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Fuels Treatments and Wildfire Risk Reduction in the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit

The Forest Service recognizes catastrophic wildfire as a significant threat to the natural resources, scenic qualities, communities and economic values within the Lake Tahoe Basin, including lake water quality.

Reducing catastrophic wildfire risk is of priority importance to the unit. Fuels reduction is the essential starting point for the parallel objective of enhancing forest health conditions, habitats and watershed quality.

Summary of Fuels Reduction Accomplishments

- Since 1997, Forest Service planning and projects have concentrated on increasing treatment acres and treatment effectiveness in the wildland-urban interface, including urban lot parcels.
- More than 22,000 acres of fuels reduction work has been accomplished in the past nine years, including 18,825 acres in California, and 3,565 acres in Nevada.
- In 2003 nearly 3,000 acres of treatments were accomplished
- In 2004, nearly 4,000 acres of treatments were accomplished.
- In 2005, nearly 2,500 acres of treatments were accomplished.
- Target acres for fuels reduction were exceeded in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; and 2006 targets will likely be exceeded as well.

Commitment and Partnership

The USDA Forest Service-LTBMU is fully committed to maintaining an active hazard fuels reduction program to reduce wildfire threats to communities, habitat, water quality and forest resources, while enhancing forest health conditions. Additionally, the Forest Service is committed to reaching these objectives through collaborative planning and project partnerships. These partnerships include all Tahoe Basin Fire Protection Districts, Tahoe Basin Fire Chiefs Association, State Forestry agencies (NDF and CDF), the Tahoe Basin Fire Safe Council, and numerous community associations.

The LTBMU played a critical role in the coordinated Community Wildfire Protection Plan initiative 2004-2005, providing subject expertise, data and Geographic Information System resources, as well as coordination.

Partnership opportunities and collaboration is being expanded through the Pathway 2007 multi-agency planning effort.

Funding for Project Accomplishment

Fuels reduction work began in 1987, but significantly increased as a result of the 1997 Presidential Commitments, and the 2000 Tahoe Restoration Act (LTRA). Funds from this source were earmarked specifically for fuels reduction, and were applied to on-the-ground projects starting in 2003. The funding was a principal factor for the LTBMU in exceeding Congressional Targets for fuels reduction from 2002 through 2004. LTRA was not funded in 2005.

Beginning in 2005, funding became available through the Tahoe Amendment of the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act (SNPLMA), following its amendment in December of 2004. For the next several years,

SNPLMA is expected to provide the majority of fuels management funding, and provide a significant increase from the earmarked funding of LTRA. Funding through this important source is vital to meeting the goals, however, flexibility in the application and uses of these funds will be of equal importance.

The Work that Remains

Of the roughly 165,000 acres of the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, approximately 42,000 acres remain requiring various degrees of initial fuels reduction treatment.

Not all lands of the LTBMU require treatments, as 25% of the basin is wilderness, high country rock or openshrub scree-fields. Another 25% is within natural densities and fire regimes. Of the remaining half of the LTBMU acres, nearly half of these have received initial and in some cases, follow up treatments. The 42,000 acres represents the remaining, roughly 25% of the land needing initial treatments.

The Forest Service proposes an annual fuels reduction program that will treat 4,200 acres annually over a tenyear period. The average acre total would include 1,750 acres in the "Defense Zone" areas, 2,200 acres in the "Threat Zone" areas, and 270 acres in general forest areas.

Requirements and Timing

The Lake Tahoe Basin is one of the world's most regulated landscapes, and has a very high percentage of urban development. Environmental planning, permitting and required prescriptive mitigations, as well as the terrain challenges. Afford limited opportunities for some treatments. Extensive environmental planning, analysis and permit review can be lengthy. The Forest Service has worked with state agencies to identify areas where regulatory delays can be reduced.

Treatment Options

Fuels reduction in the Tahoe Basin has two objectives, first to reduce un-natural catastrophic wildfire effects; secondly to enhance forest ecosystem health. Based on local conditions, treatments are commonly accomplished through the steps of hand, then mechanical treatments, commonly followed by prescribed fire, and in some cases chipping and mastication. The long term effects on soil chemistry of chipped or masticated slash left in place is not yet known.

Biomass has potential. Although a developing set of technologies, biomass can become an additional tool in the tool chest of fuels reduction. Its long term use must resolve access to fuels in thinly roaded or un-roaded areas, and steep slope areas in order to realize any reliable fuel source for energy or production.

Maintenance of Project Work

Fuels reduction must be seen as a permanent part of forest management. All fuels reduction has a lifetime, and must at some point receive follow up treatment. This work may be needed every five to twenty years, depending upon localized ecosystems. Once the heavy work of fuels reduction has been accomplished, these follow up treatments are far less costly to conduct. Nonetheless, follow up treatments must be planned, funded and accomplished to maintain the important investment for the long term. Future funding strategies must consider the long term maintenance of fuels reduction/forest health work.

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