



A proud helper mugs for the camera in front of "his" burn pile near Bear Lake in southeastern Idaho.

BRUSH-THINNING PROJECT CREATES SAFE ZONES, IMPROVES FOREST HEALTH

By Steve Stuebner

The Bear Lake Soil & Water Conservation District posted this quote recently on its Facebook page: "Conservation is the state of harmony between men and the land."

If we substitute the word "people" for "men," it seems that the district's forest-and brush-thinning projects aimed at reducing fire danger around homes and private property certainly may create more harmony between property owners

and the forest that surrounds them in the future.

In a fine example of proactive cooperation between the Caribou-Targhee National Forest and the Bear Lake Soil & Water Conservation District, there are two forest-and brush-thinning projects going on in Paris Canyon that complement each other on Forest Service and private land. The Caribou-Targhee is treating about 230 acres in its thinning project called

"The Hollows," and the Bear Lake SWCD is treating 80 acres of land that is surrounded by the national forest project.

The Bear Lake SWCD secured two Forest Service grants totaling \$498,000 to do the thinning work. Wilcox Logging, Inc., based in Rexburg, is the contractor performing the work.

"I am very pleased with how it's going so far," said Lisa Transtrum, District Manag-

BRUSH THINNING, *cont. from Pg. 1*



er of Operations for Bear Lake SWCD. “I think it’s going to be a great success, but I want to make sure each landowner is happy with the results.”

Several landowners approached Transtrum several years ago about applying for grant funds to thin the forest and brush on their properties in an area known as “Third Hollow” in Paris Canyon, west of Paris, Idaho. The canyon is a summer and winter recreation area located just a few miles from Bear Lake.

The forests need thinning badly, Transtrum says. “The timber is so thick and the brush is so thick that you can’t walk through it. The landowners felt vulnerable.”

Twelve landowners signed onto the thinning project. “If a fire comes through after our project is done, there won’t be any ladder fuels on the ground that would allow a fire to climb into the tree crowns and leap from one crown to the next,” she said. “We figured it’d be more economical to fight fires on the front end with half a million dollars of thinning work versus spending four, five, six or \$10 million to put a big fire out.”

Creating safe zones around homes on private property is catching on with pri-

vate property owners throughout Idaho as they learn more about the danger of wildfire threatening their property. Wildfires in the Clearwater River country in North-Central Idaho last summer raised awareness quickly as the Clearwater Complex fires burned more than 82,000 acres, 50 homes, and an unknown number of livestock and outbuildings. Nearly half of the acreage that burned was on private land.

A number of Idaho’s soil and water conservation districts have worked on Fire wise and forest-thinning projects to reduce the fire danger around people’s homes and private property. They also have worked on public education and outreach on the issue.

Eileen Rowan of the Conservation Commission in the Orofino area is working on a new Fire-wise program in the Clearwater Valley. She started public meetings last summer. “Most people couldn’t attend because they’d been evacuated from their homes,” Rowan said. “I have a feeling we’ll have a lot of interest in the Fire-wise program. It often takes something catastrophic for people to understand the issue.”

In Paris Canyon, the thinning work just started on private lands two weeks ago,

and it’s been occurring on national forest land for more than a year. The treatments are very similar. The contractor cuts brush on the ground with chainsaws and cuts trees with feller-bunchers. Skidders carry downed trees, stacks of brush and green trees to a burn pile. Then the woody material is piled and burned as they go, leaving nothing but ash.

“They’ve got 8-foot pits dug for the fires, and they push that brush and timber into the pit and it’s burning really hot, even though some of it is green timber,” she said. “We plan on reclaiming those burn-pit areas after we’re done.”

Keith Birch, a forester with the Idaho Department of Lands, based in Driggs, helped Transtrum with the grant applications and also with identifying trees for removal in consultation with property owners. “He’s my on-the-ground expert,” Transtrum said. “The landowners have been very hands-on, telling us what to cut and when after listening to Keith’s recommendations.”

Participating landowners also have to come up with in-kind contributions of \$50,000 for matching the grant. This includes man-hours for planning, doing their own thinning work with chainsaws and heavy equipment, and other in-kind

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BRUSH THINNING, *cont. from Pg. 2*



The finished product: removing heavy ladder fuels makes forests healthier and more resilient when a fire goes through.

contributions.

“It’s looking really good,” said Jeff Forsberg, a landowner with 14 acres in the project area. “They’ve cleaned up a lot of stuff. It’s going to be much more manageable for fire control. It’s been an interesting experience seeing what a healthy forest looks like.”

Besides the brush, Forsberg said a lot of sub-alpine fir seedlings were growing thick in the forest, while taller Douglas-fir and Englemann spruce trees fill out the forest above them. After the thinning work is completed, aspen trees are expected to grow after being repressed from the competition of other forest species. That is expected to create premium wildlife habitat for birds and big game species.

“The project is very well put-together. It’s going really well,” Forsberg said.

Norm Kidd, another landowner, likes what he’s seeing as well. “We thought it was a wonderful idea to do this project,” Kidd says. “It looks awesome so far. I hired a logger a couple of years ago to start doing some cleaning out ourselves, so we’re a little ahead of the game, but it’s still so thick with downfall and brush.”

As a member of the Highlands Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA), Transtrum also worked noxious weed control into the project. Large amounts of thistle was treated prior to the thinning project, and then the CWMA will follow up with post-treatment weed control next spring and summer. “The Highlands

CWMA is providing herbicides for the landowners to take care of the weed control,” she said.

Transtrum is looking at applying for more grant funds to work on a thinning project on the west side of Bear Lake, where thousands of homes are threatened by heavy brush and timber. “This is a huge area that needs to be addressed,” she said. “We have much more work to do!”

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Steve Stuebner writes about voluntary conservation success stories for the Conservation Commission on a regular basis.

Rapid response aids in restoration of private lands burned by Soda fire: partners collaborate on seeding

BOISE, Idaho – The more than 30,000 acres of privately owned lands that burned in the Soda Fire are in need of soil stabilization and reseeding. Agencies and conservation organizations mobilized quickly to offer nearly 30,000 pounds of surplus seed to private landowners affected by the fire.

Since the Soda Fire burned more than 280,000 acres of Idaho and Oregon rangelands in August 2015, Cooperative Weed Management Areas, University of Idaho Cooperative Extension, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Owyhee Watershed Council, Owyhee County Conserva-



Photo of Soda Fire burn courtesy of US Fish & Wildlife Service, Boise, 2015.

tion District, and others have partnered with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to ensure fire restoration occurs across all lands.

“The interagency transfer of the seed from the BLM to the Service and subsequently to landowners will aid the recovery of local working lands and the long-term conservation of sage-grouse habitat,” said Mike Carrier, State Supervisor of the Idaho Fish and Wildlife Office. “This is a win-win for ranching and wildlife.”

The seed mix consists of both native and preferred nonnative grasses and forbs, appropriate for post-fire stabilization and restoration. The seed will create structure and diversity necessary for suitable wildlife habitat. The involved county, state, and federal organizations will continue to work with private landowners on post-fire restoration. The initial seeding work will be monitored to see how successful the effort was in assisting the landowners affected by this catastrophic fire.

“This is wonderful news. We have long worked on and enjoyed solid collaborative relationships in Idaho across the board with agencies and landowners involved in natural resource management,”

said BLM Idaho State Director Tim Murphy. “This sort of thing enhances the leveraging already going on, and all hands and all lands benefit.”

The 595 50-pound bags of seed were intended for the restoration of the Long Draw Fire in Oregon. However, the seed was not needed and the opportunity to use it to restore private lands affected by the Soda Fire arose. The seed had been stored at the BLM’s seed warehouse in Ely Nevada; the Service arranged for it to be shipped to the Fairgrounds in Homedale, Idaho, where many volunteers distributed it to landowners on October 26, 2015.

For more information about this seed transfer or conservation assistance on private lands through Service programs please contact Brandon Miller at 208-685-6951 or Jason Pyron at 208-685-6958.

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