

Snapshots 2004

Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



November 19

California

Walker – Mono Basin 2004 Stewardship Contract

The Bureau of Land Management, Bishop Field Office used the stewardship contracting authority to implement a project to reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland urban

interface along Virginia Creek in the Eastern Sierra region of California. Owners of approximately eight homes, a RV park-campground, and a popular motel-restaurant, all directly bordering BLM land, supported the Bishop Field Office's efforts to reduce hazardous fuels in this important interface area.

The primary emphasis was to remove pinyon pine from the interface to reduce the intensity of future wildland fires. Pinyon pine is a native component of higher elevation sagebrush scrub vegetation communities, however, pinyon pine woodlands have greatly expanded their range in the past 100 years at the expense of once more abundant sagebrush scrub and associated herbaceous understory. A combination of wildland fire suppression, unrestricted livestock grazing (until about 1935), and a warmer, wetter climatic period (from 1880 to 1940) contributed to this pinyon pine expansion.

The pinyon pine removal occurred in important sage grouse habitat. Sage grouse are dependent on sagebrush for food during the winter and for year-round cover and breeding. Removal of pinyon pine will result in improved habitat conditions for this species. Sage grouse are currently under status review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether or not sage grouse warrant status as a threatened or endangered species.

Additionally, a small area of riparian vegetation was also treated under this stewardship contract. In this case, in addition to the fuel reduction benefits, encroaching lodgepole pine was removed from the riparian area, benefiting aspen and willow vegetation, and associated wildlife species. Post-treatment monitoring is expected to reveal an overall improvement in the riparian vegetation condition.



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Work on Virginia Creek in the eastern Sierras.

All work was completed by Summitt Forests Inc. of Ashland, Oregon. The firm hand cut and piled 350 acres of pinyon pine and hand cut and removed 47 cords of lodgepole pine from a five acre area. Slash from the lodgepole pile was chipped. Summitt Forests sold the 47 cords of lodgepole pine locally as firewood, as many area residents rely on wood as their primary source of home heating.

Work began in September, 2004 and was completed in October, 2004. Bishop Field Office specialists in botany, wildlife biology, and fuels are very pleased with the results. Stewardship contracting worked very well in accomplishing this project and Summitt Forests did an outstanding job of implementing the terms of the contract.

Contact: Dale Johnson BLM Bishop Field Office at (760) 872-5055

Word is Spreading like Wildfire in Eastern Sierra Communities

Numerous communities on the eastern side of the Sierra Mountains are becoming aware of the fire safe council concept by joining together to create defensible space and fire safe councils.

Several fire safe councils had already been established within the last few years. They are communities like Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation, Aspendell, South Fork Bishop Creek and Swall Meadows. These communities are doing fuels reduction around homes and residences, applying for grants and fire education. The interagency participation is an extremely important part of their success. The local volunteer fire departments, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Bureau of Indian Affairs and homeowners have been doing a fantastic job collaborating and accomplishing community fuels projects.

This summer, other communities are in various stages of forming a fire safe council or chapter, and taking the lead in accomplishing fire safety. Long Valley, Mammoth Lakes, June Lake, Mono City, Twin Lakes Bridgeport, Walker, Coleville and Topaz have all organized fire safe councils.

Projects like chipping events have taken place to help residents get rid of the fuels around homes and dispose of the material in a friendly way. Mammoth Lakes has a two day event that was so successful that it turned into five days. Old Mammoth residents took full advantage when the U.S. Forest Service, BLM and Mammoth Lakes Fire Department came with chippers to remove hazardous material. June Lake and Twin Lakes Bridgeport had a two day stationary chipping event. These communities were assisted by several other partners including The Mammoth Lakes Water District, the Town of Mammoth Lakes, and local trash disposal companies.

Several of the communities are doing fuels reduction work in conjunction with fuels projects that the U.S. Forest Service and BLM are doing on public land within the wildland urban interface. Fire safe councils and public agencies are complimenting each other.

Numerous communities are working or have scheduled to work on homeowner education, staffing booths at events, parades, work on clear markings of addresses and street signing, evacuation plans, community fire plans and applying for federal grants. This effort will help improve the fire fighting ability in and around the communities in the Owens Valley. Without the help of local residents this program would not be possible.

Contact: Debra Hein, BLM, Bishop Field Office, (760) 872-5057

Pole Canyon Hazardous Fuels Project Protecting Cultural Resources

In September 2004, the Surprise Field Office implemented a fuels reduction project that will help protect several cultural sites within the Black Rock Desert - High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area. The Van Riper place and Bernard's place are two historic homestead sites located in Pole Canyon and within a wilderness area which crosses over the northeastern corner of California into Nevada and the Winnemucca Field Office Area.

These homestead sites are at risk to wildfire due to the vegetation build up around fragile and flammable structures and are a management

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priority for the national conservation area. Past disruptions of the natural fire cycles, as well as other management practices, have resulted in wildfires of increasing intensity and severity. Reducing the amount of vegetation fuel loads and developing fuel breaks around the remnant structures could mitigate impacts to these historic sites if wildfires were to occur in the vicinity.

These historic sites are known to be associated with the dry land farming homesteading efforts that once boomed throughout the west after modifications to the Homestead Act were passed in 1909. The legislation changes removed requirements for irrigation, reduced the amount of land that needed to be put into production, and reduced the amount of time needed to prove up a homestead claim. At least nine homesteads were attempted in the Township starting around 1915, and only the Van Riper homestead succeeded.

Standing structures associated with these types of sites are rare. Many of the structures were quickly and cheaply built, and have not stood up well through the years. Many other structures were recycled after the homesteads failed, or destroyed



Dave Valentine, Dave Lefevre, Lynn Nardella and Brian Murdock at Bernard's Place during an archeological survey in May 2004.

by land management agencies that saw the abandoned structures as attractive nuisances. The structures at the project site have good integrity, and contain many wooden and other perishable artifacts inside them. Both the structures and the associated artifacts would be extremely vulnerable to fire.

The fuel reduction project included the creation of a 50 to 75 foot wide buffer strip around structures through the use of non-motorized hand tools. All survey and work crew personnel followed the "Leave No Trace" wilderness rules and had to access the site by foot and horseback, which included a three-mile trek from the nearest access road. Thinned woody materials were removed from the archeological sites and scattered outside the fuel break.

This project offered a unique opportunity to utilize different techniques in fuels and fire management and created a successful partnership between field offices and interdisciplinary staff, balancing directives under the national conservation area and National Fire Plan. David Valentine, from the Winnemucca Field Office, is an expert on these homesteads and shared his knowledge and expertise with the crews and volunteers adding to the fun and success of the project.

Contact: Leisyka Parrott, BLM - Surprise Field Office, (530) 279-2726

*Dave Vickery, editor
Sheri Ascherfeld, graphics and layout*



Student Conservation Association volunteer Eric Bland using loppers to remove smaller vegetation around Van Riper's Place.