

BLM News

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
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MANAGING FIRE, PROTECTING HOMES

Your home is outside of town – out in the country where you’ve got space and a beautiful view. By comparison to living in town, it’s quiet where you live. Instead of city streets and homes 100 feet from yours, you’re surrounded by sagebrush or trees. It’s a great way to live ... until ... your home and all your neighbors’ homes are threatened by wildfire. You can see the dark, billowing clouds of smoke just over the closest rise and the wind is blowing towards your house. What happens next?

Does this scenario sound too dramatic? If you live outside of any town in the West in the area called the “urban interface,” it’s all too real. Just ask the thousands of recently displaced, burnt-out people in southern California.

A similar situation nearly happened this past July in Elko when the fast-moving Schell Fire burned more than 1700 acres about two miles north of town. The fire began shortly after noon on July 17th and threatened approximately 100 structures in the Adobe Heights subdivision and northern Elko – crossing the Mountain City Highway and North 5th Street in several places. No homes burned thanks to rapid response from every fire fighting agency in Elko County, and four air tankers from Wells and Minden, Nevada, and Pocatello, Idaho, that made several retardant drops. There could have easily been a different, tragic ending to that story.

One solution to preventing situations like these is to reduce the amount of fuels near homes and subdivisions outside of town. Another solution is to create fire breaks or “green strips” that stop or slow wildfires. Both of those techniques are being used on a large scale by the Bureau of Land Management Elko Field Office.

A green strip is essentially a long, narrow stretch of ground that has been planted with fire-resistant plants, which stay green longer during the fire season. Green strips are not prone to burning, rather they’re designed to slow down wildfires until fire crews can control them. They can be up to a quarter-mile wide and 10 miles long, usually tying into existing

roads, which helps create a large fuel break. Green strips are planted with forage kochia and more competitive species, such as Siberian wheatgrass, crested wheatgrass, and perennial forbs. The reason BLM plants more than just wheatgrasses is to retain plant diversity for wildlife habitat.

In October 2003, the first phase of a multi-year project was completed to protect the Lucky Nugget and Ten Mile communities about 10 miles southwest of Elko, Nevada. More than 400 hundred acres of heavy fuels were removed using brush beaters and roller choppers. The vegetation was removed in strips approximately 500 feet wide and totaling more than 7 miles long.

The disturbed areas were then reseeded with Siberian wheatgrass and Nordan crested wheatgrass which are fire-resistant species that can slow or stop the spread of wildland fires. When the wheatgrass grows next spring, the result will be a very long green strip which protects the communities and provides a defensible space from wildland fire.

This year's work protected the south and west sides of the Lucky Nugget and Ten Mile communities and significantly reduced the risk of wild fire. In 2004, additional green strips will be constructed to protect the north and east sides of the communities.

Several other fuels reduction and green strip projects were started in 2003. The Long Field fuels treatment project was completed on about 800 acres of public land about 18 miles north of Elko off the Mountain City Highway. Mowers were used to knock down the thick sagebrush in 200-300 foot-wide swaths along or near unimproved roads. After mowing, the area was seeded with perennial forbs to augment the anticipated re-growth of native grasses. The resulting green strip is about three miles long. In addition, two large blocks of land about 320 acres each were cleared and seeded. In addition to fire protection, the project is expected to improve wildlife habitat diversity.

The Elko North fuelbreak and green strip project is the largest of the projects begun in 2003. It extends north of Interstate 80 from Elko to Ryndon. The project will be done in three phases over three years. Phase one was completed this past summer from west of Elko northeast to the Mountain City Highway. About 300 acres were cleared and planted resulting in a green strip about 2.5 miles long. Phase two of the project will be continued in 2004 and will consist of a 300-foot greenstrip from northeast of North 5th Street to past Kittridge Canyon community and extending to Osino. Phase three, scheduled for 2005, will run from Osino to Ryndon.

Another fuels reduction project done this year was the Little Humboldt Fuels Treatment Project which included the use of controlled burning and an aerial application of herbicide to treat large stands of sagebrush about four miles west of Midas, Nevada.

The purpose of the project was to reduce the risk of wildfire and to improve wildlife habitat diversity by breaking up the large-block, thick-canopy cover sagebrush. About 500 acres were burned in the project area during the week of October 6th.

Joe Freeland, BLM Elko Fire Management Officer, discussed the controlled burn. “We burned the 500-acre block in two phases. The second phase was postponed several days in order to accommodate hunters in the area. While we don’t intentionally plan to conduct prescribed burning activities during hunting season, our fall window of opportunity when the conditions are right is very narrow. We burned at night to take advantage of increased nighttime humidity. “

The second phase of the Little Humboldt project was dropping pellets of Spike 20P from an airplane immediately adjacent to the burned area. Spike 20P is an herbicide that mainly affects sage brush and woody plant species. It does not affect grass, wildlife, or people. When applied lightly, it thins sagebrush.

Other fuels reduction work included roller chopping 1100 acres on Spruce Mountain, about 30 miles south of Wells, Nevada, which will also improve wildlife habitat.

All of the 2003 projects are part of the National Fire Plan which is a nationwide effort to protect communities at risk and reduce fuel hazards in other areas.

A new project planned for 2004 will be an eight-mile long green strip in Spring Creek southeast of Elko bordering the Lower Lamoille Road from the eastern edge of the Spring Creek subdivision and extending to just north of the trailer section. Public meetings to discuss the project will be held this winter.

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