

Federal Fuels Treatment Activities

Each of the Action Agencies has substantial experience in planning and implementing projects that further the goals of reducing risks associated with wildland fires, while improving the condition of our public lands and wildlife habitat. The FS works collaboratively with its partners to design and implement projects to meet a variety of land and resource management objectives, including projects to improve habitat for wildlife and fish species. Through several hundred rehabilitation, restoration and hazardous fuels reduction projects under the NFP, the FS treats over 2 million acres each year to benefit natural resources, people, and communities. All of these projects have long-term multiple resource benefits, and several have short-term wildlife benefits as well. On the Winema and Fremont National Forests in Oregon, a thousand acres of forest were thinned and underburned to protect stands and large trees from wildfire, and to increase the longevity of those trees used by bald eagles for nesting and roosting. On the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico, after habitat loss due to the Cerro Grande Fire, ground cover in the form of large fallen woody material was restored to benefit the Jemez Mountain salamander. Habitat that had been damaged by post-wildland fire debris flows has been restored to reduce erosion and benefit Yellowstone cutthroat trout on the Custer National Forest in Montana. On the Jefferson National Forest in Virginia, prescribed fire is used every 3 years on Mt. Rogers to maintain the grassy bald area in a grass-forb stage and prevent woody vegetation from becoming established that would out compete rare plant species. Similarly, on the National Forests in Mississippi, prescribed burning reduces woody vegetation and fuels, encourages fire-dependent perennials, and restores and expands remnants of native prairie.

The BIA has planned many beneficial projects under the NFP that are designed to reduce wildland fire risk on Indian lands and to increase public safety around tribal and non-tribal communities. For example, one project will utilize both mechanical treatments and prescribed fire in lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce forests to reduce fuel loadings and protect residents and residences around the Blackfeet Indian Reservation communities of East Glacier, Little Badger, Babb, St. Mary, Heart Butte, and Kiowa, in northwestern Montana. A second project would also utilize mechanical treatments and

prescribed fire to reduce fuel loadings in Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and grass fuel types that pose a high level of risk to the residents around the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation communities of Box Elder Village, Box Elder Creek, Rocky Boy Townsite, Duck Creek, and Parker Canyon, in Central Montana. A third project would reduce fuels in about 1,300 acres of pine, juniper, oak, and grasses, by combining prescribed fire with mechanical fuels treatment techniques on Zuni Tribal forest and woodland resources in New Mexico. This project would create fuel breaks in large contiguous fuels that are at high risk for catastrophic wildfires. Finally, a fourth project will stabilize and rehabilitate 276,000 acres of White Mountain Apache Tribal lands severely damaged in the Rodeo-Chediski Fire. This project will reduce the potential threats to human life and property in surrounding communities, along with threats to cultural resources, water quantity and quality, and soil productivity.

Across the Nation, NPS is implementing numerous projects to support the goals of the NFP. Park superintendents use prescribed fire (including wildland fire), mechanical fuels treatments, and invasive species control to restore or maintain natural ecosystems, to mitigate the effects of past fire suppression policies, and to protect communities from catastrophic wildfires. NPS fire management and restoration efforts generally focus on restoring ecosystem processes rather than on the management of specific species. However, these projects provide important long-term habitat benefits to a variety of threatened or endangered species. For example, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is completing a 1,034-acre yellow pine restoration burn, the largest prescribed burn in the Park's history. The central purpose of the Park's use of fire is to replicate as nearly as possible the role that naturally occurring fires played in shaping and maintaining the Park's biologically diverse ecosystems, while also minimizing the risk of future wildfires. At Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, the use of prescribed fire is intended to restore and maintain grassland/prairie habitats in a healthy condition. The operation was an interagency effort between the FS and the NPS. Similarly, Gulf Islands National Seashore has conducted prescribed burns for habitat restoration and to reduce hazardous fuels. These burns both restore key vegetative communities and provide habitat for relocated gopher tortoises. Other

projects have improved habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers at Big Thicket National Preserve and bald eagles at Lavabeds National Monument. All of these fuels treatment projects will enhance public safety for the communities around the Parks.

The BLM is proceeding with many NFP projects to restore dense pinyon pine and juniper forests and woodlands, nearly devoid of understory shrubs, grasses, and forbs, to a more natural savannah, or open woodland conditions. In the Farmington Field Office, New Mexico, the Pump Mesa project is a multiple phase project to open up the pinyon pine and juniper forest canopy by thinning, wood removal, and prescribed burning, to make space, sunlight, water, and nutrients available for the manual seeding of native understory species that were formerly present on the site. Densities of trees in the pinyon pine systems have increased to the point that large proportions of these woodlands have become highly combustible, supporting crown fires that can produce catastrophic habitat loss for wildlife and high risk to nearby communities. In the Richfield Field Office, the Praetor Slope Fuel Reduction project will mechanically displace patches of juniper and sagebrush to reduce the risk created by large, dense contiguous areas of fuel, while creating valuable deer and elk range, complete with islands and feathered woodlands that provide necessary animal cover. In the Central Montana Fire Management Zone, a number of small and moderate-sized prescribed burns, such as in Cow Creek, Little Bull Whacker, and Fergus Triangle, have been completed to increase wildlife habitat diversity, reduce fuel loads, and increase forage for both livestock and wildlife.

Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation

Section 7(a)(2) of the ESA requires that each Federal agency shall, in consultation with and with the assistance of the Service, insure that any action it authorizes, funds, or carries out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any listed species or result in destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. Section 7(b) of the ESA describes the consultation process, which is further developed in regulations at 50 CFR 402.

The existing ESA section 7 regulations require an action agency to complete formal consultation with the Service on any proposed action that may affect a listed species or designated critical habitat, unless following either a biological assessment or informal