

Treatment/Project Area: Blanco Basin

rev. 4/15/11

Geographic Area

- Bounded on north by watershed divide between **Rito** Blanco and **Rio** Blanco (Blue Mtn and Winter Hills make up western half of divide), the east by the South San Juan Wilderness boundary and on the south and west by Highway 84 (and small piece of private in southeast corner).

Unique Characteristic(s)

- **bulk of mixed conifer lies in eastern half of geographic area; western half is mostly aspen with conifer "stringers" along canyons;**
- Blanco Basin private land in valley bottom splits the bulk of the geographic area's mixed conifer
- high scenic qualities;
- **limited road access** (much of that in ponderosa pine cover type); more limited in the mixed conifer cover type; much of area, and MC, in roadless; steep canyons in west half/steep slopes into S San Juan in east half;
- **numerous trailheads** with access **to South San Juan Wilderness;**
- includes **numerous areas of unstable areas or erodible soils** (volcanics, slumpy areas, shale soils in lower elevation aspen-with-conifer stands).
- **mixed conifer stands at lower elevations are dominated by Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine;** white fir is more common at mid-elevations and mixed with aspen or Gambel oak.
- there is **less beetle-caused mortality than further north.**
- Provancher ranch historical site
- **One of only three watersheds, on SJNF, initially identified as having "poor" watershed rating in recent (spring '11) nationwide evaluation.**

Management Challenges

- **limited access** (private in Blanco Basin, plus roadless) **to most mixed conifer** restricts mechanical treatment (so, **rely on burning**);
- much of **mixed conifer** (and aspen) **on steep ground;**
- many closed system roads in fair to poor condition, needing reconstruction prior to any use;
- Fire Regime Condition Class 3 (high departure from reference conditions) in most warm-dry mixed conifer stands – heavy fuel loading coupled with fire exclusion and dense 60-100 year-old Douglas-fir on north aspects
- forest health, current issues: fir broom rust;
- much of the cool-moist **mixed conifer** is probably **mis-typed** and should be spruce-fir (especially around Opal Lake);
- many of the range improvements (fences and stock ponds) are beyond their useful life and need to be reconstructed or replaced;

- noxious weed infestations (oxeye daisy, yellow toad flax, Canada thistle) are **beyond management capabilities**
- **fisheries impacts from trans-basin diversion .**

Management Emphasis/Desired Conditions

- current forest plan:
 - o semi-primitive non-motorized recreation
 - o range mgt; livestock grazing
 - o management for Management Indicator Species (MIS)
 - o big-game winter range management
 - o timber mgt/wood fiber production and utilization
- (limited) semi-primitive roaded recreation.
- proposed forest plan:
 - o "public and private lands intermix" (aka WUI)
 - o natural landscapes/limited mgt coupled with "natural processes dominate" (roadless)
 - o active management (generally, timber and range mgt).
- desired conditions:
 - o resilient forest conditions (bugs/crud at endemic levels; diversity in tree composition and size/age classes, etc, aspen restoration)
 - o reduced risk for wildfire in/near WUI;
 - o human-initiated disturbances mimic natural disturbances;

Projects

- o Kenney Flats Fuels Reduction and Forest Restoration Project (DM signed in 2004)
 - [NOTE: THIS IN PONDEROSA PINE COVER TYPE] Implemented in 3 phases
 - phase 1 - 1,670 acres in 2005: Kenney Flats Mowing (875 acres) completed in 2007; Kenney Flats Restoration Timber Sale (850 acres) awarded in 2007 but has not been cut.
 - phase 2 - 870 acres in 2010 (207 acres of no product removal in roadless)
 - phase 3 - 802 acres in 2015
- o on-going range permitting (grazing, cattle)
- In planning
 - o Benson Creek Prescribed Burn (2,700 acres) [in PP]
 - o Kenney Flats Prescribed Burn (1,500 acres) [in PP]
 - o Spiler Canyon land exchange

Resource Topics

- CWPP – **Most of ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forest are within WUI for Archuleta County CWPP.**
- Vegetation types –
 - o Ponderosa pine and Gambel oak dominate the western portion of the landscape. There are some very large, pre-settlement ponderosa pine in this area including a Colorado State Champion tree (#2 in the State). Very dense, tall oak under pine.
 - o Some aspen stands in a state of decline, with encroaching conifer, mostly in the upper Blanco Basin. **Healthy aspen in area of Buckles and Harris lakes.**
- Recreation –
- Current Issues:
 - o Heavy recreation use of Opal Lake trail
 - o Moderate to heavy ATV/4x4 use of Blue Creek environs, with ongoing resource concerns relating to road conditions and unauthorized route creation
 - o Lower elevations receive moderate to heavy big-game hunting pressure in late seasons.
 - o Castle Creek and Opal Lake roads provide trailhead access to South San Juan Wilderness.
- Projections/Potential Changes:
 - o EA underway to address resource concerns noted above, including the decommissioning of some routes in the Blue Creek area.
 - o Use levels and types expected to remain consistent with current trends.
 - o No foreseeable major recreation-related projects planned for area.
- Wildlife-
 - o Major east - west migration corridor for big game (elk and deer), particularly Confar Hill, Kenney Flats, and Winter Hills are (Bear Basin area)
 - o Very popular spring turkey hunting area
 - o Extensive amount of important big-game winter range, especially during low snowfall years
 - o Important production areas present for big game
 - o Extensive amount of Canada lynx habitat
 - o Area contains at least one active northern goshawk territory (R2 sensitive species)
 - o Extensive amount of mountain shrubland habitat, important fall foraging areas for black bear and habitat for many other wildlife including migratory birds.
 - o Suitable southwestern willow flycatcher (federally listed endangered species) habitat present
 - o Poor quality fisheries.
- Grazing –
 - o Grazing – active cattle grazing allotments throughout; Portions of Little Blanco, Blanco Basin, Porcupine, Blue Mountain, Blanco, Lake Creek, Park, Coyote Creek, West Harris, and V-Rock allotments, mostly satisfactory conditions. Increased mortality and

treatment of timber resources will likely lead to increased forage production as transitory range.

- Areas treated with prescribed fire would be followed with a minimum one growing season deferment from grazing allowing for seed production and storage of root reserves. If possible prescribed fire would be followed with one year's total rest from grazing
- Invasive weeds issues throughout area.
- Fuels –
 - The Gambel oak (mountain shrub community) is dense, with heavy dead fuels in 30 to 80-year stand-replacement fire regime. This is not a concern ecologically but it poses a threat to private land.
 - Dense oak understory in pine provides ladder fuels.
 - There is **dense mixed conifer (primarily Douglas-fir) on north aspects, lower elevations in the canyons that are at high risk of severe wildfire**. These areas were historically predominately ponderosa pine with scattered Douglas-fir
- Watershed –
 - **Trans -basin diversion diverts water out of the Blanco River and puts it in the Chama River**
 - **Castle Creek is naturally unstable**
 - Erodible soils in the Winter Hills area

Opportunities

- **prescribed burning smoke would, during day operations, travel away from developed areas (towards S. San Juan's);**
- Second or third entry burns in Benson Creek and Kenney Flats.
- "Wildland fire for Resource Benefit" management opportunities in most of mixed conifer
- **Best opportunity for biomass utilization in mixed conifer on the Castle Creek road (FSR 660)**
- Reconstruct range fences and stock waters;
- **inventory and treat invasive weeds** with emphasis on eradication, control, or containment of infestations
- **inventory fisheries improvement projects when/where in proximity to mixed conifer treatment areas.**

