

Forest Management on the Seeley Lake Ranger District

By Scott Tomson

Given the local emphasis on natural resource management, now is a great time to provide the community with a brief overview of what the Seeley Lake Ranger District has been up to and what is on the horizon for us. This summary will not be comprehensive since our district has a lot going on and some of it is fairly complex. Here the focus will be on the vegetation management aspects of our program of work. This in no way should diminish our efforts in other areas such as noxious weed management, fire suppression, recreation or fish and wildlife habitat improvement. The fact is, nearly all of our fuels and vegetation management projects have components of these other resources built in.

Since many of us were keenly aware of the 2007 Jocko Lakes Fire, maybe that is a good place to start. After the fire was out and the firelines were rehabilitated, we started to think about the salvage of burned timber to recover some economic value. After many planning meetings and field tours with various public interests, we proposed to salvage burned timber on approximately 1,000 acres of Forest Service land. This project made it through the NEPA process, was not appealed or litigated and was purchased by Pyramid Mountain Lumber in 2008. Pyramid is currently finishing up work on the project and should have all work completed by 2010.

A second project nearing completion is the Seeley Fuels hazardous fuels reduction project. Many of you have probably seen some of this work along Highway 83 just north of town and extending all the way up to the Rainy Lake area. If you haven't seen this work, now would be a great time to go as the bear grass is in amazing bloom this year. Pyramid is finishing up commercial timber operations this summer and our district folks will follow up with thinning, slash clean up and some broadcast burning over the next several years. The broadcast burning should look similar to the units we did along 83 just south of the Ranger Station this spring.

While on the subject of prescribed burning, it's worth mentioning the Cave Creek and Dick Creek prescribed burns we plan for this fall. These projects would run fire through about 1,400 acres north of Ovando using a helicopter/heli-torch setup. The objectives are a combination of fuels reduction and habitat improvement for elk and other wildlife and have been coordinated with and partially funded by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. We greatly appreciate their help in these efforts.

Auggie-Mountain Restoration/Fuels is a project that should be implemented fairly soon. We have completed NEPA and are awaiting concurrence on lynx and bull trout analyses from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Once we have that, a decision will be signed and we can work toward a bid offering. This project proposes commercial and non-commercial vegetation management (with an emphasis on hazardous fuels and forest restoration) on approximately 1,500 acres. The 2 primary areas of treatment are in the ski trails area near Seeley Creek and a ponderosa pine plantation near Mountain Creek and adjacent to the Double Arrow subdivision.

The Auggie project was novel for the Seeley District in that it was the first project on the Lolo done in collaboration with the Lolo Restoration Committee (<http://www.montanarestoration.org>). This group is comprised of people from a wide array of backgrounds, all interested in helping the Forest Service plan and implement restoration focused natural resource management. Although this collaborative effort is in its early stages, we here on the Seeley District feel the process is operating smoothly and that our time and effort spent with the group has multiple benefits.

The district has several projects in the early stages of planning at this time. We have one project planned for the Summit area up near Summit and Rainy lakes. This project would propose to reduce hazardous fuels by removing primarily dead and decadent lodgepole pine on both the east and west sides of Highway 83. Nearly all work would occur within the Wildland Urban Interface as defined by the Seeley Swan Fuels Mitigation Task Force. There would be additional land management/restoration activity associated with this project such as culvert upgrades, road relocations and noxious weed treatment.

We are also looking at a large, landscape level project in the Horseshoe Hills and Cottonwood Creek area. Given the large scale of this project we know it will be comprehensive with an emphasis on hazardous fuels reduction, watershed restoration and travel management. The travel management aspect is necessary because many of the lands within this area have been recently acquired by the Forest Service under the Blackfoot Community Project.

Last but not least, we have done some preliminary analysis in the Center Ridge and Monture Creek areas. This work has been in collaboration with the Lolo Restoration Committee and is also supported by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. As such, a big focus of the work here would be on big game habitat improvement.

There are some big things happening at the state and national levels which may help us move some of these projects along sooner than expected. Both the Forest Landscape Restoration Act and the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project (<http://www.blackfootclearwater.org/>) are moving forward and could help the Seeley District with funding for the planning (NEPA) and implementation of projects. Collaboration with our communities and partners is emphasized in both of these pieces of legislation. We will continue to rely heavily on the Blackfoot Challenge, Clearwater Resource Council, Swan Ecosystem Center and Northwest Connections to help share information and build community interest and support for Forest Service projects. The efforts of groups like these and the Lolo Restoration Committee really make our jobs easier and more enjoyable.

As always, if you wish to know more about what is happening on the district, feel free to stop in and ask questions. We're located about 3 miles north of town on Highway 83 and the front desk telephone # is 677-2233.

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