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Successes of BLM hazardous fuels projects ...

Montana

Lewistown District, Central Fire Zone

Community Assistance Agreements and Federal Planning Working in Tandem

A year ago Montana BLM's Central Fire Zone signed an assistance agreement with the Fergus County Conservation District for hazardous fuel reduction and public awareness. As with any new program, the start-up took some time working out a process to publicize and to develop application, approval and contracting procedures. It is now off to a good start, with accomplishments already achieved, and more on the way.

The first project approved and completed by the conservation district was with the landowner of a beautiful summer residence log cabin in the heart of the Judith Mountains, built on land homesteaded by her grandfather. A crown fire went through the area in 1918, and the surrounding forest grew up as a thick, over-stocked mix of Douglas fir, ponderosa and lodge pole pine. This stand presented a wall of flammable vegetation right behind the cabin.

A local contractor thinned an area 100 feet wide directly behind the cabin, grading from heavy to lighter thinning adjacent to the untreated forest. A 50-foot corridor on both sides of the road below the house was also thinned. The total area



Lewistown District, Central Fire Zone Community Assistance Agreements and Federal Planning Process Working Hand in Glove. Photos by Tom Huncovsky, Fergus Co. Cons. Dist.

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*Untreated forest stands directly adjacent to residence.
Photo by Shannon Iverson, BLM.*

treated was just over six acres. Thinned material was hauled to the road using an ATV, as the landowner wanted to minimize disturbance. A local post and pole mill used some of the thinned material, and more of it went to firewood. The contrast in conditions between pre- and post-treatment is marked. In the event of a wildfire, suppression forces now have a defensible space from which to work.

This project was implemented as a cost-share agreement between the conservation district and

landowner. Landowners work with a private timber operator to develop a bid, and after approval and implementation, are reimbursed at a specified cost-share ratio. The conservation district board has full authority in approving or disapproving projects and setting the cost-share level. BLM personnel have provided advice for the overall program and technical assistance for some of the early projects. After some trial and error, the conservation district has settled on a two-tiered scheme and contracted with a consulting forester to implement the scheme.

Some landowners have stands of merchantable timber in need of density management. Such owners will receive 75 percent cost-share for treatment of non-commercial material on their property. Other landowners have parcels where opportunistic logging and lack of understory management has left a stand with no commercial material to offset the cost of thinning.



After mechanical thinning. Photo by Shannon Iverson, BLM.

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These parcels often have the greatest need for treatment, and the owners receive 90 percent cost-share. The consulting forester will provide a hazard assessment for all applicants, assist in designing a treatment plan and advise the board as to the appropriate level of cost-share. The priority for funding is defensible space around residences. Establishment of fuel breaks and density management are also potentially viable projects.



After mechanical thinning. Photo by Shannon Iverson, BLM.



Contractor Dixie Taylor (l) and landowner Bonny Foley (r).

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To date Fergus County Conservation District has received 19 applications and approved 8 different projects. The total value for approved projects is \$20,960 with \$16,681 coming from cost-share funds, covering 62 acres. Applicants include two youth camps, numerous small landowners and several ranches.

The K-M Boy Scout camp in the Moccasin Mountains is working with Fergus County Conservation District for hazardous fuel reduction.



Public awareness has also been an important part of this project. A public workshop was held in June to highlight the risks of living in the wildland-urban interface and to show how to reduce risks through vegetation management, adequate egress, and structural

design, modification and maintenance. The workshop was a collaborative venture between the conservation district, Fergus County Sheriff, BLM, Fergus County Rural Fire Council, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and Montana State University Extension Service. The Lewistown News-Argus has been a full partner in raising awareness and publicizing the cost-share program. The newspaper provided coverage of the workshop and did an article showcasing completion of the first project.

Assistance agreements for similar projects have recently been signed with conservation districts in Chouteau and Phillips counties. Each of these three community assistance agreements has a complementary BLM project underway, covering the planning and implementation for similar activities on adjacent public land. In two cases the BLM efforts



Fergus County Deputy Sheriff Bill Rash giving the introductory presentation at a public workshop on risks and solutions for the wildland-urban interface.

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are integrated to include all activities in a watershed, and in another case the efforts focus solely on hazardous fuel reduction in a limited project area.

The Central Fire Zone staff, with support of the BLM Lewistown Field Office, is currently working on a watershed assessment for the Judith and Moccasin Mountains that complements the assistance agreement with Fergus County.

The assessment covers over 31,000 acres of public land. The risk of catastrophic fire and forest health are the primary issues for the watershed assessment. A GSA contract for environmental services was awarded to North Wind Environmental, a small, woman-owned business, to conduct needed field inventories and to write the environmental assessment. One of the criteria used for selecting the contractor was an ability and willingness to hire locally for field staff. North Wind filled all of their field positions through local hiring.



North Wind Environmental field technicians, Bob Nelson and Travis Swaim, and BLM Range Management Specialist, Vinita Shea, prepare to conduct upland health assessments in the Judith Mountains.

Publicity for the cost-share project has helped to raise public awareness concerning the issues for public land planning. In addition, many of the landowners participating in the cost-share project have parcels adjacent to BLM land. By focusing priority for treatment of public land in those areas where treatment on private land is occurring gives leverage to the effectiveness of treatments. The environmental assessment should be completed in early spring of 2003, and project implementation should begin next summer.

In Chouteau County, the Arrow Creek watershed assessment covers over 36,000 acres, and will be completed in the winter of 2003. Landowners adjacent to BLM land have been asked for suggestions for hazardous fuel reduction projects where they see an opportunity to integrate treatments on federal and private land.

In Phillips County, an environmental assessment has been completed covering 1,600 acres of public land around the mining communities of Zortman and Landusky in the Little Rocky Mountains. Mechanical thinning around the towns will be implemented through use of an indefinite delivery-indefinite quantity contract. The task order has been completed and vendors are preparing quotations. Work is expected to begin later this fall. Meanwhile, the Phillips Conservation District, in cooperation with the rural fire district, will focus on these towns for hazard assessments and a cost-share program for hazardous fuel reduction.

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The ongoing collaboration between the BLM and local entities will ensure that the job of hazardous fuel reduction in the wildland-urban interface is accomplished on both public and private land. Either by itself would be inadequate but by working together the job can be completed.

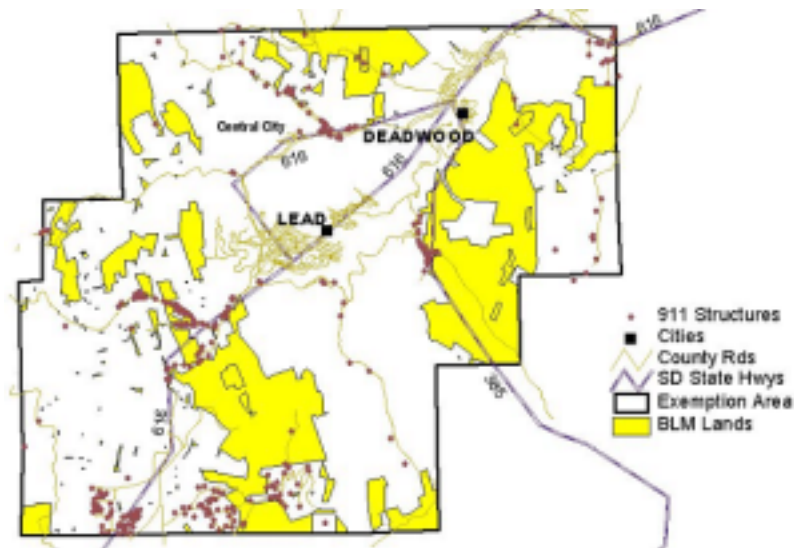
Contact: Shannon Iverson (406) 538-1989 or Mitch Maycox (406) 538-1986

Belle Fourche Field Office

Located over a mile high in the northern Black Hills of South Dakota about 60 miles from Mount Rushmore, the community of Lead is in a classic wildland urban setting. With a population of less than 3,200 people, neighborhoods are scattered on top of hills and ridges. All types of interface, classic, occluded and mixed, are present throughout the community. Fire making uphill runs into structures is a normal event.



Lead is surrounded entirely by the Bureau of Land Management land, which has been named the "Exemption Area." BLM land is in direct contact with municipal and private lands throughout the community. The fire prone ecosystem includes fuels of shrub, timber and grass with juniper and ponderosa pine as the dominant plant species.



"Exception Area" at Lead, SD

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Responding to the challenges posed in the area, the city created a model for grassroots action using Firewise practices and hazardous fuels reduction on BLM, municipal and private land. This was accomplished by establishing partnerships with BLM, Lead's fire and parks departments, South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire Suppression, Black Hills Power & Light and private landowners.

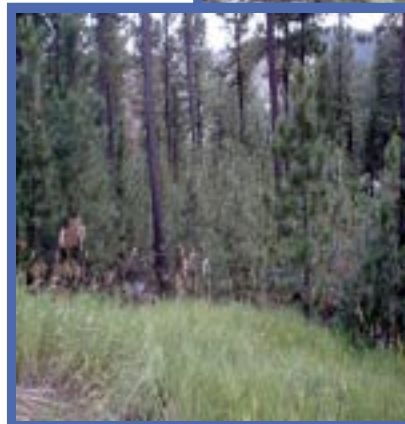
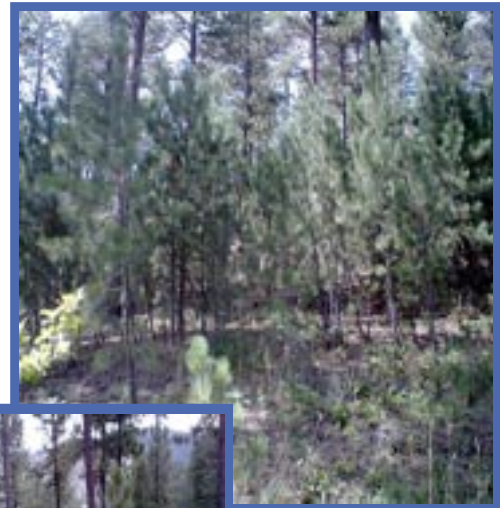
Two years ago the BLM and the Lead Fire Department held a citywide review of fuels buildup. Public meetings were held to assist in determining the amount of public interest and concern. Typical of views expressed at the initial meetings focused on what was happening on the "other guys land." The tone for many in attendance was, "Why should I do anything on my property when nothing is being done on city, BLM and power and light ground."

During the meetings educational materials were distributed and public concerns about the hazardous fuels buildup was expressed. As a result there was agreement to take action, and an initial framework for a plan was developed.

Some private property owners were highly motivated by what they heard. The day following the meeting one of the homeowners removed 150 trees adjacent to his home.

The Hearst addition to the city and BLM's Raspberry Gulch- Walt Green area were chosen for the first stage of work. The site included an overgrown scar from a 1981 fire along with fuels on the power line adjacent to private residential property. City crews started the project by cutting and piling ponderosa pine regeneration fuels from the Walt Green section.

In September of 2001 a BIA crew was brought to Lead to work with city and state crews as well as inmate trustees from the Lawrence County jail. As many as 60 people worked on the project at a time. Cut and pile methods were used in the fire scar and Walt Green areas. Fuels on the power line right of way were cut and Black Hills Power and Light hired a private tree service with commercial chipping capability to chip the material.



Walt Green subdivision prior to September 2001.

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Firewood was cut into four to six foot lengths for use by those in the community who rely on wood burning as a means of heating their homes. Some of the green mass was chipped and removed by the city crew and used for mulch in parks.



Walt Green subdivision after project treatment.

Unusable material was piled and Explorer Post 911 conducted winter burning as a community service project. Private landowners assisted with the process.

Following completion of the first stage, several groups have toured the Walt Green area. It is serving as a model for the citizens of the area who use it extensively for year around recreation. The project clearly shows hazardous fuels reduction does not need to be "clear cutting." An added benefit is that homeowners throughout the Hearst Subdivision are conducting privately funded fuel reduction activities on their own land.



Plans for the future are to get government managed land in good condition using Firewise guidelines. This will allow the use of more cost effective prescribed burning techniques. The project success to date has made it much easier to work with private landowners to encourage Firewise practices on their land, since government is taking a lead to reduce fuel buildup on public land.



Lead Assistant Fire Chief Jerome Harvey and homeowner Terry Kulbom inspect the project results. Mr. Kulbom privately funded the work at the site.

The key has been teamwork between all parties involved.

Contact: Jerome Harvey (605) 584-1617 or Terry Chaplin, (605) 720-0745.

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Miles City Field Office

Bliss R_x Burn

The Bliss prescribed fire is in eastern Montana in an area generally known as the Missouri Breaks, a ponderosa pine-grass savanna ecosystem. By reducing the dense stands of pole-sized pine and regeneration, the fire will help improve the vigor of native plants, forbs and shrubs, restoring the area to a high frequency-low severity fire regime.

The project area covers about 2,800 acres. Unfavorable weather and drought persisted in the fall of 2001 and spring 2002, and the Miles City prescribed fire staff was determined – but very cautious – in its approach. Crews tried to conduct the burn twice in the fall of 2001 and four times during the spring of 2002, but crews were pulled away from the project to respond to wildland fires in other areas. In spite of the setbacks, two-thirds of the burn was completed and the remainder will be done during the fall or winter of 2002.

Cooperation among interagency neighbors has been a critical factor in the project. Bureau of Indian Affairs crews came from the Crow Agency, along with Jordan, Montana

Volunteer Fire Department personnel, BLM Lewistown Field Office firefighters and the BLM Boise Smokejumpers. The BLM Miles City Field Office is the hosting office.

Contact: Dena Sprandel, Miles City Field Office, 406-233-2907.



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Shepherd Ah Nei

The Shepherd Ah Nei area is just north of Shepherd, Montana, and is administered by the BLM Billings Field Office. Very popular for off-road driving, the 26-acre area also borders private land with numerous homes.

Before a fuel break project was completed in the winter of 2001, moderately dense patches of ponderosa pine formed a continuous

crown near the private residences. The risk of catastrophic fire prompted the BLM to create a fuel break between public land and the homes. Bureau fire suppression personnel thinned the dense stand of pines, creating slash piles for winter burning. The winter burning met consumption expectations and very little “chunking” was needed. This project was greatly enhanced by the coordination between the BLM and private landowners.

Contact: Dena Sprandel, Miles City Field Office, 406-233-2907



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Arizona



Firewise Communities Hang Together

Fourteen organizations, universities and agencies recently came together to promote the national Firewise Communities program in Arizona through use of a descriptive door hanger. The informational tool can be used throughout the state by any organization linked to cooperators to promote the Firewise program. The front of the door hanger asks, "Are You Firewise," shows the national Firewise Communities logo, lists the cooperators in the state, and provides the national website address. The back of the door hanger includes a checklist giving home protection measures and what to do if fire is threatening the home.

The Safford-Tucson Fire Management Zone will have youth groups distribute the door hanger, as well as a flyer intended to encourage public participation at community meetings this fall. Meetings will be held in three communities adjacent to the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area.

Public input at these meetings will become part of the Fire Hazard Risk Assessment and Wildland Fire Hazard Mitigation Plans for six-mixed interface and three rural setting areas.

The mitigation plans are designed to address the communities at risk fire protection initiative and help drive implementation of wildland urban interface projects. Possible projects from these plans include prescribed burns, mechanical thinning, construction of firebreaks, improving roads and trails, infrastructure improvements, controlling noxious weeds, and partnership agreements with private landowners or government agencies.

Contact: David Peters, Tucson Field Office, (520) 258-7207.



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California

Worse-Case Scenario Provides Valuable Lesson

Ten thousand Girl Scouts, their parents and leaders, and a continuous line of eager participants at the BLM Fire Management booth...

Welcome to the 90th Anniversary of the Girl Scouts of northern California. The California State Office Fire and Aviation Program, with assistance from the Folsom Field Office fire and resources staff, participated in the event with the traditional wildfire displays, defensible space literature, and fire rig to produce an attractive and well-received exhibit. However, none of these items came close to the excitement and popularity of a new activity we being piloted for NIFC - a child-sized, hands-on model of a house that was anything but "fire safe" – in fact, the model had been prepared to resemble a worse-case scenario including:

- overgrown trees close to, and overhanging, the house;
- leaf litter covering the roof and yard;
- wood piles and a burn barrel adjacent to the home;
- a wood shake roof; and,
- a non-existent or covered street address.



Staff provides instructions for the Firewise activity to a team of scouts.



Girl scout team scampers to modify "their" hazardous home.

Small groups of scouts were introduced to their "new house located in the wildland-urban interface". Several brief concepts of defensible space were provided to the teams before they set out to make their new home more fire safe. The groups worked quickly to make their house more defensible – thinning trees, removing leaf litter from the roof, moving the wood pile and burn barrels away from the home, placing the spark arrestor on the chimney, "landscaping" the yard with lawns & walkways, changing roofing type to tile or

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composite, and making sure their address was clearly visible for firefighters and other emergency personnel.

With older groups, the activity was timed to add a competitive edge. The crowd watched, cheered, and snapped photos throughout the afternoon. When the group was finished or their time up, the staffers reviewed the modifications the group made, offered additional suggestions, and gave a thumbs up and a round of applause for the team's effort to improve their homes defensible space. Homeowner checklists and a Smokey Bear item were sent home with each child to reinforce the activity they just completed. As the next group was assembled and introduced to fire safe concepts, the house would again be reassembled with all its hazardous elements.

The line of people wanting to participate was very long and the staff exhausted by days end. But everyone left with a hands-on experience in creating defensible space that hopefully will influence the way they, and their parents, look at their *real* homes.

Contact: Donna Hummel (916) 978-4436



The house model stands ready for a day full of defensible area lessons.



Parents and scout leaders photographing their scouts in action.

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A Little Help Goes a Long Way

The Mariposa County Fire Department serves many sparsely populated and dispersed communities in the central Sierra foothills of California. These communities have a severe fire history and rely primarily on the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection for their wildland firefighting. However, when a fire ignites, it's not uncommon for the local volunteer fire department to be the first on the scene to provide initial attack until state crews arrive. With public and private land ownership located throughout the area, BLM's interest in supporting the local department's first responder efforts is high.

BLM's Folsom Field Office has worked closely with the county fire department to enhance their wildland fire equipment. The department recently was able to purchase several quick response vehicles with county funds. Unfortunately, this funding was unable to cover the specialized wildland firefighting equipment for the new trucks. The Fire Chief contacted BLM Folsom Fire Management Officer for assistance or suggestions on how to locate a pump unit for one of the vehicles that responds to public lands administered by the BLM. The timing of the call was perfect...the Chief was informed about the BLM's Rural Fire Assistance Program that had just opened its request for proposals period (which the department applied for and was successful in obtaining) and the Folsom office had just taken a slip-on pump out of service. The pump was available as excess property so its transfer was arranged. The local volunteer firefighters refurbished the unit and mounted it on the new truck. A few new hoses, a tune-up, and a fresh paint job put the unit back into mint condition.



The county's new quick responder truck now equipped with the BLM's former pump unit.

Over the course of this summer, the unit has stopped or slowed three fires on public lands using their new quick response unit equipped with the refurbished pump unit. All three fires occurred during a time when local federal and state fire equipment was assigned to fires elsewhere in California and Oregon. Given the timing and fire history of this area, there can be little doubt that a little help went a long way!

Contact: Ken Hood (916) 985-4474

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