

The Fires Next Time: Preparing Seeley Lake for the Future

by Jon Haufler

This week I took a friend who was in town for a conference on a short tour of the Jocko Lakes fire. The landscape certainly has changed from a year ago. Scorched trees and bare ground predominate. Yet, the grasses and lilies are already popping up in all but the most hotly burned areas. And there are certainly many more vistas for viewing across the valley. Now that the snow has melted, it is time to ask what we should be doing this year to reduce future wildfire threats to the community like we faced last summer.

Fortunately, a lot of that discussion has taken place, and many actions have been identified. The Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force was formed in 2004 following completion of the Seeley/Swan Fire Plan to coordinate such efforts. The Task Force is comprised of representatives of the Clearwater Resource Council, the Seeley Lake Rural Fire Department, MT DNRC, the US Forest Service, and the Bitter Root RC&D, with similar representation from the Swan Valley to coordinate activities in that part of the fire plan area. The Task Force has several objectives. First, it helps the agencies responsible for fire response to stay coordinated in preparing for an up-coming fire season. While this coordination has existed for many years, all the partners agree that the Task Force provides one more mechanism to be sure that everyone is doing all they can to be ready for the next season. Second, the Task Force is addressing fuel reduction needs identified in the fire plan. The Task Force enhances these efforts by helping this to be done in a coordinated manner, and as efficiently as possible. It helps both the MT DNRC and the USFS to coordinate their fuel mitigation projects, and to integrate these efforts with fuel mitigation work on private lands. The Task Force has also mapped out the PLOD (primary line of defense) that the agencies have identified as areas that when thinned, will allow them a better chance of stopping a fire before it reaches more developed areas. Yet, the biggest objective of the Task Force is to help address the need for fuel mitigation on private lands.

Much has been discussed in Seeley Lake about the need for private landowners to create defensible space around their homes. While this sounds fairly simple, anyone who has tackled fuel reduction on a couple of acres quickly discovers how much work this can be. For most folks, this requires hiring contractors, which can be expensive. Recognizing this, various agencies have created funds to provide assistance. However, as Frank Maradeo and I discovered back in 2004, determining what funds will apply to a specific location, preparing grant requests at the right time and in the correct format, completing all of the paper work once a grant has been approved, and getting the correct treatment of an area completed can be daunting tasks. This is where the Fuels Mitigation Task Force provides its greatest service. The Task Force provides one-stop-shopping for landowners interested in conducting fuel reductions around their home. The Task Force has applied for grants for the community, and has acquired over \$400,000 in the past several years for fuel mitigation work. It worked with Bitter Root RC&D to create a Fuel Mitigation Coordinator position for the community, and hired Colin Moon to fill this position. It has advertised the availability of funds, and prioritized the dispersing of these funds to landowners. It allocates the appropriate funds from various grants to suitable locations. To date,

approximately 450 acres have been or are being thinned. While many more acres need fuel reduction, the Task Force is pleased with the progress that has been made.

A new focus anticipated for 2008 will be a more directed effort at thinning of the PLOD. We expect to receive a grant specifically targeting this need. So if you own property within the PLOD, you may find a representative of the Task Force seeking your assistance to allow the Task Force to complete this work.

The Task Force has also recently been involved in revising the Seeley/Swan Fire Plan. This plan maps the distribution of forest fuels in the Valley as well as the distribution of homes. It identifies those areas where the combination of fuels, terrain, and density of homes pose the greatest risk to life and property, and allows the Task Force to prioritize these areas in its fuel mitigation support. It also identifies evacuation routes, and any fuel reductions that might be needed to maintain these routes during a fire event. The Plan delineates the WUI (Wildland Urban Interface), the area where homes occur within the forest. The thrust of the Plan is to address and prioritize fuel thinning within the WUI, allowing lands outside of the WUI to be managed for their forestry or ecological values.

What can you do to help the Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force? You can help in several ways. First, if you have not created defensible space around your home, do so. The Task Force can help. Simply fill out an application for assistance available on the Seeley Lake Fire Department website (www.seeleyfire.org and click the mitigation page). The Task Force will review your application and the Fuels Mitigation Coordinator will get in touch with you. You can also learn more about the Seeley/Swan Fire Plan and the steps that are being taken to protect the community from wildfire. The revised plan will be presented at the next Clearwater Resource Council meeting on May 27th, 7 PM at the Community Hall. At this meeting, the fuel mitigation work that has been completed on both private and public lands to date will be reviewed. Remaining priority areas, including the PLOD, will be discussed. Future plans for fuel mitigation will be presented. Finally, each fire response agency will discuss their efforts at preparing for the up-coming fire season. The late spring and good snowpack bode well for a safer fire season this year, but as we saw last year, one month of hot, dry weather can create rapid changes to fire conditions. Let's do what we can now to keep our community safe.

Date: May 15, 2008