

# Snapshots 2003

October 17

## Wyoming

### Reserve Officer Training Corps Students and BLM Team Up on National Public Lands Day

On September 27, the Natrona County High School Reserve Officer Training Corps students and the Bureau of Land Management joined forces to conduct fuels reduction work within the Muddy Mountain Environmental Education Area in celebration of National Public Lands Day.

Students moved and prepared slash piles while learning about forestry and fuels reduction. Activities began at 10:00 a.m. and ended at 4:30 pm.

This is the third year that Reserve Officer Training Corps students have participated in National Public Lands Day and worked on this project. Students gathered four cords of wood, and cleaned up seven acres of land that had been thinned.

Public lands day events promote shared stewardship of public lands. This nationwide celebration is a day when families and groups of all ages volunteer their time to America's millions of acres of public lands.



*ROTC kids help BLM move and prepare slash piles as part of the Muddy Mountain Fuels Reduction Project.*



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

# Snapshots 2003

October 17

## Taking It to the People—Rural Firefighter Training

Training – it’s something all firefighters routinely need. But often for *rural* firefighters, dedicated individuals who join efforts with the various federal agencies during fire season, there just isn’t enough time or money to get the special knowledge and skills used in wildland firefighting. Understandably, these small, volunteer units primarily concentrate on learning how to save lives and burning buildings. As first-responders on the scene, they must quickly make the tough decisions in life-threatening situations.

When it comes to fighting wildfires on public lands, however, the approach to fighting these fires can be quite different. That’s why two Wyoming Bureau of Land Management field offices decided there was a strong need to take the wildland firefighting message to the people.

A year ago, the Casper Field Office appealed to the Wyoming State Office in Cheyenne requesting funding for a pilot project, one which would bring much-needed training to their supporting rural fire departments.

The Worland Field Office, also part of Wyoming’s pilot project, successfully set out to provide appropriate National Wildfire Coordinating Group training.

Worland’s goal was to supplement the training available from the Wyoming Fire Academy.

“We wanted to bring certified instructors and training to any interested organization at the times and locations convenient to the students,” explained L.J. Brown, North Zone fire training specialist based in Worland.

Contacts were made to all the North Zone’s cooperating agencies including the mutual aid counties and their fire wardens, and representatives from Wyoming State Forestry and the Wyoming Fire Academy.

“In our conversations with them, we were able to prioritize the training needs of our cooperators,” said Brown. “We found that there were fire departments we work hand-in-hand with each summer that did not have a single red-carded individual in the department,” he said.

Needless to say, this startling revelation placed these departments on the top of the list to receive training. In six months time, the North Zone’s six qualified instructors brought at least some training to all their cooperating counties.

“We had a total of 110 students from ten different communities in our zone take part in over 160 hours of classroom and field training we provided,” said Brown. “Twenty-five students were given the knowledge and skill to become red-carded firefighters for the first time,” he said. Some 16 courses at both 100 and 200 level were completed, Brown said.

Behind the scenes, it took 360 instructor hours to coordinate, prepare, instruct, and purchase the necessary training materials with a budget just shy of \$13,000.

The objectives of the program were to promote safety in all aspects of suppression and preparedness, to bring much needed and up-to-date National Wildfire Coordinating Group training to all rural fire departments. The goals were to improve cooperator involvement and interaction with federal agencies and practices by opening



*Blown hoses give students experience of real world problems in fighting wildland fire.*



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

# Snapshots 2003

October 17

channels of communication, and to improve wildland urban interface protection and provide opportunities for cross training between cooperating agencies.

The students' comments were a true testament to the program's accomplishments.

"This type of training is good for all small departments," said one county fireman. "We may not have had the chance to receive this type of training at our home stations. We normally have to travel to get it. Also, it keeps us up to speed and helps us understand the way the government fights fire and also increases working relationships with other agencies. Training like this is a must to small departments."

Another student agreed:

"As a volunteer, some of your main concerns are training, time, and cost. By the BLM providing this training, we are able to receive much-needed training. This program is valuable to help local fire service interact with federal counterparts, building better relationships. There is continuity to training providing better interaction while employing firefighting techniques. This training is worth far more than the money it costs to provide it."

The Worland Field Office is awaiting word on funding for this fiscal year so they can continue this extraordinarily worthwhile project, says Brown.

"Especially when there is a definite eagerness to learn and a willingness for interagency interaction amongst our local counterparts," he said. "Where before we found in some cases a lack of department-wide training, as well as a lack of understanding about training and qualifications standards," said Brown, "now we find a desire to improve on safety, qualifications, and wildland firefighting knowledge. With results like this we



*"Basic Fires" school students receive hands-on instruction about pumps and fittings.*

can't help but encourage and support this program's continued success and wish for it to thrive in all interested BLM fire organizations."

## Alaska

### Thinning Project Reduces Fire Danger on Army Post

Forested areas of land provide a scenic backdrop throughout the family housing section of Fort Richardson in Anchorage. The trees provide places for children to play and their parents to recreate. These areas also pose a hazard from wildfire. Should a fire start in this public interface, there would be little time to catch it before it endangers homes.

The U.S. Army-Alaska Fort Richardson Fire Department, in conjunction with BLM Alaska Fire Service, has coordinated work on a project to create defensible zones in the housing area, consistent with the national Firewise program. Soldiers removed dead trees, cleaned up live trees and removed debris from one of the forested plots.



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

“Major attention goes to the military ranges because they are the areas where most of the fires ignite,” said Assistant Fire Chief Randy Souhrada, “but the urban interface area must not be forgotten.”

The soldiers removed beetle-killed trees, which are a major fire hazard. The standing-dead trees, some of which are up against houses on post, are very susceptible to fire.

Living spruce were limbed six feet up from the ground. Meanwhile, work was done to clean up the understory to break up the fuel continuity.



*Spruce forests provide a backdrop to family housing on the Army post.*



*Trees were thinned and debris piled up for removal.*

BLM’s Alaska Fire Service is providing technical support and equipment. The 20-acre plot is the first of many acres to be thinned in Stage One, which involves a non-aggressive thinning approach that removes all hazard fuels. A remaining 35 to 50 acres will undergo the hazard fuel reduction over the next two years. Souhrada says the long-term plan is to keep the area “beautiful but safe.”

Contact: Maggie Rogers (907) 356-5511

## Trial Squad Boss Class Provides Military With Hands-On Training

A trial hotshot squad boss class was hosted by Alaska Fire Service for U.S. Army-Alaska participants. Four participants from an army fuels crew and three from the Fort Richardson Fire Department attended the training, which was held in conjunction with the fuels treatment project on Fort Richardson at the end of July.

Hotshot crews are national interagency firefighting resources called to fires throughout the country. Alaska has four hotshot crews.

Part of the Alaska Fire Service and U.S. Army’s partnership in fire suppression on military lands involves training the military to do their own wildland fire response. “Fort Richardson’s Fire Department has skilled structural firefighters but they do not



# Snapshots 2003

October 17



*Squad boss trainees are briefed prior to the wildfire simulation.*

necessarily have experience in wildland firefighting,” said Josh Buzby, member of the army fuels crew. “Now that the class is over, for example, small military task forces can be sent to spot fires on the ranges.”

Training and certification must be at a national level since the military must respond to disasters in any state, said Randy Souhrada, Assistant Fire Chief on Fort Richardson. “We try to provide the same caliber of personnel as would any other federal entity.”

Two days of class were spent inside covering material related to squad boss duties and responsibilities. Alaska Fire Service instructors used class time to go in depth in the curriculum, supplemented with their personal insights from past experiences.

The third day, Souhrada taught a pumps and hose class along a creek at one of Fort Richardson’s parks. The highlight of the class took place that afternoon, when instructors staged a wildland fire scenario at a drop zone on post. The squad bosses were separated into two hotshot crews and a chain of command was established. The easy-going classroom environment quickly turned

professional and serious. Beginning with a role-play briefing and quick lesson about radios, the two crews were split up and sent to different parts of the “fire.” A Black Hawk helicopter with a bucket was available for squad bosses to practice calling in and directing water drops and radioing back and fourth.

Instructors recalled their first few times in stressful fire situations when they were overwhelmed and had to perform certain tasks for the first time. Had the fire described in the briefing been real, the squad bosses would have found themselves on a much steeper learning curve. With only a moderate amount of pressure in the semi-real life situation, students had the ability to ask questions and learn without consequences.

At the debriefing, instructors and students were extremely pleased with how the class, especially the fire scenario, had gone. AFS



*This squad boss class taught techniques in setting up pumps and hoses.*



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

# Snapshots 2003

October 17

instructor Mark Musitano said that the Alaska Fire Service involvement was well worth it. "I would rather have three guys who know what they were doing than 20 who don't." Thanks to the positive feedback from the students, instructors hope to hold the class every few years.

Contact: Maggie Rogers (907) 356-5511

## Nevada

### Ranchers Volunteer as Fire Spotters, Want to Use Grazing to Reduce Fuel Loading

Hundreds of thousands of acres of rangeland in north-central Nevada burned during the 1999 and 2000 fire seasons. Many of these wildfires were sparked by lightning in remote areas, with little or no response to suppression efforts.

In the aftermath of these destructive fire seasons, ranchers who live in these remote areas formed a partnership with the BLM and other concerned citizens called the Wildfire Support Group. BLM provided training and equipment to these ranchers, who have been working as fire spotters and first-responders to wildfires for the past three fire seasons.

Their efforts have made a tremendous difference, preventing small, remote fires from turning into large, catastrophic blazes that scorch thousands of acres of rangeland.



Fuel break next to highway north of Winnemucca.

Now the Wildfire Support Group had moved from spotting and fighting wildfires to advocating the use of cattle to eat the cheatgrass, other invasive plants and the overall reduction in fuel loading on the rangelands. The idea is simple – the more vegetation the cattle eat, the less fuel is sitting on the rangelands waiting to burn.



Wildfire scorches the grasslands.

The group proposed this idea in a concept paper, which the BLM approved in September. BLM has entered into an assistance agreement with the Nevada Association of Counties, which will use BLM funds to pay for the costs of a pilot study on eleven Winnemucca-area grazing allotments, involving five livestock permittee's. The pilot study is tentatively scheduled to begin in the spring.

Ten of the allotments are in the Orovada area, and one is south of Winnemucca in Grass Valley.

Private range consultants will work with each of the grazing permittee's to draft plans for the pilot study. The ranchers will use their own cattle to carry out the study, with assistance from scientists at the University of Nevada, Reno, and Utah State University.

The pilot study may also make use of herbicides and mechanical treatment for the purpose of reducing fuels.



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

# Snapshots 2003

October 17



*Green-up from emergency fire rehabilitation drill seeding, Northern Nevada, Spring 2000.*

The five-year study will cover an area of almost 500,000 acres, (the treatments will not involve all 500,000 acres) and will evaluate the:

- Effectiveness of the planned fuels management systems.
- Impact on native plant species.
- Impacts on wetlands, stream banks and riparian habitats.
- Impacts on threatened and endangered species and associated habitats.
- Impacts on livestock; annual species seed production; and animal unit months (AUMs) of harvested cheatgrass biomass.

Pilot study work completed to date includes:

- Planning.
- Gathering existing data needed by the permittees to develop their allotment-specific fuels management plans.
- Conducting a preliminary tour of the allotments to evaluate conditions, as well as proposed improvements and modifications to current grazing systems.

The study will bring research and development muscle to the search for alternative methods of reducing levels of fire-prone vegetation. Using prescribed fire to reduce fuel loads can be risky in areas that are dominated by flashy fuels like cheatgrass. Mechanical and chemical treatments can reduce fuel build-up, but can be costly and

may affect the environmental quality of rangelands.

While livestock grazing, primarily by sheep and goats, is recognized as an effective tool for fuels reduction in brush communities in Texas and California, little published information is available on the use of cattle to reduce the amount of weedy vegetation on rangeland. This pilot study can provide information on prescriptive grazing as both a tool and an effective method for hazardous fuels reduction.

Wildfires have scorched much of Northern Nevada during the past decade, resulting in immeasurable loss of rangeland resources, with resultant impacts to watersheds, wildlife, fisheries, biodiversity and native plant species. The burned areas have been taken over by invasive, fire-prone vegetation, such as cheatgrass and other undesirable species, which have altered the native plant community and increased the risk of wildfires.



*Cheatgrass moves in after sagebrush burns.*

The Winnemucca Field Office has estimated that about 60 percent of the Wyoming big sagebrush and native grass habitat in its management area has been lost as a result of wildfires.

This trend not only poses a threat to the future of many native rangeland vegetation types in the



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

# Snapshots 2003

October 17

Great Basin region, but also is eliminating vast expanses of sagebrush habitat, which is vital to the sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate species.

But partnerships like the Wildfire Support Group have the potential to make a positive impact on the health of the rangelands, and also increase the possibility of reversing this trend.

## Tamarisk treatment project begins near Mesquite

The President's Healthy Forest Initiative has come to a tamarisk-infested stretch of the Virgin River in southern Nevada, near the city of Mesquite and the neighboring township of Bunkerville.

The City of Mesquite Project completed fuels treatments on the first five acres of tamarisk infestation in September. The Project will target 300 acres of tamarisk for treatment during the next year, and over time 1,700 acres of the tamarisk-infested riparian area will be treated.

The City of Mesquite Project is one of the initial 15 pilot projects under the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. Fuels treatments include:

- Mechanical- and hand-removal of standing tamarisk.
- Follow-up herbicide spraying, since tamarisk is a vigorous root resprouter.
- A combination of active and passive revegetation.

The Project will only make use of native riparian plant species stocks. The work will include combinations of broadcast seeding, tree transplanting, drip irrigation set-up and, in some locations, the construction of wire fences to protect the new plants from grazing, off-road vehicles and other adverse impacts.

The City of Mesquite Project is the cornerstone of the four tamarisk projects currently taking place along the Virgin River. The BLM Las Vegas Field Office envisions further fuels treatment projects in this vital riparian area, with the ultimate goal of restoring both native riparian vegetation and the

natural fire regime along the entire 26-mile stretch of the Virgin River in Nevada.

The potential benefits of successfully restoring this section of the Virgin River are far-reaching. They include:

- Protection of human life and property in the wildland-urban interface areas of Mesquite and nearby Bunkerville.
- Restoration of the largest riparian area in Southern Nevada.
- Recovery of endangered species.
- Enhancement of the Virgin River Area of Critical Environmental Concern;
- Groundwater conservation and improved water quality in the Virgin River, in conformance with the Clean Water Act.
- Increased biodiversity;
- Increased forage productivity for wildlife, including seasonal populations of migratory birds.
- Control of a significant noxious weed infestation.
- Prevention and mitigation of a serious wildfire threat through reestablishment of the natural riparian fire regime.

The tamarisk tree depletes groundwater, is highly salt-tolerant, and has drastically altered the ecology of the Virgin River. The tamarisk infestation has



*Winter view of the City of Mesquite project. In the background is the Casablanca Hotel.*



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



# Snapshots 2003

October 17

greatly changed the area's fire regime, making potential catastrophic wildfire a significant threat to human communities and the riparian ecosystem.

Wildfire reinforces the cycle of tamarisk encroachment and soil disturbance. Native salt grass, shrub and cottonwood-willow communities are not nearly as fire-prone as tamarisk, which forms dense, highly curable, deep-duff thickets. These tamarisk thickets burn both more frequently and more intensely than native vegetation species.

Both the City of Mesquite and the Virgin River Conservation Partnership participated in the public scoping process for the City of Mesquite Project. The public-private Virgin River Conservation Partnership is a broadly inclusive stakeholders group, which was facilitated by the BLM Las Vegas Field Office through the National Park Service's River, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program.

The environmental analysis process involved direct input from the White House Council on Environmental Quality. The Endangered Species Act compliance process for this project was also unique, because six federally listed species and two designated critical habitats were located within the City of Mesquite Project site. Therefore the Fish and Wildlife Service also was consulted at the beginning of the planning effort.

This informal consultation process resulted in a "not likely to adversely affect" determination, in large part because the Fish and Wildlife Service was allowed to play an active role in designing the project implementation.

The Environmental Assessment for the City of Mesquite Project was signed on August 26.



*Herbicide spraying on the City of Mesquite Project. Brian Hamilton, natural resource specialist, BLM Las Vegas Field Office Fire Ecology and Fuels Program.*



*Loader with FECON shredder attachment.*



*ASV prime mover with DAVCO mower attachment.*



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.