

Meeting Notes
Southwest Crown Collaborative (SWCC)

October 19, 2017
Barn at Seeley Lake, MT

Attending

Jim Burchfield, SWCC (Co-chair, recorder)
Gary Burnett, SWCC (Co-chair)
Cory Davis, SWCC Coordinator
Bill Wall, SWCC
Maria Mantas, SWCC
Luke Lamar, SWCC
Roger Marshall, SWCC
Adam Switalski, SWCC
Zack Porter, SWCC
Mitch Doherty, SWCC
Kali Becher, Missoula County
Rebecca Ramsey, Swan Valley Connections (SVC)
Sara Halm, SVC
Elaine Caton, Blackfoot Challenge
Signe Leirfallom, Blackfoot Challenge
Andrew Hagemeyer, Missoula County
Rachel Feigley, District Ranger, Seeley Lake RD
Michael Stansberry, District Ranger, Lincoln RD
Sandy Mack, FS, BSLRP
Craig Thompson, FS, BSLRP
Nat Johnson, FS, BSLRP
Don Long, FS, BSLRP
Tami McKenzie, FS, BSLRP
Wade Sims, FS, BSLRP
Dave Wroblewski, FS, Acting District Ranger, Swan Lake RD
Scott Tomson, FS, Seeley Lake RD
Mark Ruby, FS, Swan Lake RD
Students in Landscape and Livelihood Course: Anna Rees, Sam Grinstead, Bryn Willingham, Amanda Craft, and Olivia Daniels

Proceedings

SWCC Co-chairs Jim Burchfield and Gary Burnett welcomed the group to the meeting and led a round of introductions. Burchfield reviewed the agenda and reminded the group about the planned afternoon field trip to the Rice Ridge Fire site.

Cory Davis and Jim Burchfield offered a few announcements to the group about upcoming events:

- November 6-7, 2017 will be the annual meeting of the Montana Forest Collaboration Network (MFCN) where collaborative groups from across the state will convene to address the theme of “Overcoming Adversity and Conflict.” The meeting will be held at the Hilton Garden Inn in Missoula and will begin at 1:00 p.m. on November 6. The SWCC is a participant in the MFCN.
- The Northern Rockies Fire Science Network will host two events of note in November. First, there will be a gathering at Lubrecht Forest from 10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. on November 2 to examine “Fuel Treatment Effects in Ponderosa Pine and Mixed Conifer Forests.” This will involve a field trip to look at sites 17 years after treatment in the fire-fire surrogate studies. Second, the NRFSN will host a webinar beginning at 11:00 a.m. on November 15 to look at the “Effects of Fuel Treatments and Previous Fires on Subsequent Fire Management Costs.” Registration is free at www.nrfirescience.org

The SWCC moved onto updates from the Forest Service on ongoing projects. Dave Wrobleski, Acting District Ranger on the Swan Lake RD discussed the status of the Beaver Creek project, which was litigated in late July 2017. Although pre-commercial thinning had started, litigants had requested an injunction. Major issues focus on cumulative effects to grizzly bear and lynx habitat. Consultation is proceeding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Michael Stansberry reported on the events surrounding the Stonewall Project and the Park Creek fire. The Stonewall project had been litigated and enjoined based on lynx critical habitat. Weather events on July 14, 2017 started fire activity and the Park Creek Fire became active in areas where units of the Stonewall project had been identified for prescribed fire. Because of the location of the ignition proximate to human habitation, full suppression measures were adopted immediately and a “long-arm boundary” of shaded fuel breaks was constructed on the south end of the fire perimeter. Stansberry emphasized that the suppression decisions and discussions would have been different if the Stonewall units had been treated prior to the fire event. An After Action Review community meeting is being planned for this winter. There is now roughly 500 ccf of decked timber awaiting sale from this shaded fuel break. The results of the mainly low/medium intensity fire affected fuels in and around the project area, and FS staff are now in the process of analyzing these effects via low level flights and field examinations. Two lynx analysis areas received direct impacts from the fire as well as areas identified as elk hiding cover. After the post fire analysis is completed by December, the District will have a much better idea on how to proceed.

Stansberry’s report led to a lengthy discussion among SWCC members and guests on the potential for “after-action” reviews to play a valuable role in understanding how

forest treatments – especially those occurring before fire events – can affect fire suppression efforts. Several people commented that the creation of areas with lower levels of fuels offers significant safety advantages to fire suppression personnel and allows a broader range of options in firefighting tactics. Clearly, the top priority in fire suppression is firefighter safety, as decision makers appropriately will not put firefighters in dangerous situations where high densities of fuels present untenable risks. Wroblewski, who worked on one of the wildfire incidents this past summer on the Plains/Thompson Falls RD, recalled how when one of the fires moved into a previously treated forest area, firefighters could work there safely and put out the spot fires. Another observer summed up fire fighter safety in this manner, “We put firefighters where they can be effective, and that’s where they are still alive.”

There was also a brief discussion across the group on the effects of the fire on the forest. For residents of western Montana and Seeley Lake especially, the 2017 fire season was particularly burdensome because of the smoke that affected human health and hampered business opportunities. However, the burned areas have a good mix of low, moderate, and high severity, leaving a heterogeneous patchwork of forest structure. The paradox of the 2017 fire season is the contrast between the highly negative social effects and the more positive impacts on ecological conditions.

The group also engaged in a discussion on how the post fire period presents an opportunity for productive, community-based discussion on how to prepare for future fires. A Community After Action Review could be an effective way for people to jointly learn about how to become more adaptive. It might be a period to consider how residents in the Wildland Urban Interface as well as those considering additional ex-urban areas developments might design or constrain these developments to reduce overall wildfire suppression costs and increase firefighter safety. Many players might be involved in this discussion: county planners, insurance companies, and participants in the updating of Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

Rachel Feigley, Seeley Lake District Ranger, reported on both the Rice Ridge Fire and the Center Horse Project. The Center Horse project, a project endorsed by the SWCC and significant to meeting the SWCC restoration goals, was only a few weeks from a decision when the Rice Ridge Fire broke out. A major part of the Center Horse project area burned. The fire started on July 24 and eventually burned 160,000 acres, with roughly 12,500 acres high severity, 75,000 acres moderate severity, and 36,000 acres low severity (based on Soil Burn Severity indices). In terms of basal area mortality, approximately half of the trees were killed or will face future mortality. A number of indirect suppression strategies were utilized, included shaded fuel breaks. No structures were lost in the 85 days of active fire, although the smoke was a serious consequence for local residents. An After Action Review community meeting is being planned for this winter.

Davis showed some low-level aerial photographs to the group taken after the fire, revealing how some of the fire burned over parts of the Center Horse project where significant road decommissioning work had been prescribed. With the vegetation gone evidence of the high-density network of old-style “jammer roads” in the Center Horse project area became evident. Adam Switalski recognized that the next year will be a time when erosion potential from these abandoned road prisms increases, and it’s a critical time to finish the decommissioning work prescribed via the Center Horse Project. Feigley said that the transportation analysis to do the needed road decommissioning was completed during the Center Horse analysis, but since there was no decision made on the overall project, the work can’t be initiated. The SWCC wondered how this part of the project could be revitalized. Either the Center Horse Project needs to be taken down from the shelf or another decision on the roads needs to be made (as the analysis of transportation is already completed). Further, some of the Burned Area Emergency Recovery (BAER) work that has been recently implemented could set up the opportunity for a new decision.

Feigley also talked about the plans in Region 1 of the Forest Service to conduct salvage operations of the burned areas across the region. Instructions from the Regional Forester have demanded consistency across salvage operations, and a few salvage projects using Environmental Assessments (EAs) will be advanced. A separate NEPA team has been stood up by the Regional Office to allow for expedited preparation of the sales to capture as much economic value before wood deteriorates. The Rice Ridge fire salvage project falls into this category. Field analysis is being conducted at the current time for the salvage EA, and it is anticipated that a proposed action will be announced in late November with a target to open scoping in December. The salvage EA will need to link to existing Forest Plans and take into account habitats for grizzly bear and lynx. No salvage work is expected in the Park or Arastra fires on the Lincoln RD. The Liberty Fire area on the Lolo NF is still being discussed.

The SWCC thanked Forest Service officials for the presentations. The group agreed to utilize the day’s meeting and field trip only as a time for learning. So much information had been provided that the group needs time for reflection. Decisions on if or how the SWCC would offer recommendations on post fire treatments would need to be done at a later time, perhaps within the next month. Members of the SWCC identified a particular need to address the road situation in the Center Horse project area. Burchfield suggested that the SWCC meet again sometime soon, either via conference call or in a face-to-face meeting in November.

During a working lunch, BSLRP aquatic ecologist Wade Sims provided a Powerpoint presentation on the progress made so far in the Upper Swan on characterizations of aquatic conditions. Both new data and photo interpretation work had offered far better resolution on the location and level of impairment of streams and fisheries habitats. By using the new mapping tools provided by BSRLP, field verification of needs for aquatic restoration could be made much more efficient.

The afternoon was spent touring part of the area affected by the Rice Ridge fire. The group stopped at a location near a shaded fuel break that was created during the fire to help suppression personnel hold the fire. A lively discussion ensued on how these fuel breaks could be utilized in the future, and important questions emerged on where these could be best located and how they could be maintained to keep regeneration from creating a new fuel problem.

The most dramatic stop of the field trip was from a high ridge overlooking Morrell Creek where a large part of the burned area could be observed. It was notable to all participants that the burned area was highly heterogeneous – large parts of the forest appeared to have survived low intensity burning while other, well-scattered patches of higher severity created a complex mosaic of small- and medium-sized openings across the valley. Near the end of the field trip the group drove through a more intensively burned area, although this only occurred on a relatively small part of the 160,000 acres affected by fire.

The group returned to Seeley Lake about 4:30 p.m. and the meeting was adjourned.