the county ordinance requirement of 100 foot clearance around*



*The Border 16 Fire started in Mexico on September 13, 2004, and burned a total of 1,880 acres; 880 acres in California and 200 acres on BLM land. The dirt road in the center of the photo separates Mexico (left of road) and California (right of road).*

through suppression efforts aided by defensible space standards that cleared brush up to 100 feet from their homes. The home that was lost had failed to meet compliance under the county ordinance after inspections from the Student Conservation Association team. The value of homes, outbuildings and other resources protected during this fire are estimated at an excess of \$1-million.

San Diego County also requires class-A roofing materials, usually tile or metal, non-combustible wall materials, and in some cases a 10,000-gallon water-storage tank and interior sprinklers. For more information

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*The non-compliant home that was burned during the Border 16 Fire.*

about the County's Weed Abatement Ordinance visit the San Diego County website at <http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/cnty/bos/sup2/legislation/leg020924weed.html>.

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## Taking Rural Fire Assistance to a Higher Level

Bureau of Land Management fire staff in northern California are taking rural fire assistance to a higher level through creative collaborative efforts by providing surplus equipment, cooperative training programs, and grants which help purchase personal protective equipment and radios.



*New radio purchased with Rural Fire Assistance grant money.*

Lassen County rural fire departments have received National Fire Plan funding through the Rural Fire Assistance program that has helped firefighters obtain needed equipment and training. Chief Robert May of the Burney Fire Protection District recalled how the new radios purchased with a rural fire grant allowed them to communicate with their regional command center while on fire assignments.

The Surprise Field Office has formed the Surprise Valley Fire Cooperative, made up of fire local volunteer fire departments, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs and BLM. Meeting at least three times a year, this group discusses safety and equipment needs for the valley. BLM has coordinated surplus equipment donations including radios and a fire engine from the Truckee Meadows Fire Department in Reno, Nevada. The group works closely on training programs for all for all of the departments including mock incidents.

The City of Susanville Fire Department has a new four-wheel-drive fire engine, equipped with a 300-gallon water tank and foam injection unit, thanks to a partnership with the Eagle Lake Field Office and

Rural Fire Assistance funding. BLM and the department worked to build the new engine almost from the ground up. BLM provided a surplus pickup truck chassis from BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program. Using grant funds, the department purchased a "slip in" fire fighting unit and related equipment. Now they have a fire



*Jim Brown, left, BLM fire management officer Northern California, hands keys to a new quick attack fire truck to Chief Stu Ratner of the Susanville Fire Department.*

*BLM worked with the department to provide Rural Fire Assistance grant funds to purchase and outfit the truck.*

*It will be used to respond to fires in Susanville's wildland-urban interface.*

truck that is ideal for initial attack in the urban interface where it can fit into tight areas and maneuver over rough terrain.

Over the past three years, the BLM has provide approximately \$500,000 in Rural Fire Assistance grants to Northern California fire departments to assist with needs ranging from wildland fire equipment to wildland fire training.

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## National Fire Plan Triangle of Success Actions Before, During, and After Fire

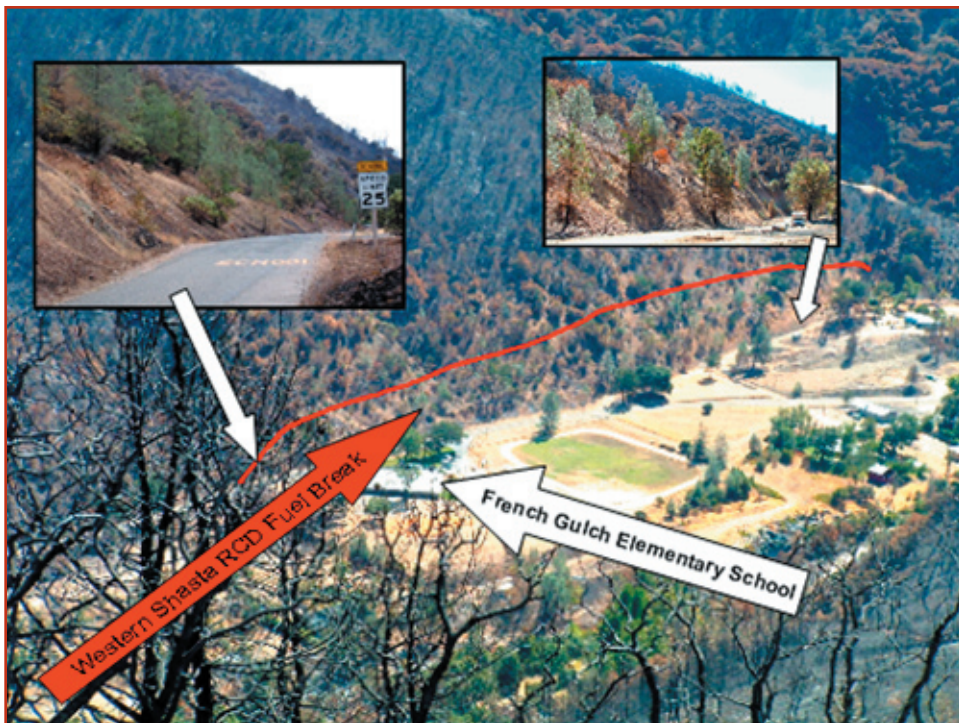
At a simple level, the fire triangle demonstrates the components necessary for a fire to burn. The National Fire Plan triangle demonstrates activities that can help avoid and reduce fire catastrophes before, during, and after fires. This was successfully demonstrated in the French Gulch community during the August 2004 French Fire.

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*The August 2004 French Fire burned over 13,000 acres of rugged, forested hillsides surrounding the historic mining town of French Gulch. Shaded fuel breaks and other pre-fire activities helped save the elementary school, volunteer fire department, and about 260 homes. A green line of trees can be seen along the edge of the road where the fuel break dropped the fire from the tree crowns to the ground.*

The French Fire burned more than 13,000 acres of rugged, forested hillsides along the Clear Creek watershed and destroyed 28 homes in the small historic mining town of French Gulch, located 16 miles west of Redding, California. This is a tragic loss of homes and habitat, but the stories of pre-fire planning and treatments demonstrate a tremendous success.

Before the fire, community and watershed partners such as the Western Shasta Resource Conservation District, Shasta County Fire Safe Council, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Whiskeytown National Recreation Area and private timber

companies developed various levels of cooperative plans that assessed wildfire issues.

California Department of Forestry and Fire unit fire plans are on line at [http://www.fire.ca.gov/FireEmergencyResponse/FirePlan/units\\_countyfireplan.asp](http://www.fire.ca.gov/FireEmergencyResponse/FirePlan/units_countyfireplan.asp) County fire protection plans, watershed assessments and inventories, and community fuels management plans can be viewed at <http://www.westernshastarc.org/reports.htm>. These plans prioritized strategic community projects such as the shaded fuel breaks around the French Gulch community.

During the fire the shaded fuel break around the French Gulch Elementary School helped drop the fire from tree

crowns to the ground and diverted the fire away from the school. The French Gulch Volunteer Fire Department received a 2004 Rural Fire Assistance grant from BLM for \$8,370 that allowed them to replace old personal protective equipment and upgrade handheld radios improving their capacity to assist in the suppression efforts during the French Fire. The school and many structures survived the ember showers and severe fire behavior due to a combination of fire suppression and pre-fire activities.

The French Gulch Elementary School fuel break was implemented by the local conservation district through a \$28,950 BLM Community Assistance grant and \$50,000 in matching funds. This fuel break along with a U.S. Forest Service funded project on the opposite side of the community helped protect the school, an historic hotel, the county park, a fire house, and over 260 homes and 650 people. Estimated property value was more than \$4 million. The fuel break can be seen as a line of green vegetation against black hillside in the photo.

The Highland Ridge Shaded Fuel Break, funded under the same BLM grant, was located on the hillside



*BLM Director Kathleen Clarke talks to students at French Gulch Elementary School about the fire and rehabilitation activities.*

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above French Gulch and was utilized as an anchor point to start a dozer line. This ridge top dozer line helped crews stop the fire spread and protect homes on the other side of the ridge. Excerpts from a letter written by property owner William Meissner to the Western Shasta Resource Conservation District



*The Highland Ridge shaded fuel break, funded through the BLM grant, was on a hillside above French Gulch and used as an anchor point for a dozer line. This helped crews stop the spread of fire and protect homes over the ridge.*

plan include community infrastructure, historical, archeological, special status species, watershed, recreation, and the local economy. The combination of cooperative National Fire Plan efforts between the agencies and local partners have demonstrated a triangle of success in protecting a community at risk before, during, and after the fire.

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express the community's appreciation for the fuel reduction work that saved their homes. "It's hard to believe that less the four months ago, I wrote you a note about the fuel break occurring on a portion of my land. It was a difficult decision for me to allow many of my trees to be reduced to slash, just on the possibility that a fire may come. Today, I hardly recognize the landscape. On the south side of the fuel break there is complete destruction of all timber and brush. Two hundred feet to the north, not a tree or bush is burned."

After the fire, homeowners discussed with the California Department of Forestry incident commander Jim Gunderson how obvious it was to see which homeowners chose not to participate in fire safe activities. Although fuel breaks were strategically

placed around the community, many of the homes without defensible space were lost to the fire.

During a visit to the burn site, the BLM Director, Kathleen Clarke pledged \$1.9 million in federal funds for emergency stabilization work outlined by the Interagency Burned Area Emergency Response Team. Her visit to the elementary school highlighted the school's participation and interest in fire rehabilitation activities. Students had already planted new trees within an old burn area in the upper watershed and now have plans to assist in the new restoration activities.

Many more homes were protected than lost within the community of French Gulch and in the outlying area. Resources impacted by the fire and considered within the rehabilitation

## Colorado

### Poverty Gulch Special Use Cabin

The Royal Gorge Field Office in Canon City, Colorado, has completed the first phase of a fuel reduction project at a special use cabin located on public lands. The 25-year old cabin was originally constructed as an educational facility for a girls high school in the area. While the school has since closed, the cabin was assumed by the local St. Thomas More hospital. The hospital has plans to conduct activities at the cabin for special needs patients.

The cabin was originally situated in a fairly open ponderosa pine stand. In the past 25 years the stand has become overgrown with dense young

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of age classes, and a natural appearance for the stand. Some removal was focused upon allowing the users to improve a dangerous parking problem.

The cabin had been constructed very close to private land. While the fuel reduction



*One of the goals was to maintain stand species diversity and a natural appearance when work was completed.*

*An area in front of the cabin with before and after photos of results of the work. The area is accessible with a public road.*



ponderosa pine. While the cabin has some problems to be resolved with respect to building materials and maintenance, it was clear that fuels had to be reduced at the site prior to any use by the hospital.

A BLM forester marked the site with the goal of reducing fuel loading while retaining species diversity, a mixture

involved only two acres, negotiations with the adjacent landowner are underway to add an additional several acres to the project to further improve the project effectiveness.

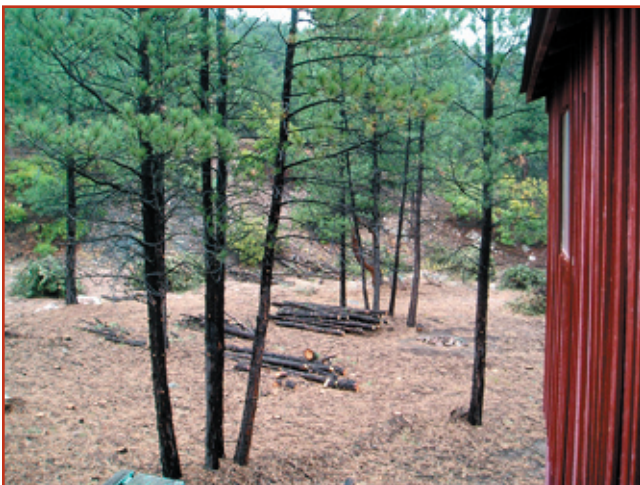
The cabin is within a few miles of the 2002 Iron Mountain Fire that destroyed 100 structures in a single day. While interest in improving defensible space in the area exists as a result of that fire, this project should serve as a reminder to local people about what can be done with a minimum amount of effort. The cooperation between BLM, local fire protection district, and the hospital is an example of the improved relationship that can be fostered by working together.

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## Oregon

### Land Management Efforts Reduce Severity of Wildfire in West Eugene Wetlands

The BLM Eugene, Oregon District provided a \$120,000 grant to Eugene Parks and Open Space program to remove invasive blackberries, non-native pasture grasses, and reed canarygrass from more than 80 acres near the BLM's West Eugene Wetlands. An August wildfire at Bertelsen Nature Park could have threatened nearby homes and businesses if the project had not been accomplished. The grant funding was



*Some work remains to be done includes removing accumulated litter around the cabin foundation.*

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specifically targeted for reducing wildfire fuel on public lands, with the added benefit of removing non-native species.

“Shortly after the project area was mowed and treated, a human-caused fire on adjacent land was started. The completed project site served as a buffer and prevented the rest of the immediate area from burning. If this area had begun burning, there would have been threats to many nearby structures,” said Nancy Ashlock of the BLM Eugene District.

Removing overgrown vegetation is the first step in restoring the native understory and managing the natural area. The next step in the restoration of this area involves reseeded with a diversity of native prairie species.

The West Eugene Wetlands Project area has important botanical and wildlife ecological values. The west Eugene area supports the greatest remaining concentration of native prairie remnants and associated rare species in the Willamette Valley. This habitat was maintained by periodic burns ignited by the native Kalapuya (“people of the long grass”) to remove woody vegetation and retain grassland conditions.

The West Eugene Wetlands allow sound urban development to continue while protecting important wetland values and rare plant communities. BLM’s West Eugene Wetland plan is considered a national model for wetland planning.

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*Native Wet-Prairie Grassland in the West Eugene Wetlands*



*West Eugene Wetlands (above and below).*

