

Prescribed fire in the Applegate

It's good for the land and good for the community

BY PAUL E. GALLOWAY

As the window closes on this year's spring burning program, the Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District would like to thank valley residents for their cooperation and understanding as we continue to use prescribed fire as a tool to address both undesirable fuel loads in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and returning natural processes to play in the restoration of forest health. "I'm excited about the prescribed fire program on the Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District," states District Ranger Linda Duffy. "In addition to implementing work identified in the Applegate Fire Plan designed to protect our communities, we also are working with partners to restore the forest to a more fire resilient state."

Why are we doing this?

A variety of objectives drive the district's prescribed fire program. Principal among them is the implementation of the Applegate Fire Plan. The Upper Applegate Road project is an example of a project area identified in the Plan that focuses on fuels reduction to decrease the risk of wildfire within the WUI. Another objective for a prescribed fire treatment is to combat the threat of insects and/or disease. This is particularly critical within some of our mature pine forests that are competing with encroaching Douglas fir and other understory species for water and nutrients, thus increasing the risk of pine bark beetle mortality. This year's underburn at China Gulch in the upper Applegate was designed to address this issue (while also reducing fuels in the WUI) and conserve and restore the historic pine stand that was naturally dependent on periodic fire. Still a third objective, as evidenced by the recent Mule Mountain and Doe Hollow projects, is to improve wildlife habitat that also is dependent on periodic fire to rejuvenate plant species that provide food and cover for a variety of species in the area.

I thought prescriptions were signed by a doctor

The prescriptions in this case are developed by the fire and fuels

professionals at the Ranger District to address the different objectives desired by the project proponent. The fuel types and density, terrain, proximity to homes and access are a few variables. Treatment of the area and the burn plan are developed that specify conditions that successfully will meet the objectives of the project. This is why the treatments you see and the timing of the burning vary greatly from project to project. Some projects will require hand piling slash and burning the piles at a later date (often in the middle of the winter). Others will utilize a helicopter to ignite a brush field in the fall in order for the vegetation to recover for the next spring green-up. And still others will broadcast burn understory vegetation and/or slash in the spring, striking the balance of consuming the undesirable fuels, while retaining the mature overstory. Of course, all of these scenarios are dependent on a multitude of factors prior to any ignition taking place. Prescribed fire managers are constantly adjusting plans in order to complete their projects within the appropriate "burn window." This window can open and close very abruptly and consists of numerous factors—fuel moisture, air temperature, humidity, smoke management, availability of equipment and personnel, etc. "It's always a challenge to get your burning program accomplished here in southwest Oregon due to the complexity of our landscape and limitations in our burning window," said Fire Management Officer Mel Wann, "but that challenge is also what keeps our juices flowing."

The prescriptions are working

Not unlike your visit to the doctor's office, prescriptions are written to relieve and prevent the spread of symptoms that are affecting the health of the patient. Here's a look at some prescribed fire examples that describe how one script wouldn't fit the symptoms these projects were trying to treat.

China Gulch

A major objective of this 175-acre underburning project was to reduce the

risk of future pine bark beetle activity. Treatments also were aimed at reducing fuel loads and decreasing the risk of high-intensity wildfires in the WUI. The prescribed burning has succeeded in providing desirable wide spacing around most remaining Ponderosa pine. Future risk of infestation by pine beetles should be much less now than it would have been in these units in the absence of treatment. Douglas fir and madrone were substantially reduced where these species were close to pines, and oaks remain well represented in the stands. Working with staff from the Southwest Oregon Forest Insect and Disease Service Center, the district secured special Forest Health Protection funding to implement the project. "The Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District, in our opinion, is demonstrating considerable skill in attaining multiple objectives in prescribed burning treatments," said Don Goheen, entomologist with the disease center. "The District has an ambitious landscape level prescribed burning plan and is actively seeking to integrate pine bark beetle risk reduction along with other appropriate objectives into planning and implementation."

Mule Mountain and Doe Hollow

These projects, totaling approximately 1,800 acres, were designed to reduce natural fuel loads and enhance wildlife habitat. Partnering with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Oregon Hunters' Association, the Ranger District staff designed these projects to remove decadent, less palatable wildlife forage. Implementation last year with the use of a helitorch allowed these projects to be completed quickly within the burn window, and recovery has been dramatic during this year's spring green-up. OHA is more than ready to continue teaming with agencies to improve wildlife habitat with these types of projects," says Jim Danikin of the Rogue Valley Chapter of Oregon Hunter's Association.

Star Gulch

This 125-acre hazardous fuels project required mechanical thinning and hand piling due to the fuel load and proximity to private structures. The piles were burned during the early

spring this year, and resulted in a fuels treatment that complements an adjacent fuels project on BLM-managed land, continuing the federal land management agencies commitment to implement high-priority WUI projects identified in the Applegate Fire Plan. "We'll continue to look for those projects that leverage our efforts with those of our BLM colleagues to promote a more fire-resilient landscape and fire-safe communities in the Applegate," explains Assistant Fire Management Officer Mike Hackett. "Our upcoming Upper Applegate Road project will provide more of this type of opportunity."

What's next?

Encouraged by the success of these and other recent projects, the Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District is looking forward to planning for and implementing a variety of projects that will use prescribed fire as a management tool to restore the fire-adapted landscape of the Applegate and enhance the safety of its residents. In addition to the Upper Applegate Road project mentioned earlier, projects in the Carberry Creek, Beaver Creek, White Rock, Yellowjacket Ridge, Palmer, Sourdough, and French Gulch areas are in various stages of development or implementation. These projects will have a variety of, and often times, multiple, objectives and will be implemented as the resources become available and the prescriptions can be met. "I'm really encouraged by the results of our recent efforts and excited about our future plans," offers District Ranger Duffy. "Our monitoring shows that the projects are well thought out and executed, providing significant improvement to a fire-adapted landscape that hasn't benefited from those periodic fire events in recent decades. We also feel these projects will help change wildfire behavior from the high-intensity burning that has been experienced recently to one that lowers the risk to our communities and firefighters when the next late summer lightning storm arrives."

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