



DISTRICTS PARTNER-UP TO REHABILITATE CLEARWATER COMPLEX FIRE ZONE

By Steve Stuebner

In the aftermath of the Clearwater Complex wildfires last summer, local soil and water conservation districts are partnering with the Conservation Commission, Idaho Department of Lands, the U.S. Forest Service, NRCS, Farm Service Agency, and University of Idaho extension agents, among others, to formulate rehabilitation and restoration plans for private lands in the burn zone.

All told, 226,790 acres of land burned in nine different wildfires that were part of the Clearwater Complex fires last August in a five-county area. Twenty-six percent of the land affected was private land, 63 percent on federal land, 4 percent on Nez Perce tribal land and 3 percent on state land.

Because so much private land was involved in the blazes, it's been challenging for agency leaders to provide information to landowners on how they can restore their property after the fires. But after multiple community meetings, they're getting the information they need.

"After the fires, people were just panicked. Now, I think everybody has taken a deep breath," says Steve Becker, who is chair of the Nez Perce Soil and Water Conservation District and Director of Division II for the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts. "Ok, we've gotten through the fires. Let's try to put our lives back together."

Becker is chairing a leadership team that Division II districts formed to prepare rehabilitation and restoration plans on private lands. The plans will be similar to the "Burned Area Emergency Response" (BAER) plans that the Forest Service and BLM put together following large wildfires. The group also has formed a technical team to help with technical issues. Both the Forest Service and the Idaho Department of Lands have been really helpful with private landowners to figure out what to do next, Becker says.

"There has been a big effort to get all of the key people together. The energy in the room is really positive to help every-

PRIVATE LANDS, *cont. from Pg. 1*

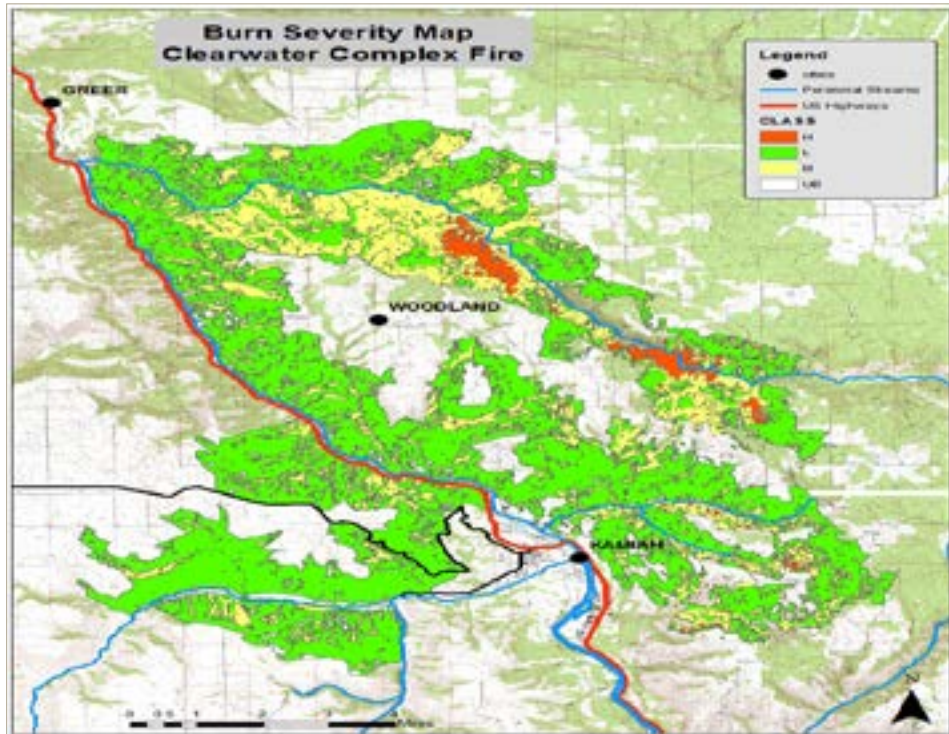
one as much as possible recover from the fires.”

While rehabilitation plans are expected to be completed this spring, everyone involved in the rehab and restoration effort seems to be impressed with the level of interagency cooperation and assistance being provided.

“IDL has been great, and Cheryl Probert, the supervisor of the Clearwater-Nez Perce National Forest, has been fantastic,” Becker says. “She’s informed her employees that there are no property boundaries to worry about here. We see this is a long-term project, and we’re hoping to work together to do conservation work on a landscape level in the future.”

“I agree, it’s pretty impressive how everyone has really stepped up,” adds Bill Warren, a University of Idaho extension educator for Clearwater County in Orofino. “It’s not really the Forest Service’s job to devote staff time and expertise to rehab issues on private land, but they’ve really stepped up and they’ve been a good neighbor.”

Becker got involved with the leadership team after hearing from the Nez Perce County Commissioners last August. They were worried about flooding issues and asked for help in gauging the risk. “I thought about that, and this is what we are elected to do - take care of soil and water conservation on private land in the state of Idaho. So I thought, we need to



step up to the plate and take on this responsibility.”

Initially, Becker and leadership team members have focused on immediate, short-term issues like helping deal with hazard trees, watershed and road drainage, and public water systems. “The sedimentation issues will be huge,” he says. “If we have heavy runoff and culverts get plugged with debris, we could have some severely damaged roads.

“If you think about it, the state of Idaho and the Nez Perce Tribe have spent a lot of money on improving fish habitat in this country. But we’re not that many rainstorms away from a lot of that habitat work ending up in Lower Granite Pool (reservoir).”

A team from NRCS reviewed the Clearwater Complex fire zone for emergency watershed issues, looking for potential damage to life and property, but the team did not see a need to engage on that front, said Richard Spencer, District Conservationist for NRCS in Idaho County. But watershed stabilization needs and culverts will be addressed in the fire assessment, Becker said.

Eileen Rowan, a water quality resource conservationist for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission in Orofino, wrote a \$165,000 grant for addressing sediment issues on the Lolo Creek Road, where salvage logging is taking place. “The grant will be to fix sediment issues in the road system,” she said. “We’ll work on that after the salvage logging is done.”

Right now, the immediate needs for private landowners are new fencing for grazing pastures, salvaging burned timber, ordering new tree seedlings and grass seed.



PRIVATE LANDS, *cont. from Pg. 2*

The Farm Service Agency is accepting applications from landowners for cost-share funds to replace burned fencing. FSA officials in Grangeville said they've had requests from about 40 landowners for about 70-75 miles of fencing in Idaho County. In Lewis County, about 30 landowners have requested assistance for replacing about 100 miles of fencing, officials said. FSA is still waiting to see if they will receive federal funds for the emergency assistance, and many landowners want to get their trees salvaged before they replace the fencing.

Nearly all of the fencing is for restoring livestock grazing pastures on private lands.

Getting burned timber salvaged quickly is a very high priority right now, and that's been challenging for landowners. The Idaho Department of Lands is very experienced in putting together post-fire salvage sales, and they're helping private landowners while IDL put together its own salvage sales in short order.

"If you're a forest landowner, and your timber got burned, the clock starts ticking right away and you need to get the timber to the mill," notes Bill Warren, University of Idaho extension educator for Clearwater County in Orofino. "With ponderosa pine, you have very little time. The logs need to get to the mill by the spring, or it will have very little commercial value. With Douglas-fir trees, you have a little more time, up to a year."

The challenge for private landowners is to capture maximum value from the



Salvage logging operation post fire.

timber to pay for replanting trees on site. The NRCS has cost-share assistance for covering the cost of replanting trees and for grass seed.

IDL is actively salvage logging on about 4,200 acres of state land at the moment to harvest about 60 million board feet of timber. Nine timber sales were put together and sold for \$16.6 million. Local logging contractors, Blue North out of Kamiah, Tri-Pro Forest products in Orofino, Idaho Forest Group in Grangeville and Lewiston, and Empire Lumber in Weippe all were successful bidders.

All of the sale units will be clearcut because of the extent of burned timber.

Wildfires burned so hot that even young tree plantations got consumed, IDL officials said. "It even burned a plantation that we planted last spring," said Zoanne Anderson, IDL supervisor in Kamiah. "It was extremely dry last summer. We got all that lightning on August 10th, and then the wind storm on August 14th and the fires really took off. It was really bad."

IDL officials have been busy helping landowners with preparing salvage sales, but also with forest compliance work, Anderson points out. Any landowner that does a salvage sale is required to replant the forest after logging. That can cost \$2/tree to do the replanting work, or \$400 an acre. Through NRCS, the cost can drop to about 90 cents per tree or \$80/acre, but if you have a lot of acres to plant, that cost can add up, especially if property owners don't get much money for the burned timber harvested on their land.

"It's a tough deal unless they're getting a good price



Representatives of the US Forest Service discuss fire issues at a community meeting.

for their timber," Spencer says.

The cities of Peck and Kamiah are concerned about whether sedimentation issues associated with the fire zone and spring runoff may affect public water systems, Becker said. "The turbidity issues are way up on the lower Clearwater River," he said. "That's an issue we're going to watch closely."

The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality is tracking the water quality issues.

One of the biggest questions related to the rehab effort is funding. The Forest Service will be able to get funding from Congress for its rehab efforts, and IDL has funds from the state to handle the salvage logging and rehab efforts. But sources of funds for private lands are harder to come by and take longer to get, Becker notes, through local soil and water conservation districts and the Conservation Commission.

After the burned-area rehabilitation plan is finalized this spring, that should help with identifying priorities for funding, he said. Groups like Trout Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy and Idaho steelhead groups are staying in the loop and want to help as well, he said.

"This is going to be a 10-year effort easily," Becker says. □

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way, writing voluntary conservation success stories.

SAGE GROUSE PROJECTS SOUGHT

By Josh Uriarte, OSC Program Manager and Policy Advisor

The Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC) has dollars to help with conservation on state and private land. The 2015 Idaho legislature authorized dollars for sage grouse conservation efforts, an unprecedented investment in keeping the bird off the endangered species list.

Some of the dollars that the legislature appropriated to OSC were approved for targeted private land habitat projects as well as strategic fuel reduction efforts

on state and private lands to be used as matching funds and to leverage federal funding. This funding is aimed at working towards the implementation of the Governor's Sage-grouse Alternative, but expanding into a larger initiative on state and private lands.

Currently, there is approximately \$75,000 left out of the appropriation to help move forward with sage-grouse conservation projects. OSC is looking for projects ideas to move forward and implement during the spring/early summer 2016 and can use the help of the Conservation District partners to help identify possible projects.

The state has been moving forward implementing the Governor's Sage-grouse Strategy. OSC, Department of Lands, and Department of Fish and Game along with federal agency partners from US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Natural Resource Conservation Service, have been identifying the best projects for sage-grouse in Idaho.

Much of this funding has been earmarked for actions needed to ameliorate the primary threats to sage-grouse in Idaho, which are invasive species and wildfire. Priorities the group has been working on include helping equip Rangeland Fire Protection Associations, implementing strategic fuel breaks to help firefighters in wildfire suppression, restoring key lands through conservation practices, and monitoring sage grouse activity.

Through these priorities, projects such as Annie Basin Phase II are being implemented for sage-grouse; removing juniper in Owyhee County to improve late brood rearing habitat in wet meadows is also a priority.

The Riddle project in southern Owyhee County was implemented by scouts and other volunteers. These groups flagged fences on private, state, and federal land

to prevent sage-grouse collisions. Fuel Break projects such as the Jarbidge and the Paradigm projects are moving forward to provide a secure area for firefighters to work, acting as extra support and a barrier to slow the spread of fire. These projects are strategically placed to help firefighters as well as protect prime sage-grouse habitat.

In August 2015, more than 12,000 acres of state land burned in the Soda Fire in Owyhee County. State agencies responded swiftly after the fire to prevent the spread of weed species and to replant desirable vegetation on virtually all of the state lands. They worked collaboratively with federal and local partners in ensuring a coordinated response across land ownerships was implemented.

Also, the State continued to lead efforts in FY16 to monitor sage grouse leks, the breeding grounds for sage grouse. With increased funding provided by the legislature, agency biologists and volunteers monitored 1,245 leks – 58% of the known leks in Idaho, which is an 8% increase from last year, and discovered 22 new leks. This season the increased efforts will continue.

OSC seeks the help of districts in moving forward with sage-grouse conservation, not letting our foot off the gas and continuing to do good things on the ground for wildlife as well as the people that live off of the land. The US Fish and Wildlife Service will be reviewing their not warranted decision in five years. By then, the state wants to make sure that that the sage-grouse in Idaho are in good hands.

For more information, contact OSC: 208-332-1556. □

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