

Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group
Meeting 12, October 25, 2011
Pagosa Community Center
Meeting Notes

The twelfth meeting of the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group was a community workshop to:

- educate community stakeholders about issues related to mixed-conifer forests, including presenting ideas for future management; and
- gain valuable input by hearing ideas, issues, concerns, and opportunities as the Working Group concludes its first phase and writes a community report.

Attendees: Bob Frye, J. R. Ford, John Nelson, Marcie Bidwell, Jimbo Buickerood, Ron Chancey, MaryJo Coulehan, Doug Call, Pete Kasper, Ben Franklin, Ron Halverson, Jim Friedley, Kent Grant, John Janowski, Emily Deitz, John Taylor, Justin Kincaid, J. D. Kurtz, Warren Rider, Marilyn Bunch, Anthony Garcia, Ros Wu, Thurman Wilson, Marsha Porter-Norton, Kevin Khung, and Steve Hartvigsen.

Marsha led introductions and did a brief overview. She explained that the Working Group had been meeting for a little over a year and was trying to reach more community members. She asked people to fill out a feedback form that can be found on the web at:
<http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/mixedconifer/default.htm>.

J. R. and Jimbo welcomed the attendees and gave some background on the Working Group. It started with the mixed-conifer conference about two years ago. (A publication of that conference was available on table in back; the doc can also be found on the mixed conifer website, above.) The conference had a good mix of participants; some new to the topic and others interested in going into more detail. People wanted to look at how we treat mixed conifer - whether we need different prescriptions; whether we need to do anything. The mixed conifer transitions into other vegetation types, ponderosa pine below and spruce-fir above. It is hard to talk about one without talking about the other cover types. Much of the work by the group was made possible by a National Forest Foundation grant that pays for the group facilitation costs.

The Mixed Conifer Working Group was designed to work in a collaborative manner. It is important that more of these collaborative efforts are pursued. Some things about mixed-conifer forests are fairly specific; some are grey areas. We want to get to a point where management actions are occurring on the Forest and being monitored. Many things on the National Forests seem to take a long time or stall out. Appeals and litigation are one of the things that sometimes cause this. The Working Group wants to work together enough to minimize the likelihood of that.

Steve oriented people to a number of maps hanging on the walls and two reports that are available: the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute's report on mixed conifer, and the Southwest Highlands Ecoregional Assessment. Steve then presented a Powerpoint slide show that he, Sam, Marcie, Marsha, and Mark Roper had developed. The slide show can be found on the mixed conifer website:
<http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/mixedconifer/default.htm>.

Then Steve answered some questions. Q: *On the Pagosa Ranger District, over the last 10 years, what percent of the forest have you done treatments on?* A: One to three percent.

Q: *Doesn't the Pagosa Ranger District already have some plans and projects in place?* A: Yes. There is a five-year timber action plan, a ten-year biomass plan and other things. Some projects have been occurring and more are planned. The Working Group is looking for input on future plans and projects.

Q: *Where have municipal watersheds fallen into priorities for treatment?* A: There have been some attempts to do treatments in municipal watersheds but one key project was appealed, litigated, and resulted in an adverse decision; hence, the Dutton Timber Sale (a restoration effort in mixed conifer, adjacent to Fourmile Creek and a key diversion point for PAWSD raw water) was dropped by the district.

Q: *Doesn't it look like a death spiral with more dollars going into suppressing big fires and less funding available for preventive treatments?* A: Yes. More than 50 percent of the Forest Service budget is now in fire suppression. That is one reason the Forest Service supports processes like this one – it can't afford appeals and litigation.

Q: *J. R. was asked how much he could treat in a year.* A: Two thousand to 2,200 acres.

There were also several comments. The Conservation District is trying to work with the Forest Service on conservation and fire protection. There are "good fires" and "bad fires" (depending on conditions and severity). We need to have more fires in moderate climate years.

After a break, Marsha asked the group to discuss several questions (there was a handout with five questions).

Do people think there is a problem? Is it urgent?

Everyone indicated yes. Individual comments:

But not sure that most of the public would be convinced. People have ADD – only deal with sound bytes. But it can be explained; it can be marketed.

Smokey Bear message got through, but the government doesn't normally do a good job on messages.

Is providing messages really the government's role? So many people are in the woods around here. Challenge them to look around. Their recreation experience may be adversely affected.

There is much in the way of population turnover locally. New people haven't considered problems. We haven't had the effect of major wildfire in this community.

A major communications push is needed. MADD and littering campaigns are good examples.

Tree farms can bring classrooms into forest (private land). Work on the next generation. Get kids out as part of the classroom. Funding and flexibility (conflicting schedules) are hurdles. J. D. said that when they did their last field trips, 105 students participated – the logistics are challenging. There is also a tendency to focus on things that fit standardized test questions.

USFS needs to focus on healthy forests. Groups like this need to help get word out.

Working on the CWPP for Echo Basin was tough because only 1/3 of the residents were permanent; most are seasonal. There is a need for brief printed materials or videos.

Need to use stark, hard, contrasting messaging.

You get a lot of concerned calls on prescribed burns. Someone was upset recently that a burn was happening during the fall color season. People also complain about them happening during hunting season. The town also gets calls when they try to do things like burning willows. There is never a right time to burn because it is always someone's season.

Think about how the Missionary Ridge fire affected an entire year's economy.

Jim Morrison (USFS, Region 1) commented while visiting during the Missionary Ridge Fire that their experience with the large fires on the Bitterroot in 2000 was that you only have about 18 months to capitalize (as a learning moment) on big events. Is the current spruce beetle event a learning moment? People don't seem afraid of fire but they seem afraid of bugs.

People don't like the sound of equipment working on thinning projects. They don't want to put up with even a short-term inconvenience in trade for a long-term benefit.

We should have a short video or multi-media presentation to use for education. We could rent a theatre in town and show the video and have a talk. Tie the event to something fun to attract people.

Marsha brought the discussion back to the questionnaire: 1) *What do you believe the driving force for management should be on the PRD/SJNF? Should it be current conditions in the forest; leaving areas in their natural state; healthy watersheds; producing products such as forage for stock or fuelwood for locals and sawtimber for mills; or recreation?*

Is it sustainability, meaning self-perpetuating for generations to come? A healthy, sustainable forest supports water, recreation, and practically everything else. It is important to promote the health of the forest, not just use.

2) *The USFS is bound to consider three things when assessing projects including the environment, the community, and the economy. What are your thoughts on this and do you see opportunities for linking or melding these areas on the ground?*

It doesn't seem like it is USFS' mandate to enhance the economy or community, but healthy forests contribute to economy and community.

Pagosa used to have the largest sawmill in the State (cutting mostly spruce, some pine) and also some smaller sawmills. Having smaller mills would be good.

The forest will be hard to use - hard to move around in with all the trees down.

Need to consider benefits (reduced cost of fire fighting, water table, watershed health). The Denver Water Board reported a 300% increase in water treatment costs after fires.

The spruce beetle kill and the mixed conifer are different situations. Cleaning out the dead trees and making forests healthier are two different things. There is still a chance here (compared to northern Colorado) to thin and prevent losing all the trees.

Smoke will be a hard issue to overcome – not just local politics but structure of funding.

Artisan mills, small sawmills, would be good. We see some examples (Allen) working. Why not more?

What is small scale? Compare to the local food movement.

What are the barriers to having mills? Rotten lumber – poor quality wood mostly, so you can only make simple products like cants. There are no kilns so a large investment would be needed to add quality.

There are some local small-scale mills near Dolores – Stoner Top, Wall Wood, and the larger excelsior plant.

We were basically out of time at this point, skipped questions 3 and 4 and got a quick response to 5) *Should we try to return to forest conditions of the past? For instance, given 140 years of fire exclusion and the resulting changes in forest density, structure, and composition, should we thin our lower elevation ponderosa pine forests back to conditions prior to settlement?*

We probably can't get back to what it looked like 140 years ago.

Will forests look the same with climate change? Would the 140 years ago version be what works best under a changed climate? Ponderosa pine is the most drought-resistant tree in the area; white fir the least. The Forest Service has been trying to design treatments to reflect anticipated climate change.

The Colorado State income tax credit for wildfire mitigation risk reduction should be used as a marketing tool.

The next two Working Group meetings will be on November 18 and December 16, both from 9:00 to 12:00.