

Snapshots 2008

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Colorado

Mesa Pedregosa Fuels Reduction

The Mesa Pedregosa Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project area is located within 1,177 acres of BLM lands on the Pagosa Ranger District/Field Office of the San Juan Public Lands in southwest Colorado. The project area, located within the Wildland Urban Interface, encompasses three mesas intersected by steep canyons and ranges in elevation from 6,500 to 8,200 feet. It is bordered by San Juan National Forest to the north and by private property on three sides. The Alpine Lakes Ranch subdivision, comprised of over two hundred 35-acre “ranchettes,” borders the project on the west and occupies an inholding surrounded by public land. Several houses are less than ¼ mile from treatment unit boundaries.

San Juan Public Lands is a Service First organization with joint management responsibilities for both US Forest Service and BLM land. The Pagosa District/Field office began holding public meetings and field



Fire scars on 200 to 300 year-old ponderosa pine. Note post-settlement white fir and Douglas-fir in the understory. Photo taken May, 2006.



Juniper growing under pre-settlement pine in Treatment Unit 4. Photo taken May, 2006 before treatment.

trips in 2002 with residents of Alpine Lakes Ranch to discuss fire hazard and possible fuels reduction projects on adjoining US Forest Service land. The fire hazard conditions on Mesa Pedregosa were brought to the District’s attention by nearby homeowners. In May, 2006, 24 residents of Alpine Lakes Ranch attended a public field trip into the project area. All expressed support for the project.

Much of the Mesa Pedregosa project area is unique in that it has not been logged and contains numerous 200 to 400 year-old ponderosa pine trees. Due to over 100 years of fire exclusion, the once open ponderosa pine forests are now choked with juniper, white fir and Douglas-fir. The area is at high risk of severe stand replacement fire with more than 30 tons of hazardous fuels per acre on the mesa tops and more in the canyons. Bark beetles have recently killed numerous ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and white fir trees, especially in the canyons. The older pine trees are especially vulnerable.

In June of 2004, fire crews suppressed a 30-acre wildfire in the project area that had significant



Before and after photos of mechanical mowing on Mesa Pedregosa. (Above) Before mowing in Mesa Pedregosa Unit 4. Photo taken August, 2007. (Below) Same location after mowing. Photo taken October, 2007.



potential and helped to raise concerns among the residents in the area.

The project involves mechanical mowing/shredding of understory vegetation (Gambel oak, Rocky Mountain juniper, white fir, Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine) on about 400 acres in six treatment units, followed up by prescribed burning in four of the six units. The emphasis of the mowing is



to remove ladder fuels, thin dense clumps of trees, enlarge existing openings and create new openings in the canopy. The objectives of the treatment are to reduce the risk of crown fire, reduce competitive stress on older ponderosa pine trees, and remove non-fire resistant species such as juniper and fir. The first phase of mowing took place in the summer of 2007 on 200 acres in four units. The remaining treatment units are scheduled for mowing in 2008.



Before (above) and after (below) treatment of pre-settlement pine and Gambel oak understory. Photo taken August, 2007.



This summer, a burn plan will be prepared and the first prescribed burns are scheduled for next fall or the following spring.

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Eastern States

Off Season Sizzle

The Eastern States, Jackson Hotshots assisted with a high profile prescribed burn in Palm Beach County, Florida on the BLM managed Jupiter Inlet Natural Area. Because of unfavorable weather conditions, coupled with drought, the tract has been out of prescription for over two years. According to Lamar Liddell, BLM Fire Superintendent, “fate and favorable weather conditions collided on January 30, 2008, and we got a 24 hour window to try and pull off a complicated five acre urban burn.” The area targeted for the burn was in an Area of Critical Environmental Concern or ACEC. The ACEC is surrounded by a gas station, several restaurants and many multi-million dollar condominiums and residences.

The burn took several hours to complete and according to Liddell, “it went off without a hitch. Our primary goal was achieved.” That goal being, the reduction of the possibility of destructive wildfire which could threaten the surrounding community, and the consequential improvement of wildlife habitat. The prescribed burn was a collaborative effort between BLM and Palm Beach County.

The Jupiter Inlet Natural Area is a BLM prized asset in Palm Beach County, offering a host of educational, interpretive and recreational opportunities for the



Aerial view of the prescribed fire.

public. This strategic location contains regionally important natural, historic and prehistoric resources, including the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse, a host of special status species and imperiled habitats all in an urbanized setting. Jupiter Inlet is cooperatively managed by BLM and six local partners made up of representatives from Federal and local governments and non-profit organizations, collectively called the Jupiter Inlet Working Group. Over the last decade, working collaboratively, this group has accomplished a great deal at the site such as wetland construction, river slope stabilization following hurricanes Frances and Jeanne, fuel hazard reduction in the wildland urban interface, and habitat improvement for endangered species. The area has been proposed as an Outstanding Natural Area, part of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS). In April



2007, a bill was introduced in both the Senate and the House. Currently the bill has passed out of the full committee in the Senate and House and is now awaiting floor vote. This area offers a unique opportunity to provide critical and rapidly vanishing publicly owned green space in a highly urbanized part of Florida.

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The burn was a success. The understory was significantly reduced, thereby reducing the threat of destructive wildfire in such an urbanized setting.



