

TETON CONSERVATION DISTRICT, OTHERS: BUILDING “FIREWISE” COMMUNITIES

Many people dream of living in Idaho’s beautiful forests and rangelands. Too few realize their home can quickly burn to the ground in a wildfire if they don’t maintain defensible space around it. Fortunately, a number of Idaho conservation districts are proactively working with landowners, creating “firewise” communities.



In the wake of a disastrous fire season in the West last summer, creating defensible space around forest and rangeland homes has become a higher priority for property owners. Defensible space encompasses an area around a structure that’s designed and maintained to lessen the risk that fire will spread from its surroundings to the structure. It provides firefighters access and a safer area from which to defend it.

Several Southeastern Idaho districts have partnered with the High Country RC&D in St. Anthony, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Caribou-Targhee National Forest, local fire departments, and others to help property owners thin trees and brush. Their work is a big part of creating communities that are “firewise” - resistant to wildfire structural damage (other firewise practices include utilizing fire-resistant plants, ignition-resistant building materials, and not building on slopes).

Other participating districts include the East Side and West Side Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) in the Bonneville County area, Madison SWCD, Butte SWCD, Custer SWCD and Teton Soil Conservation District (SCD).

The Teton District received grant funds from BLM via the High Country RC&D to help create community events providing information and education on the importance of creating defensible space around homes and communities at risk to fire. The grants also paid for two demonstration projects with private landowners in the Teton Valley, and tours of the demonstration projects to showcase the results.

The community events drew big crowds for a small community -- about 150 people -- and showed how crucial it can be to work with a local entity to reach private landowners, said Tera King, a consulting forester with Northwest Forestry in Moscow.

“It’s always an uphill battle calling these people out of the blue and telling them what you want to do to create defensible space on their property,” King says. “It takes a lot of time to do the outreach and get them comfortable with the firewise techniques you are proposing on their property.”

Working with the Teton District created a great bridge to reach landowners more effectively, King said. “Working with Lori Ringel and Virginia Grosse at the Teton District, they’re local, and it’s a lot easier for them to approach the landowners.”

Jeff Copeland, one of the property owners who stepped up to create defensible space on his property, said he and his wife, Cheryl, were happy to participate because they had been worried about their home’s vulnerability to wildfire for some time. Plus, the BLM grant covered the full cost of the demonstration project, so there was no cost involved to the property owner.

“It was like a gift -- we’ve owned this property for 20 years, and every summer, we worry about someone starting a wildfire in the forest nearby or a lightning strike burning out of control,” Copeland says.

Copeland has 40 acres of land and a 1,800-square-foot home located near the edge of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. They have an open meadow on

one side of their property, and on the other side, they had a dense thicket of Douglas-fir trees, aspen trees, shrubs and more. “We had been picking away at it, but it was so dense, it would have taken years to clear it out,” Copeland said.

With grant funds and a budget of \$4,000, Northwest Management officials recommended forest treatments and hired a contractor, Centennial Wood Products, to clear out the thicket next to the Copeland home. They cleared about 40 feet between “leave” trees, left some shrubs for bird habitat, and piled the harvested logs next to Copeland’s small-scale sawmill that he’d used to cut the dimension lumber for their home.

“We’re thrilled. It’s like a dream come true,” said Copeland, a retired research wildlife biologist who focused on Wolverines and worked to promote conservation for much of his career. “The project is done.”

The contractor had light-weight equipment for skidding the logs so the impact on the land was minimal, Copeland said, and now he’s got more logs to cut into dimension lumber or firewood.

The Teton District held a tour of the Copeland property last summer, and the participants were impressed, said Lori Ringel, District Manager for the Teton Soil Conservation District. “It’s hard to overcome the perception that people need to clearcut their property,” she says. “What we’re trying to do is create defensible

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space to protect your home and your property. It's creating a buffer. It's still going to look nice when the project is over."

Al Young, who owns about four acres of land in the Pack Saddle Estates subdivision, wholeheartedly agrees. Her property was treated as the first demonstration project arranged by the Teton District. A contractor removed lots of bitterbrush, sagebrush and dead aspen trees from her property.

"It looks really pretty now," says Young. "The grasses have grown up underneath the brush. Before, it was too much brush and dead aspen for anything else to grow there."

Young also feels safer. Three homes have burned in her subdivision. "It's scary. Anytime we have lightning storms, I freak out. There could be a lightning strike and a fire could come rushing down the hill." Now her home has defensible space, safeguarded from a wildfire.

Jim Robinson, a silviculturalist and natural resource specialist with the Teton Basin Ranger District on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, participated in the tour of Copeland's home and was pleased with the results. Many more projects like that are needed on the edge of the national forest, he said.

"From the Forest Service perspective, it's great to see private landowners step up on fuels reduction projects," Robinson said.

"This project was very well-done."

By reducing the number of Douglas-fir trees on the property, it would stop a wildfire from jumping from one tree crown to the next, he said, reducing the fire threat to Copeland's property significantly. And it didn't require too much clearing. Copeland still was able to keep about 70-100 trees per acre -- a mix of fir and aspen trees.

The Teton District's demonstration projects and follow-up tours are great ways to educate the public about the issue of creating defensible space around their homes, Ringel notes. She and King as well as Robinson believe that more property owners would engage in "firewise" projects if insurance companies encouraged and rewarded such land planning and management activities.

"Smart landowners should get a discount from their insurance companies for doing the right thing," Robinson said. "The insurance industry really needs to make that happen. Until it hurts people in the pocketbook, [firewise] projects are not going to happen."

Ringel runs into many property owners who think their homeowners insurance will protect them, and therefore, they don't need to create defensible space around their homes. But there's more at stake than just the home, she notes. "The value of their property is really more than



just the house," she says. "If everything burns all around the home, then that'll affect the way the property looks for years."

Besides the insurance issue, King said, Northwest Management and High Country RC&D have been trying to build incentives for property owners to participate in cost-share projects involving at least a 50/50 match (if not 60-70 percent), if neighbors convince neighbors to step up to engage in firewise projects. "Everyone is always skittish at first," she says. "You've got to convince the property owners that it will look good and help protect them from fires. But it takes time. With these demonstration projects, it makes our job easier."

For more information on "firewise" land management and fire-prevention principles, go to <http://www.idahofirewise.org>. □



IDAHO FISH & GAME, PARTNERS IN VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

This month we feature another sister state agency helping promote Conservation the Idaho Way. If you hadn't noticed, we're proud of the entire Idaho conservation family. - Editor

In a state like Idaho, with its abundant public land, you might wonder why the Idaho Department of Fish and Game has seven full-time staff dedicated to working with private landowners. The Department recognizes the importance of working with private landowners and assisting them in accomplishing their conservation goals.

When Idaho was settled, a considerable amount of productive lands and

waters ended up in private ownership. These landowners have a strong connection to the land and a positive land ethic. Over the last decade, the Department has created or expanded programs dedicating more resources toward partnering with landowners. The focus is increasingly tied to the concept that activities that promote sustainable agriculture also benefit wildlife and retain open spaces for recreation and enjoyment.

Many of the Department's private lands biologists are located within USDA field offices. Their role is to work with land-

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Staff profile

DELWYNE TREFZ
District Support Services Specialist



Delwyne is a quintessential Idahoan and conservationist: he loves the land and has a deep respect for the people who work it. His affinity for locally led conservation makes him an excellent Commission liaison to Idaho's 50 conservation districts. - Editor

Where do you live and work? I live in Homedale and work in Marsing.

Briefly describe your job responsibilities. I support districts statewide by helping coordinate Commission, district, and other partners' voluntary conservation efforts.

What do you like about your job? I like the opportunity I have to help promote and sustain non-regulatory natural resources conservation in Idaho.

What are your passions in life? I'm passionate about my family and about spending time in wild places.

What is your favorite thing about Idaho? The common sense Idaho world-view/ mind-set/spirit.

What's the favorite conservation project you've worked on for the commission and why? The Jump/Succor Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative the Commission worked on with NRCS was my favorite because it involved a lot of collaboration with numerous partners to get some excellent best management practices implemented.

Tell us about your family... I've been married to Colleen for what will be 30 years this December. We have four kids and eight grandkids.

If money were no object, what would you do for the farms, ranches or natural resources in your area? I'd work with the state Legislature and Congress to address environmental regulations that are currently strangling responsible land owners and land managers. □

PARTNERS *Cont. from Pg. 1*

owners, assisting them with navigating the various USDA and state programs and providing technical recommendations on activities that will benefit wildlife. The Department and its partners have various programs that can financially assist landowners in conducting habitat projects. In addition, other programs provide payment to landowners to encourage them to promote public access for hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation.

The accomplishments that these partnerships have achieved are too numerous to mention here, but some notable ones are: enrolling nearly a hundred thousand acres of highly erodible farmland into the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); working with grazing associations and landowners across southern Idaho on win-win projects such as juniper removal, grazing management plans, fencing modifications, noxious weed control, and rangeland seeding that benefit both agriculture and wild-



life; partnering with landowners up north to enhance riparian and wetland areas, as well as improving habitat for upland game birds and improving soil health.

The goal of these private lands positions is to find ways to incorporate wildlife benefits into landowners' conservation goals. So far, these efforts are a big success. Collaboration between the Department and landowners will likely increase in the years to come. □

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BOARD ADOPTS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REQUEST CHANGES, HOLDS LISTENING SESSION

Technical Assistance Allocation Process

After up six months of intensive outreach and Technical Assistance Work Group (TAWG) recommendations, at their recent Board meeting held in conjunction with the IASCD Annual Conference, commissioners adjusted the technical assistance allocation process based on lessons learned during the first year of implementation.

Changes are as follows:

- Districts are still required to submit requests in March for technical assistance during the following fiscal year, but Commission staff will adjust the amount of discretionary and district support hours to allow for additional flexibility.
- Each Division will determine their own evaluation process for a 1-year pilot program to begin in March 2014 (including whether or not to utilize criteria adopted in FY 2012. At the end of the year, the Commission will evaluate all processes, solicit input from the TAWG and districts, and will adopt a single process going forward.
- Request form - Commission will enable spell-checking of fields, simplify request form to 2 pages, including written description of project, total number of hours requested, narrative paragraphs on project support (not letters of support), plans for publicizing, permitting, and maintaining the project. They will also include a signed district certification form.
- Within existing 2012 TAWG ranking criteria, extra points will be awarded to districts that haven't had technical assistance in past 3 years.
- Commission staff may be shifted to temporarily cover district needs in situations where geographic conditions and skill sets permit.
- Districts awarded technical assistance hours may request reallocation

of project hours if they don't use them all on the awarded project. Requests to reallocate hours must be made in writing and preapproved by Delwyne Trefz and field staff's direct supervisor.

- Delwyne will continue to educate district staff, supervisors, and Commission staff on the process to ensure everyone understands. Commission technical assistance staff may participate in district deliberations on possible assistance requests and Delwyne will attend meetings virtually as requested to assist districts in brainstorming possible requests.

Audience comments and questions were solicited (answers are indicated in italics). They included:

- What is the definition of "struggling districts"? [*Those districts that haven't received Commission support in the last three years or that lack the technical expertise to take on planning, projects, BMPs, TMDLs, etc.*]
- Are there still two types of technical assistance? [*Yes, they continue to be as defined by the TAWG - technical assistance and comprehensive assistance (capacity building.)*]
- How does a district know how much time to request? [*By consulting with Commission field staff, Delwyne.*]
- How can a struggling district gain knowledge and training? [*Through IDEA, the Commission, NRCS, IASCD, and others as available.*]
- Districts need more discretionary time for flexibility and brainstorming on possible projects.
- Need strong communication between the Commission and districts during the process.
- Districts need grant writing and networking assistance.
- Commission staff should be used as a tool. Districts should request assistance, but Commission should evaluate the requests.
- Alternative 2 that districts design

own criteria and priorities should be respected. The onus should rest on supervisors to decide what they need, allocate staff hours, determine how to spend them.

- How do districts know how many hours have been spent on awarded projects? [*Districts can request an update from field staff assigned to their project and Commission will issue a report at the end of each fiscal year.*]
- Districts should request a project by deliverables, Commission should figure out and assign hours based on staff knowledge of what the project will take.

Listening Session

Each year at the IASCD Annual Conference Commissioners hold a Listening Session, asking participants to give them feedback. Over 60 people attended this year, and many had questions and comments for staff and Commissioners. They included:

- Districts need written procedures on how to file for and achieve a name change with the Secretary of State.
- The Commission should work to increase the amount of base funding districts receive and help increase overall funding. [*State agencies don't and can't lobby the Legislature. That is the role of the Association.*]
- The Commission should work to reduce the cost of district audits required by statute. [*That is the role of the Association.*]
- The Commission should inform districts exactly what is required to conduct an audit pursuant to statute. [*Staff will distribute a memo clarifying the requirements found in statute.*]
- Districts appreciated the staff training provided by the Commission at the Conference.

Thanks to all who attended and contributed. You help keep the partnership strong! □

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