

## Treatment/Project Area: Little Blanco

### Geographic Area

- Bounded on north by Highway 160, on northeast by the San Juan Wilderness boundary, on east and south by the Rito Blanco/Rio Blanco watershed boundary and on the west by Highway 84 and Pagosa Ranger District boundary.

### Unique Characteristic(s)

- geographic area broken up by numerous blocks (inholdings) of private land;
- most of lower elevational margin of mixed conifer begins at or near private lands;
- high scenic qualities;
- moderate open road access – but much of that access is in the pine/oak cover type; access much more limited in the mixed conifer cover type;
- slight to moderate closed road network;
- substantial roadless area;
- limited, but key, access to wilderness (Little Blanco Trailhead);

### Management Challenges

- Granting available grazing on the Log Park allotment.
- Many of the range improvements (fences) are beyond their useful life and need to be replaced.
- Noxious weed infestations (oxeye daisy, yellow toad flax) are far beyond control capabilities.
- Almost all mixed conifer is in roadless
- Much of the area is steep, rugged and inaccessible
- Aspen decline is evident throughout geographic area, particularly on southwest facing aspects
- Many stands in the area are 50/50 mix of conifers and aspen, which is problematic in sales
- many closed system roads in fair to poor condition, needing reconstruction prior to any use;
- prescribed burning smoke constraints greater when working closer to town of Pagosa Spgs;
- Fire Regime Condition Class 3 (high departure from reference conditions) in most warm-dry mixed conifer stands (and lower/adjacent ponderosa pine stands) – heavy fuel loading coupled with fire exclusion (much dead white fir from mortality spike in 2004-2006); generally FRCC 2 (moderate departure from reference conditions) in remaining w-d MC stands;
- forest health, current issues: spruce beetle epidemic; fir broom rust; in addition to aspen decline;
- Substantial area in private inholdings become problematic for prescribed burning.

### Management Emphasis/Desired Conditions

- current forest plan:
  - o semi-primitive non-motorized recreation
  - o range mgt; livestock grazing
  - 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

- Approved
  - o on-going range permitting (grazing, cattle)
  - o Rito Blanco Forest Health & Fuels Reduction
    - included: 366 acres of restoration in PP & w-d MC; 468 ac of coppice cuts in aspen, MC, and aspen-with-conifer; 3238 ac of mastication in aspen, oak, PP/oak, and w-d MC; and 2700 ac Rx fire;
    - RB Conifer TS offered in '09; no bids received;
    - RB Aspen TS to be offered in 2013;
  - o Fawn Gulch RX [*actually, very close to approval*]
- In planning
  - o Echo Canyon RX
  - o Lefthand Canyon RX

### Resource Topics

- CWPP – area lies within WUI for Archuleta County CWPP;
- Vegetation types –
  - o ponderosa pine, grading to mixed conifer (both phases) & aspen, then into spruce-fir;
  - o aspen stands in a state of decline, with encroaching conifer
  - o significant white fir expansion – horizontally (area) and vertically (height, in stands) – in w-d MC; and significant mortality in larger size classes in 2004-2006;
  - o past harvesting in mixed conifer was inconsistent; heavy harvest in some areas, light harvest elsewhere;
- Recreation –
  - o Moderate to heavy vehicle use of Nipple Mountain and Blanco Basin roads

- Heavy late season big-game hunting pressure throughout geographic area
- Popular 4-wheel drive/ATV routes along Willow Draw, Left-Hand Canyon, and Blue Creek roads
- Nipple Mtn road one of very few roads on District accessing high elevations
- Projections/Potential Changes:
  - Possible closure of Willow Draw road to full-sized vehicles (open to ATVs/Motor cycles only)
  - Interest by private parties in providing heli-skiing services in Nipple Mtn environs
  - Beetle-kill may drastically affect FS ability to clear/maintain Wilderness trails, which will have implications on use, though exactly how is unclear (could focus use on certain passable trails, or could result in decreased visitation overall, or combination of both, e.g.).
- Wildlife-
  - substantial elk winter range, particularly Willow Draw, Lefthand Canyon, Bear Basin (south of Blue Creek);
  - Lefthand Canyon and Porcupine active goshawk territories; Rito Blanco and Mill Creek fisheries;
  - Major big-game migration corridor out of San Juan Wilderness, through Forest Service land onto private land.
- Grazing –
  - active allotments throughout; Portions of Log Park (vacant), Dry Gulch, Little Blanco, Procupine, Blanco Basin, Blue Mountain and Blanco allotments, mostly satisfactory conditions.
  - Increased mortality and treatment of timber resources will likely lead to increased forage production as transitory range.
- Invasive species --
  - Invasive weeds issues throughout all areas.
- Fuels –
  - change from predominantly ponderosa pine to mixed conifer due to fire exclusion, area of concern is the Lost Valley of the San Juan due to high risk/high intensity fire regime.
  - insects have added to the fuel loading changing the fuel model leading to a higher resistance to control.
- Watershed –
  - municipal water system for the San Juan River Resort; lots of irrigation diversion
  - Willow draw is an area of highly erosive soils
  - Rito Blanco is an area of naturally unstable stream channels
- Economic activity – rec use leads to cabin or site rentals on adjacent private; outfitter guides; carryover to Pagosa Spgs/Archuleta County community from rec demand/use.

### Opportunities

- prescribed burning smoke would, during day operations, travel away from developed areas (towards S. San Juan's);
- broaden Rx burning potential into wilderness;
- reset succession back to aspen (by cutting or removing conifers); [area reflects vigorous aspen response from disturbance]
- inventory of road network has been done for much of the area, recently, to find road segments needing maintenance and those suitable for decommissioning;
- inventory and treat noxious weeds;
- biomass utilization of white fir in warm-dry mixed conifer stands, and of declining aspen;
- grant available grazing on Log Park (NEPA complete);
- reconstruct range fences;