

West Region Wildfire Council

Meeting Minutes

8/10/17

Last Name	First Name	Affiliation
Asbjorn	Chris	BLM
Austin	Tom	Log Hill Fire
Chavez	Thad	USFS
Conway	Joe	Norwood Fire District
Gomez	Jamie	WRWC
Haefner	Lee	Colorado State Forest Service
Menz	Mary	Ouray Plaindealer
Odom	Luke	Colorado Division of Fire Prevention & Control
Tarantino	Mike	WRWC
Tisdell	Ben	Ouray County

Introductions

Jamie Gomez facilitated the meeting and initiated a round of introductions. Jamie noted that Lilia Falk is currently on maternity leave and is expected to return to work in October. Jamie then introduced Steve Woodis, Wildlife Biologist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) for the meeting's presentation.

Presentation: An Overview of the "Baldy Mountain Habitat Improvement Project" – presented by Steve Woodis.

Powerpoint Presentation Link: https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B73_1AQQokPxeTZ1dEFDc2l2V0k

Steve started his presentation by giving a background of the project site and his history of working with the landowner's at the Mullen's Ranch outside of Ridgway, CO. Steve explained that the genesis of this project idea actually started approximately 30 years ago. Since that initial genesis, there have been several intermediate projects that have occurred on privately owned ranch to promote and enhance wildlife habitat and other natural resources. For the most part, these completed practices have not been highly visible to the public with the exception of a fireline mastication cut that recently was completed this summer.

Woodis went on to describe that the *proposed and conceptual* project is in the early stages of development but is likely to involve work to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk while improving wildlife habitat on both privately and publically owned lands (BLM and National Forest) within the vicinity of the Mullin's Ranch. (more info is available via the attached project information handout). Woodis displayed a conceptual project area map outlining the conceptual project area footprint and then went on to discuss the two main tools that could be employed to execute this potential project. The first tool described was mechanical vegetation treatment via mastication. The goal of mechanical treatment via mastication is to restore sites that have become overcrowded with encroaching pinyon and juniper trees and to create fuelbreak's such that can be used by tactically during prescribed burning activities. Steve also explained that an additional goal of mechanical treatment is to set succession back and to increase herbaceous plant growth for foraging wildlife (primarily Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, Mule Deer and Elk). Steve noted that in previous projects, prior to treatment average annual herbaceous production was estimated at 150 pounds of annual production per acre and after treatment was estimated to be 1300-1500 pounds of annual production per acre – a tenfold increase in forage production.

Thad Chavez asked if there is a time lag between initial mastication treatment and the noted increase in forage production. Steve answered by stating that, generally speaking, the effectiveness of such a treatment cannot be fully evaluated until the end of the third growing season after treatment.

The second tool that Steve then discussed is prescribed fire. Steve provided a history of the use of fire on the Mullins Ranch. In September 2011, a prescribed burn occurred on the ranch utilizing a masticated fuelbreak as a containment line to burn out from that edge. The fire was intended to consume about 50% of the existing vegetation, which was composed of oak, serviceberry, snowberry as well as pinyon and juniper trees. The 100 acre burn was deemed successful and resulted in approximately 50% consumption of the existing fuels/vegetation in a highly mosaic pattern – which is the best kind of burn for wildlife. Shortly after this successful prescribed burn, an unfortunate incident involving an escaped prescribed fire (the Lower North Fork prescribed fire) occurred which resulted in the Lower North Fork Fire which had devastation consequences for both life and property. This incident resulted in a drastic statewide policy change and view towards to the use of fire on the landscape. This has, in effect, made the use of broadcast fire on private land considerably more challenging if not infeasible in certain circumstances.

The current highly visible fireline that can be seen from Ridgway was done using similar mastication equipment and to act as potential future fireline for a potential future broadcast managed burn. While there are no concrete plans for a prescribed fire at this point, the fireline was developed because of the opportunity: they had a large masticator on site to do other wildlife mechanical vegetation treatments and thus developing that fireline was a relatively small addition to that project's scope of work.

Steve concluded his presentation by highlighting the plight of the existing Bighorn Sheep population. Steve noted that historic winter range has been drastically altered/reduced due to conifer invasion/encroachment which can be attributed to a variety of factors including historic overgrazing and lack of natural fire on the landscape. Steve explained that the nearby cliffs act as excellent "escape terrain". Steve also explained the project planners of additional habitat improvement work on the ranch hope that those treatments will have a behavioral impact on resident elk populations, thus diluting the "elk effect" throughout the proposed project areas.

Jamie asked if he has access to historic photographs to show the change in pinyon juniper communities, specifically the aforementioned encroachment in more open herbaceous and sagebrush dominated rangelands. Steve said that he does have access to aerial photos from the 1960's which, when compared to recent imagery, demonstrate the PJ encroachment while providing an analog for restoration treatment prescriptions.

Jamie asked about the status of the NEPA process for the proposed project. Steve explained that a NEPA coordinator came out to the site this past spring, and that he believes a raptor survey may have been completed. Cultural resource surveys may not be complete at this time. Thad mentioned that he thought this project could be a candidate for Categorical Exclusion #6 which is the CE that is designated for wildlife habitat improvement projects.

Luke Odom asked about the status of funding for this project and noted that it he has seen other projects put in significant resources and time in to the planning of the project and while neglecting to secure adequate funding for the project. Steve noted that he is aware of funding sources and existing partnerships that would likely look favorably upon this project, but agreed that it is necessary to move forward with securing funding.

Round Robin Updates

Chris Asbjorn provided updates including a mention of recent work that he has put towards designing interpretive signs to increase public awareness and understanding of fire ecology and associated information. Chris also mentioned that the BLM is trying to celebrate a success story involving the 2017 Lightner Creek Fire (La Plata County, CO) where numerous reports demonstrate the effectiveness of a BLM fuels treatment on fire behavior. Apparently, as the fire moved through the area, it hit a previously completed fuels reduction/wildfire risk mitigation project and at that point, had a major impact

on observed fire behavior (reducing flame lengths considerably) as well as decreasing fire intensity and severity. Firewise of Southwest Colorado (WRWC's sister organization based out of Durango, CO) is promoting this success story.

Ben Tisdell provided updates related the Colorado Forest Health Advisory Council as well as the Wildfire Matters Interim Committee. He mentioned that they are currently looking in to potential policy changes as they relate to smoke permits and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. Tisdell also provided information about the regular meetings of the Emergency Fire Fund as well as interest in the State of Utah's model to encourage and require local jurisdiction's efforts to take on "pre-suppression" activities like mitigation.

Thad Chavez announced that he will be stepping down from his current position to take a new job with the USFS in California. Thad explained that a large majority of local resources are currently out on a variety of assignments throughout the west. Currently staffing levels are at a 1 and 2 and he providing information about current ERC values.

Joe Conway introduced himself to the group. Joe explained that he is the new Chief for the Norwood Fire District and is looking forward to working with everyone on the council. Everyone welcomed Joe to the region and the Council.

Luke Odom provided updates to available resources, including helicopter, SEAT's, the MMA's as well as the Global Super Airtanker which the DFPC is looking at potentially having as a "call as needed" resource.

Lee Haefner gave an update to Colorado State Forest Service Montrose District activities.

Mike Tarantino provided updates from his work as a staff member for WRWC, listing numerous projects, community chipping program accomplishments and associated activities.

Tom Austin provided updates as the relate to Log Hill FPD, including two high profile starts from lightening strikes.

Jamie Gomez, WRWC Mitigation and Education Coordinator, spoke about upcoming activities planned for the counties under his jurisdiction listing numerous projects, community chipping program accomplishments and associated activities.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:50 pm.