

# Snapshots

Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



March 12, 2004

## New Mexico

### Northern Pueblos Team with BLM for Mutual Benefits

BLM's Taos, New Mexico Field Office is continuing a long-term training program to educate local tribes and incorporate them as a key part of a successful fire program. Improvement of tribal economies is an important aspect of the program.

Fire crews from the Santa Clara and Taos Pueblos are building their capacity to become independent contractors by working on BLM wildland-urban interface hazardous fuels treatment and fire suppression projects.

Northern New Mexico unemployment fluctuates between 23 and 40 percent. However, this number increases to 50 percent in the northern tribes. Six years ago, fire management officer Pat Pacheco of the Taos BLM office, envisioned a concept to include local tribes in management of the local resources and approached the Santa Clara Forestry Council with it.

"The federal government is looking for opportunities to contract with local entities, especially minority entities," he said. "This is a win-win. People who always have fought fires



*Thinned materials are stacked by crew members for future burning.*

and worked with resources can help us and build capacity in their own communities."

During the last five years, the Santa Clara Pueblo, through assistance agreements, has worked on over 20 projects for BLM with the goal of



*Taos Pueblo crew members working on BLM's Cooper Hill wildland-urban interface project.*



*Pueblo crew member working in dead pinion tree area.*

eventually becoming an independent government contractor.

In 2001, after several years of shadowing the Taos fire crew, 40 to 60 firefighters from the Santa Clara Pueblo successfully formed their own tribal forestry council. They now boast two 20-person crews along with specialists ranging from foresters to archeological technicians.

Taos BLM has currently hired the Pueblo for a 250-acre hazardous fuels reduction project in the '31 Mile' wildland-urban interface project near Espanola, their third contract since becoming independent.

Following the success of the Santa Clara Pueblo, the field office started a similar project with the Taos Pueblo last November. "We are giving them supervision training, teaching them science, and showing them initial startup costs and how to do business," Pacheco said. The Taos Pueblo is currently mechanically thinning and piling 250-acres of hazardous fuels in the Taos BLM's Copper Hill area adjacent to five northern New Mexico towns.

Contact: Pat Pacheco, Taos Field Office Fire Management Officer, (505) 751-4717

### Governor's Grant to Help Reduce Hazardous Fuels

BLM in Taos, New Mexico and the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps are teaming up to treat hazardous fuels near a local community after winning a one-of-a-kind grant in December. The Taos Field Office, along with the Carson National Forest, is partnering with the youth corps to reduce hazardous fuels on between 200 to 1,000 acres near the communities of Pilar and Velarde.

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The project comes as a test pilot for the State of New Mexico after the partners were selected for Governor Bill Richardson's first "Special Pilot Project—Governor's Pinion Initiative for Northern New Mexico" grant. More than 80 applicants had applied for the grant. The Governor's Office was looking for local youth organization and government collaboration for a pilot project to deal with high fire risk to northern New Mexico communities. Native pinion trees in the pilot area have been decimated by drought and pinion bark beetles and have a 90 percent mortality rate.

Using the grant money, and an additional \$15-thousand contributed by the BLM New Mexico State Office Healthy Forest Initiative fund for planning and monitoring, the youth corps members, ranging in age from 15 to 18 years old, will be clearing dead pinion trees from a high risk wildland-urban interface area that has experienced at least four human caused fires in the late 1990s.

Justin Dean, Taos Field Office biological technician, is in charge of overseeing the site prescriptions and specific tree marking. The project site has less grass recovery, and is more steep and rocky than other such areas in the Taos Field Office management area. "We'll be removing the minimum number of trees to accomplish the hazardous fuels reduction goals, but nothing more," he said.

"We will be leaving taller trees for things like bird nesting habitat," added the Taos Field Office Fire Management Officer Pat Pacheco.

The project, set to take place in April, is adjacent to the Rio Verde Recreation Area, which, according to Pacheco, receives over 10 thousand visitors a year, and has a pinion tree mortality rate of over 60 percent. "In other words, more than every other tree is dead," he said.

The youth corps members, trained by the Taos Field Office, will be manually removing and piling wood. The dead trees will provide biomass fuel wood

sold to the local community at \$20 per cord. The funds will go back to back to the BLM for site reclamation and wildlife habitat management.

Contact: Pat Pacheco, Taos Field Office Fire Management Officer, (505) 751-4717



High risk wildland-urban interface area covered with dead pinion trees.

## Wyoming

### Coal Mountain Fire Break

The City of Casper is located in central Wyoming at the base of Casper Mountain in the North Platte River Valley. The mountain, rising 3,000 feet above the city, is a popular recreation site for the local community, as well as home to many local residents, with 800 structures scattered across its slopes.

Ten miles southwest of the city adjacent to Casper Mountain is the Gothberg Draw-Coal Mountain area. In 20 years over a dozen wildland fires have occurred on or threatened lands within the mountain area.

During summer of 2000 the Deadhorse fire burned nearly 6,000 acres of private, federal, and state lands on Coal Mountain costing \$1.2 million for suppression and nearly destroying several dwellings.



Rocky Mountain Youth Corps team members in New Mexico.

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*Hand piles on Coal Mountain.*



*Casper Field Office fire personnel work on Coal Mountain slash disposal.*



*Remains of hand pile after burning.*

Last fall as part of the Gothberg Draw-Coal Mountain Wildland Fuel Reduction Project, BLM created a three and one half mile fire break on public land.

According to Natural Resource Specialist, George Soehn, "Coal Mountain is a lightning rod during summer thunderstorms. Every summer there are at least two or three small

of local firefighting resources. This project will create a fuel break that will aid firefighting efforts in the future."

Heavy fuel loads along existing roads and trails on Coal Mountain will be removed with creation of a fire break

to reduce potential for a catastrophic wildfire on the adjacent Casper Mountain.

During summer of 2002, fire crews cut and hand piled junipers and conifers approximately 15 feet on along each side of an existing two-track trail for about three and one half miles.

Approximately 700 piles were burned in January and early February. The project area is being monitored for the encroachment of noxious weeds into burned areas, and the fuel break will be monitored over the next decade maintain its effectiveness.

Contact: George Soehn, Casper Field Office, (307) 261-7531

## Boom Equipment Tackles Tough Maggie's Cabin Project

BLM's Worland Field Office in Wyoming finished implementing an important phase of an ongoing vegetation treatment on western slopes of the Bighorn Mountains last September. The Maggie's Cabin project is designed to improve ponderosa pine stand resistance and resilience to insects, disease, and wildfire, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire, and improve wildlife habitat.

It is a 400 acre project of ponderosa pine stands with a heavy fuel loading of slash and juniper ladder fuels. Evaluating the area, an interdisciplinary team concluded that if a wildfire were to occur, ponderosa pine stands would be lost. Stress from drought as well as increasing competition with Utah juniper for water and nutrients increased threats of insects and disease. Wildlife habitat associated with mature pine stands would also diminish if stands



*Hand pile consumed by flames.*

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*Boom-mounted excavator best for the Maggie's Cabin job*

were eliminated by wildfire, drought, or disease.

It was decided that combinations of mechanized equipment, hand work, and prescribed fire were necessary to achieve project objectives. Some areas inaccessible to equipment were cut and piled by hand by a seasonal fuels crew during the summers of 2001 and 2002. However, 267 acres of the heaviest fuels still remained, and the large volume made it impractical to treat by hand.

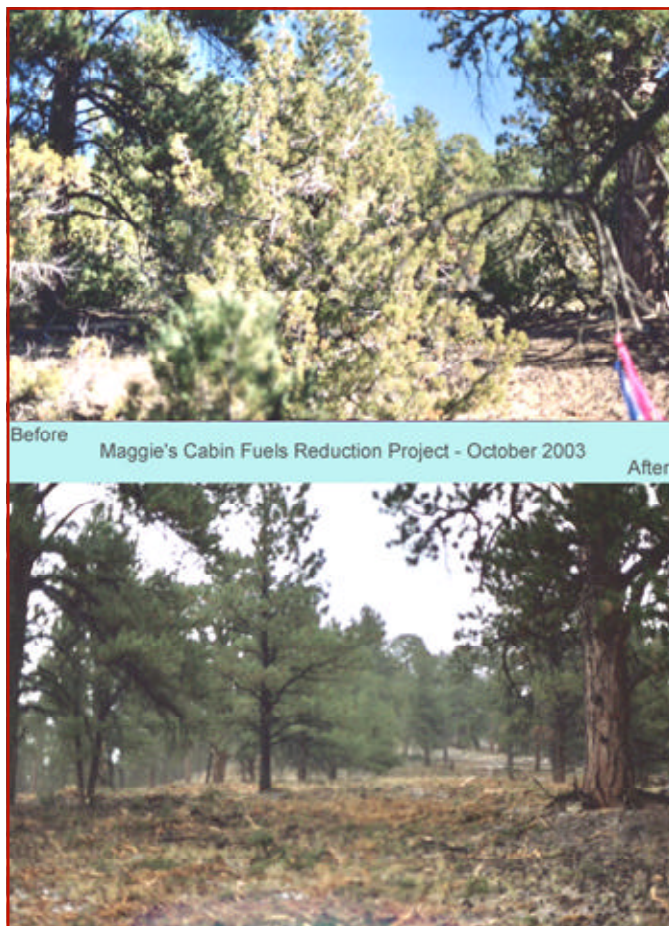
Treatment was done using tracked equipment with a boom-mounted mastication head. Equipment specifications were carefully chosen for the project because of challenges associated with rough terrain and noxious weeds. Equipment had to

negotiate and work around rimrock ledges, boulders, steep slopes, and fence lines. Boom-mounted equipment had a type of cutting head which allowed greater flexibility. Its cutting head tilts up to 90 degrees sideways, allowing for more precision when working around fence lines and boulders. Since the 25-foot boom can reach and swing 360 degrees, each pass with the equipment treated a swath about 50 feet wide with minimal ground tracking. Fewer issues associated with soil disturbance and subsequent noxious weed invasions were created as fuel height was reduced from an average of 15 feet to about 5 inches.

The next step will be an initial underburn to kill live juniper stumps and prevent re-sprouting, and to stimulate forage production. Over the next several decades periodic maintenance underburning will be done.

With four years of consecutive of drought, it was determined that an initial underburn would likely cause unacceptable ponderosa mortality because of mountain pine beetle infestation. Future plans are on hold until a year of normal precipitation occurs.

Contact: Jim Gates, Worland Field Office, (307) 347-5100



*Before and after photo's of Maggie's Cabin project*

## Cub Scouts Come to BLM

In February, Cub Scouts from Pack 101, Den 3 made a stop at BLM's Wyoming State Office to learn about public lands and fire. Cheyenne's city fire department had a representative available to assist with presentations. Scouts looked at land status maps showing large blocks of BLM holdings in Southwest Wyoming.

Mark Gorges, wildlife biologist, gave them information on migratory birds and management steps necessary to protect them. Scouts had many questions about birds in general and how and where they live.

Paleontologist Dale Hanson intrigued youngsters by showing various fossils found on public lands in Wyoming. Included were petrified wood, fossil fish, a dinosaur track and a fossilized turtle shell.

Prescribed Fire and Fuels Specialist Bob Means and Shannon Gorman from Cheyenne's fire department led discussions about "Good Fire and Bad

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Fire”. Scouts heard that fires can be good when used to help clean out areas where habitat needs to be improved and how Native Americans used fire to enhance bison and antelope grazing on prairies. They discovered that even though Cheyenne doesn’t have trees it does have wildland fires, even in the middle of winter! A 5,700 acre fire that occurred just outside the city in January was discussed.



*Cub Scouts listen intently about public lands in Wyoming.*

Scouts and parents had many questions, and all learned something new about public lands. Posters and fire materials were distributed, helping to reinforce their educational experience.

*Contact: Robert Means, Prescribed Fire and Fuels Specialist, (307) 775-6287*



*The troop had a lot of questions for BLM specialists when they visited the Wyoming State Office and learned about the differences between good fire and bad fire.*

## Idaho

### Rural Assistance Program at Work in Southcentral Idaho

Driving the National Fire Plan’s Rural Fire Assistance Program is a vision of distributing funds to increase safety and effectiveness of local fire departments throughout western states. Southcentral Idaho’s Bureau of Land Management is working hard to fulfill this vision- and is seeing results. By ensuring a fair division of funds to eligible rural fire department partners, and by allocating money early each season, cooperative efforts are leading to significant improvements in the way that wildfire is fought in the region.

Southcentral Idaho BLM works jointly with 33 rural fire departments to ensure each receives a portion of available assistance funding. In this way, every department is able to make considerable progress each year, rather than gaining one year only to lose progress the next.

“Rural Fire Assistance has greatly improved the safety of our operations and equipment capabilities,” Chief Rod Davis of Salmon Tract Rural Fire Department said. “To sum up our partnership with the BLM in one word, it’s fantastic. We are able to accomplish a lot more by cooperating.”

Most rural fire departments can generally expect to receive their allotted funds in mid-May. However, recognizing time needed to adequately prepare and train, Southcentral Idaho BLM begins the agreement updates in early January, which enables departments to receive assistance funding by late March.

“From a fire suppression preparedness standpoint, with firefighter training and wildland - urban interface mitigation needs, getting the funding to the rural departments early is absolutely necessary,” said Dale Anderson, Idaho BLM Rural Fire Assistance Coordinator.

Another progressive aspect is a process followed to allocate funding. Collectively, departments elect five representatives to serve as a cooperative board which reviews pre-applications for rural assistance and allocates funding as a group decision. Oversight and input of the cooperative board, facilitated by BLM, provides a high level of fairness and consistency to the allocation process.



*Federal and Rural resources help suppress a wildfire in an urban interface area near Gooding, Idaho. Through Rural Assistance partnerships, Rural Fire Departments play a significant role in managing wildfire in Southcentral Idaho.*

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Combined efforts of ensuring that each department receives funds early in the year, along with balancing oversight of the cooperative board, are paying off. Trend analysis shows that Southcentral rural fire departments have improved to nearly 100-percent capability through the Rural Fire Assistance program. That means they now have tools and preparation needed to conduct more successful initial attack on urban interface and wildland fire incidents. Rural departments currently respond to 80-percent of BLM wildfires in Southcentral Idaho, with a significant majority contained by initial attack.



*A picturesque view of the Lathrop Bayou prescribed burn.*



*A 40-foot diameter buffer was cleared around each of 19 red cockaded woodpecker cavity trees.*

## Eastern States

### Successful Prescribed Burn at Lathrop Bayou

Virtually an island, Lathrop Bayou on Florida's gulf coast is a tract of BLM land that has retained much of a

natural wet flatwoods character lost throughout most of the surrounding area due to conversion to slash pine plantations. Its high quality habitat is illustrated by an abundance of special status plants, presence of Bay County's only red-cockaded woodpecker colony, and uninterrupted nesting of bald eagles at the site since the early 1990's.

A draft management plan was developed which includes habitat improvement guidance through use of prescribed fire, monitoring of special status species, control of exotic species and regional coordination in support of federally listed species management. BLM-administered land is already closed to mining, is a rights-of-way avoidance area, and is closed to motorized vehicle use as a result of earlier planning decisions made in a state-wide planning effort completed in 1994 which identified habitat protection as the primary resource objective.

Following the management plan, a prescribed fire was scheduled for early in 2004.

On January 29, a prescribed burn at Lathrop Bayou was successfully completed after a strong cold front had pushed through. With high fuel loads and critical resource values such as red-cockaded woodpecker cavity trees, the burn was challenging. Teams experienced additional challenges with equipment, primarily the helicopter, but the combined BLM, St. Joe Timberlands Company, and Florida Department of Forestry crews worked together as a seamless unit.



*Jackson hotshot Fred Ashford sets a back burn for the fire break in a black needle brush marsh.*

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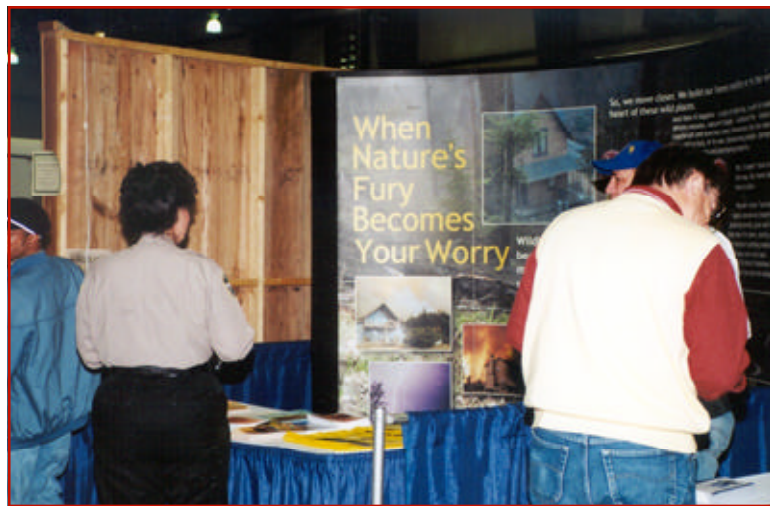
Over the two day burn, firebreaks were installed in needle rush marsh with low pressure vehicles, and back fires were lit by hand crews. A helicopter was used to ignite strip head fires starting at the south end of Lathrop Bayou through the first afternoon, and then allowed to burn back through the woodpecker cluster in the center of the island through the night. Aerial ignition began again on the north end of the bayou the following morning. A total of approximately 600 acres of BLM, St. Joe Timberlands, and Genecov land was burned, including marsh buffer areas. On January 29, all 19 woodpecker cavity trees were checked, and all came through unscathed. Not a single scorch mark was found inside a 40-foot-diameter buffer that had been cleared around each tree. Saturated soils and standing water on the island protected roots of what promises to be a spectacular spring bloom!

## Hotshots Participate in FireWise Outreach

BLM's Eastern States Office staffed a FireWise outreach booth in Canton, Mississippi at the Wildlife and Fisheries Extravaganza on February 27-29. Over 10,000 outdoor enthusiasts attended the event.

Overall, public awareness for fire safety was raised. This marks the third FireWise outreach effort that Eastern States has conducted this fiscal year. Other communities in two states have been targeted for events to reach hundreds of thousands of additional people.

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*The exhibit at the Wildlife Expo in Canton, Mississippi. Over 10,000 outdoor enthusiasts participated in the event.*

*Dave Vickery, Snapshots editor  
Sheri Ascherfeld, layout and graphics*