



Montana Conservation Corps works with BLM on fire mitigation

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Volunteers from the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) worked with the BLM Miles City Field Office this fall to reduce wildfire fuels in the Knowlton area in Custer County.

The Knowlton fire fuels reduction project was initiated by the BLM to accomplish several objectives related to reducing the amount of volatile wildfire fuels in the area, simultaneously improving habitat for wildlife and livestock grazing.

Previous fuel treatments were successful to the point that this project has evolved into a sustained, multi-year, multi-phased project, with Custer County thinning the private ground adjacent to the BLM project area utilizing community assistance funding. The project has been designated as both a Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Area and a Healthy Lands Focal Area.

Project objectives for 2014 were successfully reached with the use of a contracted "Facon Bull Hog" mechanical masticator—a heavy-duty mulcher that can mow down entire thickets of volunteer evergreens and trees with trunks up to 10 inches in diameter and leave nothing but shredded wood and stumps in its wake. The masticator head was attached to a track-equipped excavator which allowed the careful negotiation of uneven terrain in the project zone.



A Montana Conservation Corps volunteer trims down a felled tree as part of an ongoing fire fuels reduction project taking place in the Knowlton Area of Custer County, Sept. 30. Volunteers play a large role in assisting the BLM in taking care of public lands. The BLM has a long relationship with youth groups like the Montana Conservation Corps, which promotes a healthy work ethic and public service. Photo by Mark E. Jacobsen

Volunteers from the Montana Conservation Corps were arranged for and coordinated by the BLM to clean up the leftover thickets and groves that the masticator left behind. These stands of seedlings sometimes have to be addressed with pruning clippers, as chainsaws are relatively ineffective on the slender, flexible stalks. Larger diameter evergreens are cut down by chainsaw and scattered.

By removing these groves of young trees—which are susceptible to ground fire and can elevate flames

into the tree tops to produce "crown fires"—sunlight can reach the forest floor and promote grass and forb production for grazers and a variety of wildlife.

The Knowlton area has had several large complex fires and multiple fire starts over the last decade. These fires have been difficult to control due to abundant fuel loads. The Miles City Field Office has produced several examples in Garfield, Custer and Powder River counties where fuels reduction work resulted in cooler, less intense fire behavior by wildfires when they burned through previously treated (by prescribed burning) sections of timber.

The Knowlton project has received attention and funding from outside sources such as the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Mule Deer



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Foundation and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

The next treatment phase scheduled for 2015 will be supported by funding from the RMEF and NWTF, in combination with BLM internal funding and volunteer agreements with the MCC. Current treatment implementation costs have been \$300 per acre.

The MCC was awarded the Public Land Foundation's Landscape Stewardship Award at a ceremony held at the BLM Montana/Dakotas State Office in Billings Oct. 10. The Landscape Stewardship Award honors the work done by private citizens who work to advance and sustain community-based stewardship on lands that include those administered by the BLM. The BLM nominated the MCC based on its ongoing work on BLM-administered lands in Montana and South Dakota.

Volunteers play a large role in assisting the BLM in taking care of public lands. The BLM has a long relationship with youth groups like the Montana Conservation Corps, which promotes a healthy work ethic and public service by coordinating volunteer work crews with public land agencies. The MCC continues to be a productive partner and helps stretch taxpayer dollars while accomplishing important work projects that otherwise might not get done due to limited BLM staff and funding.

For more details on the Montana Conservation Corps and its mission, see: <http://mtcorps.org/>.



A Bull Hog Masticator takes down a pine tree in this file photo from the Fecon Corporation's website. BLM Miles City Field Office staff employed a heavy-duty mulcher much like this one to treat a build-up of wildfire fuels in the Knowlton Area recently. Montana Conservation Corps personnel are in the area performing clean up tasks and eliminating residual stands of small trees considered to be a wildfire hazard.



Shredded limbs and wood chips litter the forest floor after this location was treated as part of a wildfire fuels reduction project in the Knowlton Area of Custer County. Volunteers from the Montana Conservation Corps are also in the area assisting with cleaning up small stands of young trees that can be considered as future wildfire fuels. Photo by Mark E. Jacobsen