

Table of Contents

California

Mount Laguna FireSafe Council Gets Proactive	1
First Phase Completed on Sunrise Fuel Break	1
Community Collaboration Pays Off in Trinity County in Combating the Threat of Wildfires ...	3

Idaho

BLM Partnership Allows for Unique Volunteer Fire Department Resources	4
Wet Gulch Vegetation Management Project.....	6

California

Mount Laguna FireSafe Council Gets Proactive

Mount Laguna, California is located on and surrounded by the Descanso District of the Cleveland National Forest. This popular forest-covered mountain, home to an established Recreation Area, is bound on its entire east side by BLM administered public lands of the El Centro Field Office. Seldom known by the recreational user, this east facing escarpment with its incredible and stunningly beautiful vistas makes a dramatic drop of 4,591 feet to the desert floor. This is the aptly named Sawtooth Mountains Wilderness. Though beautiful, this BLM land challenges both bisitors and firefighters. The base of the mountains is covered with grasses and desert shrub and rises through chaparral, ending in pine/oak woodlands. There are a tremendous amount of fuels here. This too is the Lightning Belt of San Diego extending between the Coastal Peninsular Range and the Colorado Desert. Fires here often rage downhill, driven with the cooler coastal air filling in behind the rapidly lifting daytime desert air. Come nighttime, watch out! Fires rage back uphill into the community of Mount Laguna.

The Cleveland National Forest and BLM's Palm Springs-El Centro Fire Management Zone met several years ago with local civic-minded community members and created the Mount Laguna FireSafe Council. The Descanso District aggressively pursued brush cutting and mastication. The beetle infestation plaguing Southern California was hitting here too. The Forest Service was dropping trees and coming to grips with the unfortunate tree mortality. BLM Rural Fire Assistance Grants have been awarded to



The Laguna Volunteer Fire Department has been awarded BLM Rural Fire Assistance Grants to assist in equipping the Department with the tools necessary to respond to a wildland fire.

the Mt. Laguna Volunteer Fire Department to secure funding necessary for handheld firefighting tools and P25 Compliant radios.

While nearby Cuyamaca Rancho State Park had burned over much of its forest land in the Cedar Fire, Mount Laguna dodged much of that bullet. The community at Mount Laguna made the decision be proactive and to avoid the same or similar fate. The FireSafe Council started working with private homeowners and Forest Service cabin tracts to make a difference. Vegetation Management is evident on Forest and private lands here with the award of BLM Community Assistance Grant

funds this year. So far, 100 acres of brush and 35 acres of stricken trees have been treated and \$145,000 in volunteer time has been donated this year according to spokeswoman and facilitator Pat Deasy-Spinetta. "We couldn't have done this without you," Pat says and she means all of you at BLM who have worked so hard to help the public be more FireWise and yes, FireSafe.

For more information contact: Clayton R. Howe, Fire Mitigation/ Education Specialist (858) 676-0894.

First Phase Completed on



The community at Mount Laguna began efforts to reduce fuels on and around their homes.

Sunrise Fuel Break

The community of Julian, a historic mining community, sits in the mountains of San Diego county. The community - a tourist destination famed for its pleasant ambiance and tasty apples - has suffered greatly from the effects of wildfire in recent years. More than 343,000 acres burned in three fires in the area in 2002 and 2003. The citizens of Julian grieved the loss of more than 600 homes and the death of one firefighter in these blazes.

Despite the large amount of burned acreage in the area, the community of Julian remains at risk to wildfire due to the potential ignition of unburned pathways leading to the community. Some of these pathways cross BLM land administered by BLM's El Centro Field Office. The Fire Management personnel of the California Desert District and Palm Springs-El Centro Fire Management Zone met with California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, San Diego Unit to determine what needed to be done to assist in protecting this community. The collaborative group decided to revitalize the historic Sunrise Fuel Break.

The BLM and CDF were seeking reestablishment of CDF fuel breaks on public lands under their direct fire suppression responsibility. These old master fuel break systems were supported by the establishment of Community Fuel Breaks. Defensible space actions on the part of homeowners would form an integrated fuels management strategy between agencies and homeowners and result in increased wildland fire safety.

Grants were also made available by the BLM through the Rural Fire Assistance program to provide wildland firefighting hose, handtools and radios to Julian and neighboring Cuyamaca Volunteer Fire Departments. A two-weekend Basic Wildland Firefighting Course contracted by BLM with the California Fire Chiefs organization was co-hosted at the Julian Volunteer Fire Department. This essential wildland firefighting training included hands on training instruction by BLM firefighters from San Diego, Corona and the Pinyon Fire Station.

Through the support of BLM Community Assistance grants, the local Julian community FireSafe Councils and the FireSafe Council of Greater San Diego County were able to create Defensible Space. Treatments were planned to cut vegetation which could then be run through chippers to reduce the vegetation's mass. The material could then be returned to the site as soil amendments, erosion reduction agents, and for dust control. The chipped material has less validity than the original woody biomass fuel, reducing the community risk from wildfire.

The BLM Fire Mitigation Specialists in San Diego and Riverside successfully received two Student Conservation Association (SCA) Fire Education Corps teams through a grant from the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC). San Diego interns worked in collaboration with the Riverside crew to conduct home inspections, deliver informational newspapers, and coach homeowners in our FireSafe effort adjacent to the project. Additionally, SCA interns trained in GIS mapping assisted the Volunteer Fire Department with mapping of the community. The SCA



Homeowners worked with their Federal and State partners to reduce the risk of wildfire to the community of Julian.



Work continues to be implemented on the fuel breaks in place for community protection from wildfire.

crew was able to provide map books to the Fire Department and CDF Fire Station from the community mapping project. The wildland fire staff met with field office resources personnel to develop a Letter of Authorization after an Environmental Assessment so homeowners could reduce combustible vegetation on BLM Public Lands if it was within 100' of their homes. This was in compliance with County and State regulations which recently changed the vegetation management requirements from 30' to 100' after the large structural loss of the fires.

BLM's South Coast Fuels Crew working with CDF counterparts and BLM Fire Mitigation Specialists planned and implemented the first phase of the project. It would cross public and private lands, need to be re-sited, and need to ensure a good tactical advantage to responding firefighters in their defense of the community. BLM Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office approved the use of a light dozer with a brush rake. The wide-track dozer has minimal ground pressure and greatly reduced ground disturbance. CDF Conservation Crews from La Cima and McCain Valley Camps worked in areas not accessible due to steep slopes for the dozer. California's Conservation Camps are led by CDF Crew Captains and composed of inmate firefighters who return their debt to society through conservation project work and firefighting. Fire service from these inmate crews includes responses to floods, slides and earthquakes. Julian Volunteer Firefighters, CDF and BLM firefighters burned brush piles under favorable weather conditions in the cooler seasons as 2004 ended.

Several funding challenges in 2005 threatened to end the uncompleted efforts on the Sunrise Fuel Break. However, the BLM Fuels Captain and Mitigation Specialist worked with CDF and were successful in getting assistance when

possible. Community education efforts were intensified to gain defensible space compliance. Several homeowners spent their weekends providing opportunities to increase home safety. Another weekend resident, a retired doctor, was in such support of the project that he operated his light Kubota tractor on the fuel break on his personal property to dramatically reduce the threat to his and his neighbor's property.

The Fuels Captain was able to let a contract for a Masticator to do a significant share of the remaining work as the BLM dozer was too expensive to utilize with the remaining project budget. The Fuels Captain and Mitigation Specialist met regularly with the CDF and the contractor to keep the progress on the project going. Interested residents saw how quickly the Masticator reduced the chaparral and many hired the contractor to arrange additional fuels reduction on private land, further improving the defensive system.

Phase one of project implementation is complete, and the next phase will take the Sunrise Fuel Break south to provide a barrier between the habitat and the community. The next phase of the project will likely be as appreciated by the community as the initial phase. Continuing wildland fire education, support of FireSafe Councils, and active fuel modification will continue to assist and prepare the community for wildfires in the future.

For more information contact: Clayton R. Howe, Fire Mitigation Education Specialist, (858) 676-0894

Community Collaboration Pays Off in Trinity County in Combating the Threat of Wildfires

The Junction Fire was one the first of a series of fires in Northern California this year. The fire scorched over 3,126 acres of forest land. On Sunday, July 29 2006, the fire burned over Oregon Summit through territory thick with dry brush and timber. It was headed toward Weaverville's historic downtown, with over 2,000 homes and 200 businesses threatened.



The Junction Fire threatened the community of Weatherville and burned right up to several homes.

The Western end of Weaverville, California is considered a Community At-Risk to wildfire, as listed in the Federal Register. It



Burning over 3,000 acres in Northern California, the Junction Fire left only ash in some areas.



Residents of Weatherville saw how close the fire really came to their community.

consists of a sub-division called Oregon Mountain, an area which is called home by several families who faced a true Firewise test. With flames burning at the edge of Oregon Street, residents were well prepared for on-coming fire.

Back in October 2003, the Trinity County Resource Conservation District (RCD) received a Community Assistance grant from the BLM for \$75,000. The result project successfully reduced fuels loads in strategically located areas, provided a fuel break to protect the community of Weaverville, and created defensible space around 75 homes.

The project was identified in the Trinity County Strategic Fire Plan with partners from the Trinity Fire Safe Council, State Water Resources Control Board, RCD, BLM, USDA Forest Service, and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Homes and lives were saved due to proper planning and community collaboration. The Phase II: Oregon St./ Grass

Valley Creek Watershed shaded fuel break project has been approved for funding from BLM through the Community Assistance Grants Program.

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Idaho

BLM Partnership Allows for Unique Volunteer Fire Department Resources

The small towns of Eden and Hazelton, Idaho are not so different from any other Small Town, USA. Empty boxes that were once booming businesses are scattered along the streets. A few spots are obviously social hubs for down-to-earth folks that have grown up and now raise their own families here. First Segregation Volunteer Rural Fire Department Chief, Don Utt, can remember the days before the interstate was built on the horizon. His mom is the city clerk and his grandfather was the highway and water man. Utt himself is not only the Fire Chief, but the mailman as well. He can even remember where the name First Segregation really came from.

“In the 60’s, there were three water segregations. Everything in Eden and Hazelton was named after the area being the First Segregation Water District,” Utt recalls.



The First Segregation Volunteer Rural Fire Department sign greets residents and visitors.



Burning over Oregon Summit, the Junction Fire headed toward Weatherville.

“Nowadays folks have questioned why we don’t change our name to Valley, just like the school and many other businesses in the area. But the lady in Boise said I better not even think about it- there’s only one First Segregation in the state, so we’re easy to keep track of.”



First Segregation Rural Fire Department asked a local artist to create their “Taz” logo’s on both their structure engine and off-road unit.

First Segregation Fire Department stands out in other ways too. While many of the engines and much of the communications equipment the Department uses have come through National Fire Plan Rural Fire Assistance funds or second-hand purchasing from the BLM, it’s what this small volunteer department has been able to purchase outside of these items that is most visible in these small communities.

Last year the Department built on to the existing fire station in Eden, adding garage bay space for equipment and a large room for meetings. The room is now used for city council sessions, senior citizens exercise classes, and many other community venues as needed. The building itself adds new vitality to the town.

“Because we had Rural Assistance money for equipment or training or any of that, we’ve been able to save to pay for this building and for our little off-road unit,” Utt says with a gleam in his eye.

The First Segregation Fire Department’s “off-road unit” that Utt refers to and shows off with pride is an Artic Cat Prowler,



This 1962 International old engine was recently replaced. As Fire Chief Don Utt says, “You just can’t do the same thing with the same tools today as you did years ago; we’ve had to grow with the times to be effective and stay safe.”

an essential cross between a four wheeler and a pickup truck. The unit has 12 ½ inches of ground clearance and carries a water pump that is connected to a pressure washer, disseminating 2 ½ gallons per minute at 2600 PSI.

“People have thought we were crazy when we show up on a fire with this thing, but it puts flames out faster than any of our engines,” Utt relays excitedly. “And even more than that, it’s gotten us back to working in teams, instead of one guy alone on a four wheeler.”

The Department originally sought an off-road capable tool when they faced several situations where their smaller engines couldn’t get to the fire scene because of access constraints. The off-road unit has proved especially helpful in fighting fires along the eastern portion of the Snake River Canyon, which in itself presents some unique challenges for the First Segregation Fire Department.

Given that many of the fires they respond to in the Eden and Hazelton areas are wildfires, Utt was recently looking for a used heavy engine to replace the 1962 International that First Segregation had been using. Again, through funding savings as a result of the Rural Assistance program, the Department



The heavy wildland fire engine purchased from the BLM has already seen a lot of use in the Eden and Hazelton area. Fire Chief Don Utt and his committed volunteers are proud to be able to keep fires small and put them out quick with the resources they recently obtained.



First Segregation Rural Fire Department Chief Don Utt talks proudly of the off road capabilities of the Department's Artic Car Prowler.

was capable of making such a purchase. Utt turned to a contact he knew was reliable, BLM Mitigation and Fleet Manager John Sabala, to help him locate a used engine.

“John found us a used, single cab heavy in Wyoming,” Utt said. “But something happened and that engine didn’t end up being available to us after all. So, John worked until he found something else.”

The alternative engine had Sabala a lot more excited. This unit was a year newer, in better shape and could be sold to First Segregation at the same price as the original offer given the unique circumstances of the sale. Utt and the rest of the Department were astonished at the great condition of their new engine.

“All we had to do was put a hose on and it was ready to go,” Utt recalls with a smile. “Now, between it and the Prowler, we’ve been able to keep fires that could’ve gotten really big, pretty small.”

Small fire sizes, a new building, and efficient equipment aren’t the only things that get Chief Utt excited. Driving the pickup that everyone recognizes and waves at as he travels between Eden and Hazelton, he talks of the improvements the First Segregation Fire Department now is able to bring to the area. Over the past several years, they have been able to bring the area’s insurance rating on a scale of one to ten with ten being the worst and most expensive, from a nine down to a six. He also says he likes explaining to taxpayers who have questions about the Department’s spending that they’ve saved in a big way by working with the BLM.

“Things are just really good working with the BLM,” Utt said. “We help them if they need it and they help us when we do.”

Wet Gulch Vegetation Management Project

The BLM Cottonwood Field Office (CFO) is making great progress in implementing the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) portion of the National Fire Plan within several northern Idaho communities. Work is being accomplished through an Assistance Agreement with the Clearwater Resource Conservation and Development Council, Inc. (RC&D), a rural non-profit development and natural resource conservation organization that has been helping to improve the communities of North Central Idaho for over 30 years. Under the agreement, the Clearwater RC&D and BLM partner with other local, state, federal, tribal and private sector wildland firefighting organizations and with a number of local private contractors and consultants to implement goals and objectives aimed at protecting local communities from catastrophic wildland fires.

The third task order under the Assistance Agreement addresses the reduction of fuels in the Wet Gulch area of the John Day Creek watershed in Idaho County. The Wet Gulch project is located on rugged Salmon River uplands between the communities of Riggins and Whitebird, Idaho and near a rural subdivision. The project was discussed with the Idaho County mitigation plan working group and is included in their Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) as a high priority fuels treatment project.

The WUI component of the Wet Gulch Project includes developing fuel breaks to improve suppression capabilities; creating a greater opportunity to stop the movement of a stand replacing fire that may move toward the communities and the subdivision; and treating stands of timber on 125 acres. The non-WUI component or hazardous fuels reduction being implemented outside of the communities incorporates stand level treatments on 205 acres to reduce fuel continuity, improve forest vigor, and improve critical elk winter range.



Helicopter brings logs to the ridge top landing site during commercial tree removal within the Wet Gulch project area.

The area is generally historic Fire Regime II or III and is in Condition Class 3. Fuel breaks were designed for the series of ridges which divide the watershed, creating a break in the continuous nature of the fuels. A portion of this project lies within the Brushy Ridge Habitat Management Area.

On a stand level basis, commercial thinning will favor retention of larger ponderosa pine and western larch. Following the commercial thinning, a moderate severity prescribed burn will be completed to reduce fuels and improve the quantity and quality of elk browse.

Implementation of the fuel break project work began when the RC&D approached the Cottonwood Field Office regarding implementing fuel reduction work in accordance with the National Fire Plan. Under the Assistance Agreement, the RC&D contracted with the Idaho Correctional Institution (ICI) at Orofino, ID to provide laborers to complete the pre-commercial thinning, pruning, hand piling, and burning. Note: ICI has four, red carded, 20 person crews. Creating the fuel breaks on the steep terrain was arduous but necessary to protect the rural communities and subdivisions.

The next stage of the project involves removal of the commercial forest component through a timber sale contract. Logging has been initiated and/or completed on four of the six harvest units. A prescribed fire burn plan is complete for the treatment area and will be implemented during the next available burn window when all prescription elements have been met.

Contact: Mark Craig, (208) 962-3593



Pretreatment view of stand conditions in the Wet Gulch fuel break area.



View of area after pre-commercial thinning and burning was completed and before overstory removal of trees.