

**Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group  
Meeting 15, February 17, 2012  
Pagosa Community Center  
Meeting Notes**

The fifteenth meeting of the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group focused on the summary report that is in preparation plus a discussion on how to start the monitoring phase of the project.

Attendees: Bev Warburton, J. R. Ford, John Taylor, Bill Trimarco, Dan Wand, Sam Burns, Thurman Wilson, Kevin Khung, and Steve Hartvigsen.

Thurman passed out the current draft of the summary report. Marsha and Sam developed the outline a while back and Sam and Thurman have been adding meat to it. The current version is fairly complete in terms of documenting the history of the Working Group and its products such as mission and vision statements, desired conditions, and polygon summaries. It needs more work on recommendations. Thurman and Sam particularly wanted some discussion today on the results of the survey and on the polygons.

Thurman will add a few things to the draft report based on today's discussion and give it to Sam in a few days. Sam will do the next iteration. We will see if Marsha has time to review next. Then Steve will do a technical review in March.

Most of the meeting was spend discussing the results of the survey that was initiated on October 28, 2011. Nineteen replies were received. It was a useful exercise that engaged some interested people that haven't been able to attend meetings regularly. But care is needed when using the results. It was designed quickly. In hindsight, we would reword some questions differently. The responses may not represent the general public well. It represents an "in group" (more knowledgeable), not an "out group" response. Some of the discussion follows.

**Question 1.** Focusing forest restoration treatments in areas with the highest risk of wildfires that might damage watersheds or private property was the highest priority location identified. Working in the wildland-urban interface, especially where work was being done on adjacent properties was identified as a high priority. Working in areas that are the most changed from historical ecological conditions and in areas that are already roaded were strongly supported. Working in areas that are more "wild" such as the backcountry or Wilderness had less support.

"Private property" is an easier concept to get your arms around than "watersheds." Some watersheds are a higher concern because they are more sensitive, especially in terms of erosive soils. Other watersheds are more of a concern because they are the source of municipal water supplies. Many people may think of watersheds mostly in terms of where water intakes and water storage occur, not further out. The report needs to tell both stories.

The least support was for working in areas that are more "wild" (backcountry) but at 4.7 on a one to ten scale, it didn't really indicate disapproval. The question may have been too open to interpretation but people probably do place a priority on working close to homes and development. People have diverse opinions on what makes up the backcountry. We also may not have conveyed the concept that the treatment options become more limited in roadless areas and Wilderness. What constitutes "work" would be different. We need to add a matrix showing

which treatment options are available in different circumstances to the report along with more discussion.

That ranking may also possibly reflect that there is more agreement on the need for treatment and how to do it in the lower-elevation ponderosa pine and warm-dry mixed-conifer forests which typically are found closer to development than with the forest types more common to the backcountry.

In order to have more medium-sized fires (which received strong support in question 2) and to let fires run from lower elevations where they most commonly start to higher elevations in the backcountry and Wilderness, we need to work in ponderosa pine, warm-dry mixed conifer, cool-moist mixed conifer, and spruce. Fire fighters respond to fire starts differently depending on the circumstances. Having more areas in the mid-level elevations in the backcountry treated would increase fire-fighting options. The report needs more on the philosophy of how to manage fire.

Fire is the main treatment tool available in backcountry. Public concerns over smoke make it hard to use fire.

Fires that start low scare people – it is easier to see them getting to private property. But Missionary Ridge causes fire fighters to worry about fires that start high also. That fire made a number of runs where it came down from higher elevations to lower ones. If it had gotten out of East Creek and crossed another ridge it could have gone much further east into private land.

Kevin mentioned Trail Ridge several times as an example. It is currently classified as roadless (an error in the data layer that should be corrected with the authorization of the revised plan). A fire starting there could easily spread towards development due to vegetation conditions and prevailing winds. Archuleta County included it in the WUI. Kevin thinks it is a high priority place to work.

Kevin also mentioned the Turkey/Devil Creek area seeming to jump out as a priority for fuels reduction work. There are lots of fire starts in the ponderosa pine there and they typically move towards development. The same for the area south of there (around Chimney Rock) but we didn't talk about that country in the polygon analysis because it isn't considered mixed conifer.

Rito Blanco is another area of concern due to increasing development.

It was noted that all the polygons have characteristics that fit the high priority responses in question 1. Almost all of Archuleta County and much of Hinsdale County is WUI as defined by their CWPPs. All polygons have areas that are very changed from their historical conditions. Private property and watersheds of concern are spread across the polygons. Many polygons (Rito Blanco, Turkey/Devil, and Williams particularly) have work being done on adjacent properties. The factors discussed in the survey may be more helpful for setting priorities at a smaller geographical scale than the polygons than in picking a priority between polygons.

Including wildlife habitat improvement provides an opportunity for cross funding.

Kevin, in response to the survey comment "wherever deemed necessary by the Forest Service," stated that he would like to see the conversation change from "my" (Kevin's or the Forest Service's) to "our" (everyone's) needs.

The report should put more emphasis on the goals of sustainable forests and resilient forests. If you work towards those goals, fire in the outback is a part of the solution.

We should use the term “join efforts” – we need to work across boundaries.

Costs vary with the types of tools used and the locations.

There are also rules about where different kinds of money can be spent.

**Question 2.** Protecting urban water supplies and distribution systems was the most strongly supported parameter to consider when selecting forest restoration projects. Restoring ecosystems to more natural conditions, reducing the potential for insect and disease epidemics, reducing wildfire risk from dead or dying trees, and increasing opportunities for medium-sized wildfire to occur safely followed in priority. Being cost effective, protecting fire-fighter and community safety, and increasing local employment also ranked high, followed by improving wildlife habitat and protecting other ecological values. Sustaining recreation opportunities and working in key view corridors were ranked the lowest of the listed parameters with scores of 4.2 and 4.6.

Watershed protection seems to be the highest priority and if you can accomplish some other things at the same time, so much the better.

What do the terms “protect” and “improve” mean? People probably interpret them a number of different ways.

People have a concept of what is ideal. Capturing that in pictures and asking what it takes to maintain it would be helpful.

The 4.1 rating for protect other human/community values is probably a reflection of the composition of the people responding to the survey. It would probably rank higher from the general public.

The comment about timing for smoke in case of prescribed burns is a tough one. The Forest Service is required to consider the effects of smoke and does consider people upset about smoke but there are trade-offs. Burning is only possible and effective at certain times and those times are often when people are here, especially hunting season. Some conflict is inevitable.

People worry and people complain. Education on smoke is important. Smoke from wildfires can be much worse and longer lasting than from prescribed burns.

We might want to use the survey again sometime.

We might be able to improve the polygon discussion in the report by first listing the statements that apply everywhere, then focusing more on the differences between polygons.

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**Monitoring.** We could use the upcoming field season to look at monitoring.

Kevin said a few more people from his staff should engage as we work on monitoring, particularly Sara Brinton, Scott Wagner, and Anthony Garcia.

Bob Frye indicated before the meeting that he was willing to participate in developing a monitoring approach when he returned from Arizona. Marcie also indicated before the meeting that it was logical for MSI to be involved. We should ask Jimbo to be part of the monitoring group. Also J. D. Kurtz in case some of the high school students can participate. Sam, John, and Thurman offered to help. Jessica had offered CFRI's help on ecological monitoring – we should follow up with Tony. Kurt Mackes from CSU might be interested in helping from a forest industries standpoint. Thurman will start getting the monitoring effort organized.

There is an interplay between monitoring and education – the two groups will want to get together at times.



### **Updates and Schedules**

Steve said that the status of the Long-Term Stewardship Contract remains the same as it was at our last meeting. Negotiations continue with those bidders who were evaluated and deemed to be in the competitive range.

The US Forest Service has its 2012 budget. It is working its way down to the Forest from the Washington Office and Regional Office. They expect to see it locally in about two weeks.

The education group is going to meet on February 21 from 9:00 to 11:30 in the Pagosa Library meeting room.

The next full group meeting will be April 20 with updates on education and monitoring. The full group may meet less often than monthly for at least a while as the education/outreach and monitoring groups focus on their topics.

As always, more info can be found on the Mixed Conifer Working Group website:  
<http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/mixedconifer/>.