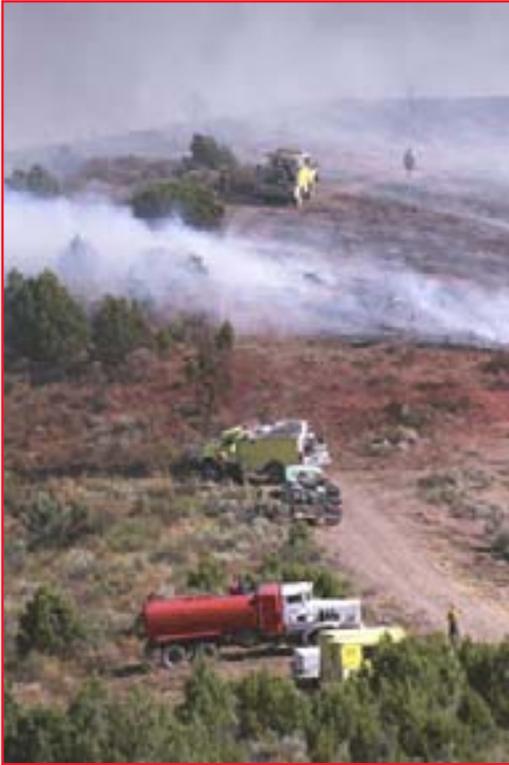


Snapshots

September 16, 2005



Successful BLM Projects
Supporting the National Fire Plan



Firefighting resources are able to meet the grounded flames of the Portneuf Fire on a ridge top, using direct attack. Robert Barnes photo

enhancing wildlife habitat,” said BLM Pocatello Fuels Specialist Sarah Heide. “We want to create a mosaic of grassland, shrub land and woodland on the landscape, instead of the expanse of juniper that currently exists in the project area.”

BLM contracted a specialized piece of heavy equipment to create irregularly shaped openings in strategic locations within the Mink Creek woodlands. Fuel breaks will be built so that, in the event of a wildfire, flames can remain on the ground surface rather than climbing into the canopy and turning into a crown fire that firefighters cannot manage safely. The contracted machinery is

designed to cut and chip the juniper trees as a one-step process.

The outstanding work this contractor completed thus far helped prevent this blaze from quickly growing large. Had it not been for the previously treated acres, Gosswiller believes fire behavior seen on this fire would have been much more intense.

“The fire behavior from the junipers burning would not have allowed for ground resources to conduct direct attack tactics on the fire, and it would have become much larger,” he said.

Proof that the Mink Creek fuel reduction project is making a difference was evident to Gosswiller on Thursday afternoon. “If the fuel project had not been done, the fire would have more than likely spread into the next drainage.”

Fire officials were able to maintain firefighter safety and preserve natural resources by having a water tender place a wet line along a ridge top just over the Portneuf Fire eventually lost energy and died out.

Because of pre-existing fuels breaks, approximately 65 firefighters successfully used engines and hand tools to directly attack and contain this 54 acre ground fire in just five hours, during the hottest part of the day. Gosswiller claims that “reducing the junipers on and near the ridges allowed us to use air tankers and retardant in the lighter grass fuels on the ridge and prevent the fire from spreading into the next drainage.”

Fuels specialists consider the work of initiating and fostering fuel reduction programs not only important, but imperative. Now they have evidence in a treated area like Mink Creek to back up the theory of the positive effects of keeping wildfires on the ground and out of the crowns.



The Portneuf Fire backs into the treated area of the Mink Creek fuel reduction project. Where there once were thick stands of Utah juniper, the fire now has only chipped debris to consume. Robert Barnes photo

The Pulaski Project: “An Education in Catastrophic Fire”

The 1910 fire is often referred to as “The Big Blowup” or the “Great Fire of 1910”. It is, to date, the largest wildfire in United States history and changed the lives of the people in the Inland Northwest forever. The fire traveled at 60 miles per hour and burned an estimated nine billion board feet of timber across three million acres of land in just two days.

On August 20, 2005, BLM participated in the official dedication of the Pulaski Tunnel Trail. The dedication took place exactly 95 years to the day that the 1910 fire forced US Forest Service Ranger Edward Pulaski and his crew to seek refuge in an old mine tunnel, located on BLM administered public land.

Pulaski and his crew of 45 men were working the fire when they became trapped in the West Fork of Placer Creek on their attempted retreat to the town of Wallace. Once inside the Nicholson Mine tunnel, men started going berserk or panicking when the fire began rolling over the top of the tunnel opening. At one point, Pulaski pulled his revolver and threatened to shoot anyone who tried going past him, in hopes of taking their chances outside. The horses and men lay on the moist floor of the tunnel and spent the night waiting for the fire to blow through; many of them totally losing consciousness

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from the heat and smoke. When they finally awoke and realized the worse was over, they crawled toward the entrance in hopes of getting a drink from the nearby creek. They found the creek was still hot and that all the fish had died. Of the 45-man crew, 39 survived thanks to Ranger Pulaski's courage and foresight.

In 1911, Pulaski presented a tool he invented to U.S. Forest Service supervisors. The tool was a cross between an ax and a mattock (grubbing hoe). To this day, the Pulaski is probably the most recognized fire fighting tool known.

Senator Craig, the keynote speaker at the August 20th dedication, emphasized the national significance of recognizing the bravery and dedication of Pulaski and his crew, in addition to all past, present and future fire fighters. He also recognized the importance of the community partnership process that made this project possible and the lessons that not only the community, but the entire nation, should learn regarding catastrophic fire events that have and will occur again.

The Pulaski Project is a partnership involving the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land



Shoshone County Commissioner Jon Cantamessa addresses the audience during the Pulaski Tunnel Trail Dedication Ceremony on August 20, 2005. To his right are (seated in front row), Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey, Idaho Panhandle Forest Supervisor Ronatta McNair, Pulaski Project member Jim See, Wallace Museum Director John Amonson and BLM Field Manager Eric Thomson.



The mouth of the 50 foot tunnel where Ranger Pulaski and men took refuge during the 1910 fire. All survived except 5, who suffocated in the tunnel. Two horses led into the tunnel were so badly burned they had to be shot. See firefighter's clothes (left) and saddle and stirrup (below tunnel mouth). U.S. Forest Service photo

Management, HECLA, Stimson Lumber, East Shoshone County Water Company and, to a great extent, the Greater Wallace Community Development Corporation. One of the goals of preserving and recognizing the historical significance of the Pulaski Tunnel Trail is to provide an interesting and true story that the public can affix to these huge fire events. In the long-term, the project will include establishing a museum and learning center as a public outreach and education tool describing the history of fire; the mistakes that mankind has made with our past suppression efforts; and more importantly, how fire changes and restores the ecosystem.

As a result of the Pulaski Project, a new bridge has been placed across the West Fork of Placer Creek to allow access to the two-mile trail used by Pulaski and his men when they crawled out of the tunnel and down into

the town of Wallace. Improvements to the two-mile trail, along with interpretive signs, benches and a viewing platform are also being designed for the area. Once completed, the public will be able to cross the bridge, walk along the trail paralleling the creek, and reach an overlook with a view of the Nicholson Mine Tunnel, on the opposite side of the West Fork of Placer Creek.

The Placer Creek Watershed is the sole municipal surface water source for the community of Wallace, Idaho. Within this watershed, the BLM's Coeur d'Alene Field Office is involved in a very effective partnership with the community of Wallace. Several projects are planned to assist the community in reducing fuels and increasing the defensibility against catastrophic fire as well as to protect the municipal water source. According to Eric

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Thomson, BLM Field Manager, “the Pulaski Project could not serve as a better public outreach tool to illustrate the need for aggressive fuel reduction efforts within the wildland urban interface.”

Contact: Eric Thomson, Coeur d’Alene Field Manager at, (208) 769-5030

Colorado

An Industrial Urban Interface Partnership

Not all wildland urban interface involves homes. Interface also includes values such as industrial sites. This is the case in a location west of Meeker, Colorado in the Piceance Basin of Rio Blanco County.

The largest known, naturally occurring, commercial deposit of sodium bicarbonate in North America is home to Natural Soda Inc. Natural Soda is a large mining operation

producing 125,000 tons of sodium bicarbonate a year and it’s located within the Bureau of Land Management White River Field Office.

The mine recovers sodium bicarbonate using a process known as solution mining. Natural Soda produces approximately \$350,000 annually in royalties which come back to the state and county and employs over 30 local people.

Piceance Basin is a high fire occurrence area containing dense, continuous, pinon-juniper stands interspersed with sagebrush. Natural Soda has experienced 45 fires within two miles of the mine facility in the last 10 years, so there is potential for wildfire to impact the mine.

Natural Soda’s plant is powered by electricity which is supplied by a twin wood power pole line coming into the plant, then on to well locations on numerous single power pole lines. During

the development of the Rio Blanco County Fire Plan, the industrial facilities and power lines that traverse the Piceance Basin were identified as values at risk and the county’s highest priority for treatment. Access and egress were also a concern since there is only one road into and out of the plant creating a hazardous situation for firefighters as well as employees.

Wood power poles igniting during a wildland fire wasn’t the only concern. Smoke acts as a conductor and arching from the power lines is a possibility. If lines are damaged it would close the plant until repairs could be made, which would impact the county economy. The economic impact of a power outage to the county and Natural Soda could potentially be devastating.

These factors led BLM Fuels Planner Ken Holsinger, to establish a partnership between Rio Blanco County, Natural Soda, Colorado Division of Wildlife and White River Electric Association to effectively address the existing conditions. In order to mitigate dangers, a hazardous fuel reduction plan was developed.



Treated area with a stand of pinon juniper to the right of the building showing the density of surrounding stands.



A portion of the area that was hand thinned and limbed.

The plan was developed utilizing the new categorical exclusion tool provided from the Healthy Forest Initiative in order to move things along.

BLM thinned pinon-juniper stands under and around power lines and the access road to approximately 15 foot canopy spacing so that crown fire could not be supported, burned slash and pulled back heavy fuels from around mine pipelines. Thinning included widening the road corridor 50 feet on each side of the road and also thinned dense pinon-juniper stands upwind from the main power line supplying power to the plant. Mechanical treatment consisted of brush beating approximately 400 acres of sagebrush in strategic areas around the mine



Aerial picture of the Natural Soda site showing treated areas. Dark green is pinon-juniper stands, light green is mowed and thinned area.