

## CLEARWATER COMPLEX FIRES INSPIRE LANDOWNERS TO GET ENGAGED IN FOREST MANAGEMENT

By Steve Stuebner

A collaborative partnership of many groups in North Central Idaho are continuing to work together on rehabilitation and restoration activities in the Clearwater Complex fire zone. Activities have included spring tree-planting projects in 2018 on two private properties in the Lolo Creek area, the highest-priority area for restoration.

Doug Nelson, a private forestry consultant hired to oversee the tree-planting project, worked with a tree-planting crew from 5 Star Forestry to plant 32,000 tree seedlings in the Lolo Creek area. Dave Summers, a private forestry specialist for the Idaho Department of Lands, also helped oversee the projects.

“The trees were planted in March, and they should do fine,” said Nelson, co-owner of Nelson Brothers Timber Management in St. Maries. “There’s been plenty of moisture up here this winter and spring. It’s good to get some trees in the ground. Without the grant project, the landowners probably couldn’t afford to do it on their own.”

“The plantings are looking good,” adds Summers. “We just went out and looked at the seedlings, and I’m seeing 9-10 inches of growth from this spring already.”

Eileen Rowan, a Conservation Commission water quality specialist, worked together with Jennifer Russell, cooperative grants coordinator for the Idaho Department of Lands - Forestry Assistance Bureau, and Stefanie Hays, Idaho Soil and Water Conservation District to write a detailed grant proposal that provided \$300,000 for the tree-planting project.

Russell said the grant application was submitted to the U.S. Forest Service, and it was a very competitive national grant program. “There were 43 applications, and ours ranked No. 1 in the country,” she said with pride.



Tree-planting crew plants ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir trees on private property in the Lolo Creek area.

The tree-planting project is part of multiple rehabilitation and restoration projects being done by a long list of partner agencies, all brought together under the umbrella group called the North Central Idaho Wildfire Restoration Group (NCIWR).

The NCIWR group has cobbled together \$2.3 million in funds so far from multiple agencies to work on restoration activities on a landscape scale. The Clearwater Complex fire burned 227,000 acres in 2015 during a very hot and dry August. Twenty-six percent of the land affected by the burn involved private landowners in the region.

In a previous article in *Conservation the Idaho Way*, Steve Becker,

chairman of the Nez Perce Soil and Water Conservation District, noted that the fire brought everyone together to work on rehabilitation and restoration. “There has been a big effort to get all of the key people together,” Becker said. “The energy is really positive to help everyone as much as possible recover from the fires.”

The NCIWR group includes five soil conservation districts in North Central Idaho, the Idaho Department of Lands, U.S. Forest Service, county commissioners from five counties, the Idaho Office of Emergency Management, five county weed departments, the Conservation Commission, Bureau of Land Management, Nez Perce Tribe, University of Idaho Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service, county road departments and private landowners.



Click above for more on NCIWR efforts to restore lands in the Clearwater Fire Zone

## FOREST LANDOWNERS, *cont. from Pg. 1*

"It's been a great team effort so far," said Leon Slichter, a Conservation Commission board member and Idaho SWCD board member.

"When this project came into being, everyone in the whole basin wanted to make it happen," adds Russell. "It's a real collaborative effort."

Other post-fire projects include road-restoration work, including drainage and resurfacing work, more than 100 miles of fence-replacement through the Farm Service Agency, and separate tree-planting projects through NRCS, involving 200,000 seedlings, immediately after the fires.

Following the Clearwater Complex fires, a number of landowners realized that they had better step up the management of the timber resources on their lands before those resources burned up, said Kara Carter-Chase, soil conservationist for the NRCS office in Orofino.

"We did some fuel-reduction projects and Firewise education after the wildfires, and people paid attention to those concerns," Carter-Chase said. "We put in over 200 acres of fuel-reduction projects, and we had quite a few people sign up for assistance."

At least 20 landowners signed up to work with a forestry professional to craft forest management plans for their property and learn about the value of the timber on their property, she said. "They might have a lot of green trees and think that they've got healthy trees, but a professional forester can do a site visit and recommend the best options for them," she said.

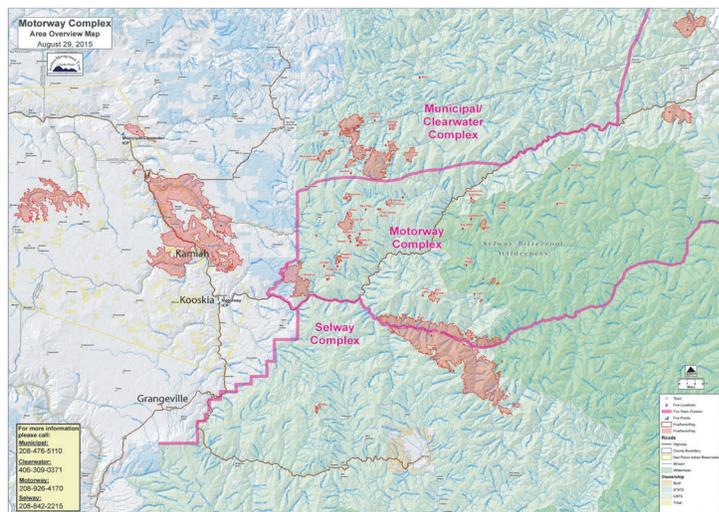
"One couple saw that other people's timber was getting burned up, so they decided, let's get our timber harvested so we don't lose the value," she said.

One of the landowners who participated in the March 2018 tree-planting project is Lanis Aultz, whose family lost the value of their forest in the Clearwater Complex wildfires. Aultz had a professional forester write up a management plan for them several years before. "We had a lot of timber. We planned to use the income for our retirement," he said. "We did a thinning project in 2012."

But the Clearwater Complex fires burned nearly all of their timber. "The fire took 90 percent of our timber," he said. "It was a nightmare to say the least. It was a big loss because of the value that went up in smoke. I sure miss having a nice green forest around our property."

Aultz was not planning on re-planting the trees on his property because, being in his 70s, he wouldn't live long enough to enjoy the benefits. "I was going to put it into dry grazing land," he said. "It didn't make any sense to plant a forest."

But when Rowan called the Aultz family and indicated that grant funds were available to plant trees on his property, he agreed to participate. In fact, Aultz was one of two landowners who agreed



to participate in the tree-planting project this spring, while other landowners that Rowan contacted did not respond.

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## GRANT FUNDING AVAILABLE FOR FLOOD DAMAGE, MANAGEMENT, AND PREVENTION

The Idaho Water Resource Board is seeking applications for grants to be used for flood-damaged stream-channel repair, stream-channel improvement, flood-risk reduction or flood-prevention work in rivers and streams throughout Idaho.

Applicants may request funding for up to \$200,000 per project. There will be a 50-percent match requirement for all grants awarded, officials said. Applications that include higher cost-share percentages will receive a higher ranking.

The application period for flood-management grants lasts through June 15. Projects will be reviewed by the Water Resource Board's Finance Committee, and final grant awards will be selected at the July 27 Board meeting in Moscow.

The Board's Flood-Management Grant Program was authorized by the Idaho Legislature this year. The Legislature set aside \$1 million for flood-management projects.

The record-setting winter of 2017-18 caused flood damage to a number of Idaho streams and rivers. That prompted flood-control districts and other entities to approach the Legislature about creating a statewide program for ad-



ressing flood-control damages as well as flood-prevention, stream-channel improvement and flood-management work.

To be considered for grant funding, applicants must provide evidence of flood damage or evidence of conditions that create the risk of flooding in a stream channel. The following entities are eligible to receive grant funding: flood control districts, counties, municipalities, drainage districts, irrigation districts, canal companies, and other public entities.

The Idaho Water Resource Board has set up a web page outlining the details required for applications. Go to <http://www.idwr.idaho.gov/IWRB/programs/financial/> for details. □

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Several property owners worked with NRCS to do fuels-reduction projects on private property to increase safety around their homes. Before and after pictures show the difference..

"I didn't know that they had these kinds of programs available," he said. "We were pleasantly surprised."

Even if the Aultz family won't live long enough to make income from the timber, the trees will hold the soil together and create a resource for future property owners. "You never know ... I appreciate the idea," he said.

More landowners are coming out of the woods, so to speak, after hearing about the tree-planting that occurred in March, Rowan said. "Lots of people are knocking on the door now that they've heard there is money available for tree-planting," she said.

The Clearwater Complex fires have increased awareness about the NRCS' cost-share forestry EQIP programs, and it's also increasing awareness of the Idaho Department of Lands' forest stewardship program. NRCS and IDL officials say they hope that more private forest landowners contact them for assistance.

A recent survey of private forest landowners in Idaho by the University of Idaho's Policy Analysis Group found that about one-fifth of the landowners had received information or assistance from IDL's Forest Stewardship Program or the University of Idaho Extension services. The survey also found that one-third of the forest landowners are likely to sell their lands in the next five years.

About 1.7 million acres of forest land in Idaho is family-owned, representing 36,000 landowners statewide.

The objective of the study was to better understand Idaho family forest owners'

management decisions and preferences and to compare the management activities of landowners who participated in forestry assistance programs with those who have yet to participate, said Philip Cook, a Policy Analysis Group principal researcher.

"The survey's findings will improve delivery of technical assistance programs that help landowners manage their forests to reduce fire risk and insect and disease infestations," said Mary Fritz, IDL Forest Stewardship Program Manager.

Dave Summers, an IDL professional forester in Kamiah who provides technical assistance to landowners, said it will be valuable for more forest landowners to know about the programs that exist. "We find that we're not that well known, and even the Department of Lands is not that well-known," he said. "A lot of people think we work for the Forest Service or the BLM. We get that all the time."

By reaching out to IDL foresters or NRCS, private landowners can get a free visit from a professional forester to address any concerns that they have, and recommend drawing up a forest management plan with either NRCS, IDL or a private forestry consultant, officials said. A forest management plan will describe the condition of their forests and recommend management actions to enhance the forest, improve the value of their land and potentially provide income to the landowner over time.

"Usually we hear from a landowner after they've decided to harvest their timber, and they've already visited with a sawmill or a logging outfit, and they want to know if they're getting an honest assessment,"

Summers said. "When we get that call, they've got a million questions. And we are happy to answer them."

Summers points out that under IDL's Forest Stewardship program, landowners who have more than 20 acres will be encouraged to work with a private forestry consultant to draw up a management plan. This is so that IDL doesn't out-compete private industry. NRCS also will recommend a management plan. And once a management plan has been drawn up, a landowner's property can be eligible for NRCS cost-share EQIP programs.

Summers points out that for new forest landowners, there are a host of issues and information to sort through, including taxes and other things. "Many people don't have any idea what the value of their timber is, or that it might have value at all," he said. "People can miss out on that value if they don't reach out for assistance."

Insect and disease issues, Firewise issues – allowing trees and vegetation to grow too close to a rural home, increasing fire danger – and other issues can be explained to landowners with solutions to resolve them and places to turn for financial help.

"You have to look at multiple components to ensure that your forest is in good condition," Carter-Chase says.

Going back to the Clearwater Complex restoration activities, the grant that made the spring tree-planting possible in 2018 also is going to provide 100,000 tree seedlings for the spring of 2019 for landowners in the Lolo Creek area. Rowan and others will be making contact

FOREST LANDOWNERS, *cont. from Pg. 3*



*Chemical herbicide was used to reduce competition from grass around the edges of the trees.*

with property owners to see if they'd like to participate.

"If people have timber on their property, they should manage it," says Doug Nelson, a private forester. "A forest is not a stagnant thing. It's a dynamic, living thing. And if you don't manage it, fires are one of nature's tools to manage it for them."

To contact Rowan about participating in tree-planting projects next year, landowners should send her an email at Eileen.Rowan@swc.idaho.gov or visit her at the ISWCC Orofino office.

To contact IDL about its Forest Stewardship Program, contact Mary Fritz, IDL Forest Stewardship Program Manager, 208-666-8667, or email MFritz@idl.idaho.gov, or visit your local IDL office.

To contact Kara Carter-Chase about NRCS Forest EQIP projects, send an email to Kara.Carter.Chase@id.usda.gov or call 208-476-4612 or visit your local NRCS office. □

*Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.*

## COMMISSION UPDATE

The Commission thanks the Boundary SWCD for hosting a meeting at Feist Creek Resort, and for a fascinating tour of conservation in Boundary County! Tom Daniel, Cassie Olson, Greg Becker - thanks! We appreciate the work you put in to make our trip a success!

A few things to update you on this month:

1. We need your help improving the Rangeland Development Loan Program (RCRDP): we're working through the negotiated rulemaking process to streamline applications and increase loan volume. Interested persons, please make plans to attend the negotiated rule making hearing on June 20th – either in person or by phone. For a draft of the proposed changes, go to [www.swc.idaho.gov](http://www.swc.idaho.gov) or call Terry Hoebelheinrich at 208-332-1793.
2. Please respond to the District Survey sent out recently. It forms the basis for our annual performance measurement report that is delivered to the Governor and Legislature annually (in September), letting them know how districts are feeling about working with the Commission.
3. The Commission's updated Strategic Plan will be considered by the Commissioners for approval at the June 7th meeting. A draft was sent out to each district (to an admin and a supervisor on each board), asking for input. Comments received by June 25th will be included in the Board packet. Comments received after will be distributed at the meeting.
4. The FY 2019 District Reference Manual has been finalized and is posted on the Website. Please note that there are some significant changes, for example, new instructions on documenting local matching funds. □



*Greg Becker, NRCS District Conservationist in Bonner and Boundary Counties, points out projects at the Wildlife Management Area near Bonners Ferry.*

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*Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship*