

# Snapshots

Successes of BLM hazardous fuels projects ...

## Montana

### Spring Burning 2002

Between rain and snowstorms this spring Montana BLM's Central Fire Zone managed to fit in five planned burns. Burns were conducted in the Missouri breaks and the foothills of the Little Snowy Mountains for forest and range health improvement, wildlife habitat improvement, and fuel reduction. Working with narrow burn time windows, crews found that potential for getting stuck in the quickly reconstituted gumbo of the breaks was high.

Cooperation between interagency neighbors achieved success. Resources to fill burn plan workforce requirements can be scarce in Montana before all the fire crews show up for the summer. Personnel and equipment cooperating came from the BLM's Montana State Office, West Zone, East Zone, Lewistown and Malta Field Offices; Musselshell, Judith, and White Sulphur Ranger Districts of the Lewis and Clark National



*Cooperating crews in Montana are briefing before a night of work on prescribed burns.*



*Patterns of prescribed fire.*



*Good fuel treatment on the ground during the night.*



*The night conditions helping in reducing fuel loads on a key knoll.*

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Forest, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Rocky Boy Reservation, Crow Reservation, Yellowstone National Park helitack and fire monitors, Yellowstone National Park Fire Use Module, and the West Yellowstone Smokejumpers. All usually had only a few hours to respond when a burn window opened.



*Weather and interagency cooperation resulted in positive treatments.*

Timing of the moisture was ideal for the projects. The photos show the quick response. It was aptly put by this statement that was overheard on the burn” It just shows what this country can do with a little water.”

### **Interagency Prescribed Fire in Montana City**

On May 17, the BLM and Forest Service joined forces to burn an area adjacent to Montana City just south of Helena. The 72-acre burn was a classic urban interface fuel reduction burn with the burn unit just a few hundred feet from private property with homes.

The burn area was located within a completed timber harvest unit and the goal of the burn, besides fuel reduction, was to improve wildlife habitat and restore plant diversity. On the day of the burn, the weather cooperated and crews were able to hand ignite taking advantage of the light winds throughout the afternoon.

Adjacent land owners and Montana City residents were somewhat concerned about the smoke and potential risk, but were very supportive of BLM’s efforts to reduce fuel in the area. The burn received excellent coverage from two Helena TV stations.

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## Nevada

### Fuel breaks proved their worth north of Winnemucca

BLM's Winnemucca Field Office created several fuel breaks along highway rights-of-way in June 2001. The purpose was to clear a 16-foot strip of bare dirt, eliminate the highly flammable cheatgrass and sagebrush and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fires, and to reduce costs and dangers of suppression.

By August last year, these fuel breaks had proven their worth.

One fuel break on State Highway 447 south of Gerlach and Empire stopped a wildfire dead in its tracks. According to the Gerlach Volunteer Fire Department, two wildfires eight miles apart could have spread to 7,000 or even 8,000 acres, but only one acre ended up scorched. The winds, the weather and the fuel conditions created the potential for a dangerous wildfire. In the end, plowing the fuel break proved to be far less costly than the potential loss of resources and the costs of wildfire suppression.

Another fuel break along U.S. Highway 95 north of Winnemucca slowed the Dutch Flat Fire just enough that firefighters were able to quickly extinguish a small five-acre "slop-over" after the wildfire jumped the fuel break.



*Fuel break along U.S. Highway 95, 15 miles north of Winnemucca.*

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For both the BLM, and its partner, the Nevada Department of Transportation, fuel break construction has proven to be a good investment in reducing burned areas during wildfire activity. Fuel break research accumulated over the last two years has proven the effectiveness of removing flammable invasive vegetation from highway rights-of way, and mitigating the costs and effects of wildland fires.

The eventual goal over the next three-four years is to eliminate the cheatgrass seed bank from fuel break areas and replace noxious vegetation with fire-resistant grass species.

Before fuel break construction began, the BLM identified rights-of-way where evidence existed of infrequent but devastating wildfire activity, and identified three stretches of highway in Humboldt, Pershing, and Washoe Counties. After Nevada's Department of Transportation approved BLM's fuel break proposals and rights-of-way permits, construction followed in 1999 with a 16-foot trial fuel break on U.S. Highway 95, north of Winnemucca.

Crews working on the trial fuel break used a D-6 crawler tractor and a Towner brush land plow, which averaged one mile an hour during the construction phase. They cleared the fuel break 20-30 feet from the edge of the highway, removing mostly cheatgrass and sagebrush.

Eventually, three longer fuel breaks would be cleared:

- From Winnemucca north to Orovada, along the Highway 95 corridor.
- South of Empire and Gerlach on State Highway 447
- Along State Highway 140, west of Orovada towards Denio on the Oregon border.

Crews have cleared 108 total linear miles of fuel breaks to date, with another 72 miles being considered for permitting this year. In June 2002, BLM Winnemucca crews returned to the existing fuel breaks and cleared them again.

Field office staff have already noted a reduction in the amount of cheatgrass in the original fuel break areas. Based on these successes, the use of fuel breaks has become a permanent part of the BLM Winnemucca fuels program.

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## Green Strips Help Stop Fire Cycle

Three consecutive years of large wildfires in northeastern Nevada had BLM fire rehabilitation and wildfire fuels specialists scrambling for tools and solutions. Planting green strips in conjunction with fire rehabilitation efforts has proven to be one of the better tools.

A deadly mix of wind, weather and fuel conditions during the fire seasons of 1999-2001 resulted in more than 2.8 million acres burning in Nevada. More than 1.5 million of those burned acres are located on public lands in northeastern Nevada, which are managed by BLM's Elko Field Office.

Fire in the Great Basin can follow a destructive cycle. Native grasses and shrubs that burn during wildfires is often replaced by annual vegetation such as cheatgrass and forbs if rehabilitation work is not done quickly. Large blocks of cheatgrass will ignite easily and burn quickly.

A green strip is essentially a long, narrow stretch of ground that has been planted with fire-resistant plants, which stay green longer during the fire season. Green strips are not as prone to burning, rather they're designed to slow down wildfires until fire crews can control them. They can be up to a quarter-mile wide and 10 miles long, usually tying into



*December 8, 2001. Dry Hills Green Strip about 6 miles southeast of Beowave in northern Crescent Valley. The helicopter (El Aero of Elko, NV) just picked up a loaded seed bucket to broadcast over the rehabilitation project area. The seed mixer is moving to fill the empty bucket which was just dropped off. The turnaround time for each filling/broadcasting cycle is about 10-20 minutes each - depending on distance the helicopter must fly and how much seed is spread on the ground per acre.*

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existing roads, which helps create a large fuel break. Green strips are planted with forage kochia and more competitive species, such as Siberian wheatgrass, crested wheatgrass, and some alfalfa.

Green strips also protect rehabilitation efforts, unburned critical habitats and private lands within ranch communities. While it can take green strips up to five years to mature, the kochia component responds quickly for early green-up and forage for displaced wildlife. Once established, green strips provide vegetation and cover for wildlife and forage for livestock.

The green strip technique was developed and perfected in Idaho in the early 1990s as a means of breaking up the fire cycle. BLM Elko fire rehabilitation staff have developed eight green strips in Lander and Elko Counties in northeastern Nevada during the past three years, for 70 total linear miles of green strips.



*December 8, 2001. Dry Hills Green Strip about 6 miles southeast of Beowave in northern Crescent Valley. The purpose of the 1900-acre green strip project is to limit the size of wildfires and is part of the Great Basin Restoration Initiative. The project area was drill seeded with crested wheat grass in October 2001. The area is adjacent to another green strip project that was done in 1999 for fire rehabilitation for the Frenchie Fire.*

*Bob Johnson (center standing on ramp of the seed mixer) of Soil Spray Aid, Inc. of Moses Lake, Washington is treating kosha (a half-shrub) with an organic fertilizer.*

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