

Snapshots 2004

Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



July 30

Alaska

Major Fire Season Hits the 49th State

Over four million acres have burned so far during Alaska's 2004 fire season, putting the state into its third largest fire season on record. Fire seasons are ranked based on documentation from the 1950s when reliable fire records began to be compiled. Using acres burned as a base, 1957 ranks highest with 5 million acres. In 1969, with 4.2 million acres burned ranks second. The 2004 season may well be on its way to exceeding 1957 if current level of fire activity continues.

As fire activity increased dramatically in the Interior of Alaska in mid-July, a weather anomaly of persistent, strong winds from the northeast, associated with an imbedded high weather pattern, blew a blanket of smoke across the entire state, making it impossible to use air support, map fires or detect new fires. While fire management was limited by smoke, weather conditions exacerbated the already volatile situation.



Part of the massive Taylor fire complex in Alaska.

Large fire seasons in Alaska require a significant warming and drying trend with the right combination of instability, heat and moisture to result in many lightning strikes. Not all warm, dry summers have a large amount of fire activity because there has to be an ignition source. Records were broken this summer with more than 8,000 lightning strikes a single 24-hour period in mid-June (during a time in which each day there were thousands of strikes over a period of consecutive days), and in mid-July with over 8,400 strikes in one 24-hour period.

The high level of fire activity has raised some new issues in Alaska that were not as prominent in past large fire seasons. What has changed is the increase of wildland urban interface area. The expansion is not only around cities, towns and villages, but in the areas that used to be completely remote. Many of the newly populated areas are still very isolated with no road access. Structures in these remote areas are being built with little defensible space among thick stands of black spruce, which burns like gasoline on a stick.



BLM Alaska Fire Service firefighters work on structure protection for a cabin.

Thick duff, consisting of decomposing material on the forest floor, has had weeks to dry. Firefighters must change tactics to control and extinguish most large fires. Burnout operations are an effective and proactive tactic but carry a greater risk than waiting for a fire to come to the wildland urban interface areas.

Even with people and equipment ordered from the lower 48 to supplement Alaska's resources, most initial attack can only be done by smokejumpers, who are quickly deployed into the remote areas. The support of these operations is through para-cargo since ground support is rarely an option. Given the number of starts and the incredible rates of spread, even with the large numbers of the smokejumpers added from the lower 48, it has been very difficult to catch all the wildfires early.

Another issue this year has been the impact on the support system. BLM's Alaska Fire Service and Alaska State Division of Forestry incident support is also impacting the private sector. For example, in the Fairbanks area

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Rural Alaska cabin lost to wildfire.

there is not a single room available in any local hotel or bed and breakfast facility. The university and some area high schools have been contracted to provide housing in support of suppression resources and local incidents.

This fire season has also increased the public's interest in fire planning. State and federal agencies have had discussions and public meetings with communities and individuals regarding the role of fire planning and strategy behind fighting fires. This fall, Alaska Fire Service will initiate additional planning discussions with various communities and Native Alaskan tribes.



A firefighter is silhouetted by flames at the Taylor complex.

The State of Alaska is divided up into four protection levels, which are critical, full, modified and limited. These determine actions that will be taken on the ground. The critical level receives heavy initial attack to protect life and inhabited property. Other levels vary in response ranging down to limited, where fire is acknowledged in its role as part of the natural ecosystem and should be allowed to burn with site specific protection.

Fire Season 2004 in Alaska has provided many challenges because of the large number of fires located near the wildland urban interface and vast amount of resources committed to suppression. No one can recall when so many suppression resources have been committed to fire suppression at one time in the history of fire in Alaska.

There have been tragedies, with the loss of structures and private property, and triumphs, with the amount of effort being put into the firefighting and the high level of firefighter and public safety that has been maintained. The importance of defensible space around homes, especially in areas that are hard to access, is being emphasized while the fire community has the public's attention. Most importantly, the fire season is not over yet in Alaska.

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New Mexico

BLM New Mexico Launches New Wildfire Risk Reduction Program

During the first four years of the National Fire Plan, BLM New Mexico focused its fuels management program on reducing fire risk on public lands. In June of this year, BLM expanded these efforts by entering into a partnership with the New Mexico Association of Counties to develop and implement a wildland urban interface community assistance program. The association had expressed its interest in exploring opportunities for cooperation in land and resource management activities as part of a November 2003 Memorandum of Understanding with BLM. The new Wildfire Risk Reduction Program for Rural Communities is the first joint project to be established under the memorandum.

The Association of Counties is proving to be a very capable and enthusiastic partner. As an umbrella organization providing a voice for all counties in New Mexico, they provide expertise in statewide issues and a network to



BLM Deputy Director, Jim Hughes, along with the Association's Executive Director Samuel Montoya, announces the Wildfire Risk Reduction Program at the Association annual conference.

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The New Mexico Association of Counties, an affiliate of the National Association of Counties, represents all 33 counties in the state.

easily reach all 33 counties in the state. By agreeing to help BLM develop and delivery of a Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, they hope to empower counties or their rural communities-at-risk to develop local wildfire protection plans, implement local fuel reduction treatments, and develop other local risk reduction solutions.

The Wildfire Risk Reduction Program will be phased into full implementation over the next 15 months. Phase I is currently underway. The association is conducting a comprehensive statewide survey to determine the status of community fire planning and mitigation efforts in an effort to identify priority areas for future risk reduction activities. They are also providing outreach and education about wildland urban interface issues to county elected officials and developing of a key contact list. These key contacts will be recruited to form a statewide “fire affiliate,” essentially a working group under the Association of Counties that will provide county and community-based expertise to help



BLM build an effective non-federal wildland urban interface program. In addition, the association is pursuing additional funding sources to supplement and leverage BLM seed money for future projects.

The next phase of the project, beginning this fall, will consist of soliciting county and community proposals for risk reduction activities that mutually benefit New Mexico’s communities at risk and BLM public lands.

BLM’s expertise in fire planning and risk-reduction activities coupled with the New Mexico Association of Counties dedication and commitment to serve the state represents a new approach to deliver on the National Fire Plan’s directives. All involved parties look forward to a long and productive partnership to reduce fire risk to communities at risk in the state.

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Specialized Position Provides Support for Prescribed Fire Projects

Fire is a tool frequently used by BLM New Mexico and other federal land managers to reduce hazardous fuels, restore ecosystems, and treat wildland urban interface areas.

While extremely effective in

accomplishing these fire management goals, it creates air quality issues that must be carefully considered and coordinated with the state prior to ignition.

The New Mexico Environment Department’s Air Quality Bureau is responsible for ensuring that all air quality standards are met and maintained, issuing operating identification numbers and enforcing air quality regulations. A memorandum of understanding between the air quality bureau and the federal land managers was established but misunderstandings affected its usefulness. In an effort to improve the situation, the Department of the Interior, through the BLM, hired a smoke management specialist in 2002 to work with, and be co-located at, the air quality bureau.

And what a difference the position has made! The specialist serves as a bridge between the state air quality specialists and the federal fire managers. With experience as a firefighter and burn boss, she understands fire management practices, fuel models, and weather considerations and knows the



Prescribed fire project conducted by Farmington Field Office. Management of smoke issues must be planned for prior to ignition of a prescribed fire.

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Close coordination with the Air Quality Board ensures that all air quality standards are met during prescribed fire projects.

amount of planning and preparation that go into a burn project long before its ignited. This expertise has been used to help the air quality bureau better understand the dynamics of fire, answer questions about using fire to manage public lands, and serve as a subject matter expert when waivers are needed for specific burn situations such as winter pile burning.

The specialist also provides many services to New Mexico's federal burn specialists. She has developed training materials covering new regulations and best management practices to minimize smoke and emissions, helped field units with their smoke instrument monitoring, and assisted with state reporting requirements. By participating in both state and national-level smoke, fire emissions, and air quality working groups, she keeps all involved parties informed of changes that might affect the current smoke management program.

This specialized position has helped create mutual understanding between different professionals. Federal burn specialists are more aware of the effects of smoke issues and the air quality board realizes that prescribed fires are carefully planned projects with important resource objectives. With well over 50 percent of BLM New Mexico's fuel reduction projects involving prescribed fire, this specialized position has improved communication, consultation, and cooperation, all in the service of reducing hazardous fuels!

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Oregon

Commercial Use of Juniper Chips from Public Lands

In central and eastern Oregon as in other regions of the West, juniper encroachment on public lands has had a significant negative impact on rangeland productivity, diversity and health. In parts of Oregon, western juniper is out-competing native pine trees and sagebrush and bitterbrush shrubs. Limiting juniper's spread can help improve wildlife habitat, and improve forest and rangeland health on public lands.

The BLM Lakeview District's Klamath Falls Resource Area has approximately 57,300 acres of commercial forest land, the majority located west of Klamath Falls. BLM-administered lands located east of Klamath Falls contain approximately 15,300 acres of commercial forest land, which represents the remaining 30 percent of the resource area's total. The most abundant conifer species are ponderosa pine mixed with western juniper.

Eastside lands also contain about 70,000 acres of non-commercial juniper woodlands. Over the last decade, the Klamath Falls Resource Area began to analyze and test an array of methods to treat these juniper woodlands to restore the vegetation component to pre-fire suppression levels. These treatments involve contracts to cut and remove



Overstocked juniper was cut as part of a hazardous fuel reduction project.

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Juniper chips.

some of the juniper to a processing facility in Klamath Falls, Oregon.

As a next step to an earlier hazardous fuel reduction project, the Klamath Falls Resource Area is working with a local contractor to make felled and stacked juniper available for chipping as a component for hardboard siding. The 1,472 acre Schnipps Valley in southeastern Oregon was overstocked with juniper until a recent thinning project cut and stacked the excess. Other methods of removing the cut juniper had limitations. Making the juniper available for firewood use would not remove enough, while burning the stacked logs would cause too much harm to nearby pine trees.

An on-site chipper is used to process the seasoned juniper logs for transport to the mill in Klamath Falls. In order to fill a chip truck, cut and stacked juniper from a two to three acre area is needed. After processing more than 50 acres of juniper and delivering 29 truck loads of chips to the mill for testing the final hardboard product, the contractor has requested approximately 250 more chip truck loads consisting of the cut juniper from the BLM's Klamath Falls Resource Area.

This positive development will help meet resource objectives and use biomass in a way that provides benefits to the local economy.

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Cut material will be used to make juniper chips to help produce hardboard siding.



The juniper is run through a chipper at the site.

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