

1Mixed Conifer Working Group  
Minutes of Meeting, February 18, 2011

Attendees: Attendees: John Taylor, Sam Burns, Beverly Wharburton, Jimbo Buickerood, Ryan Bidwell, Kevin Khung, Steve Hartvigsen, Bob Frye, J. R. Ford, Christina Schmidt, Dan Wand, Marsha Porter-Norton, Mike Reid, Adrian Archuleta, Anthony Garcia, Scott Kohler, and Brandy Richardson.

After introductions, Marsha Porter-Norton presented an overview of the purpose and activities of the M-C Working Group: To develop a restoration framework of the M-C landscape which is present predominately on the Pagosa District of the San Juan National Forest. This work will assist in setting some parameters of future restoration treatments, both through fire and mechanical processes. In the future some of the work of the group will involve monitoring to assist with adaptive management.

Mention was made of a recent newspaper report of a presentation about the annual health status of Colorado forests, in which bug infestation north of Pagosa Springs was noted. This was a presentation to the Colorado Legislature, provide by Jeff Janke, state forester, Rick Cables, USFS Regional Forester, Nancy Fischering, president of the Colorado Timber Industry Association, and Page Lewis, The Nature Conservancy. This annual report is available.

The Mixed Conifer WG website is <http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/mixedconifer/>

The education topic for this meeting was wildlife, habitat, and relationships the M-C landscape. A detailed presentation was given by Anthony Garcia, Wildlife Biologist, Pagosa District, San Juan Public Lands Center, SJPLC. (See attached handouts) Topics covered in the presentation included:

- An Overview
- Existing Mixed Conifer Habitat
- M-C Habitat Trends
- Factors Influencing wildlife habitat suitability
- Species utilizing M-C habitat
- Wildlife inventory and monitoring in M-C
- Existing warm-dry M-C habitat conditions and influences to species
- Existing cool-moist M-C habitat conditions and influences to species
- Management recommendations /considerations

Anthony mentioned that while the total area encompassed in both warm-dry and cool moist was "stable", that insects were abundant and increasing. There is also a noticeable decrease in Aspen stands.

The wildlife biology staff looks at management indicator species, sensitive species, threatened and endangered species, and migratory species.

Due to insect disturbances in higher elevation cool-moist (particularly, a combination of overstory mortality due to bark beetles concurring with understory dieback and mortality due to western spruce budworm defoliation), some species habitats are changing. Some wondered if these sites were drying out due to loss of forest cover; for instance, could they be shifting to warm-dry mixed conifer? Steve felt that sites were becoming shrub-dominant – that is, the already abundant shrub cover was readily responding to the loss of competing vegetation (i.e., trees). In the cool moist areas of Pagosa Creek

drainage, budworm-associated defoliation has decreased habitat quality for Red Squirrel, American Marten, and Canadian Lynx. Changes such as this are important in part because 70.43% of the M-C Zone is classified as cool-moist.

146 of the over 300 species of wildlife within the Pagosa District are adapted to an urban environment, and among these none are threatened.

In some of parts of the M-C Zone, tree density is increasing, with a related decrease in openings that some species prefer.

The increase in hiding-cover habitat is coming at the expense of a concurrent decrease in foraging habitat.

It is recommended that future forest management should emphasize forest restoration through both mechanical and prescribed fire treatments to maintain an appropriate balance of canopy cover and stand density in both warm-dry and cool-moist stands. Effective road closures will reduce disturbance levels after project implementation. Noxious weed treatments should be employed pre and post project implementation. Timing restrictions will be necessary to reduce adverse impacts on winter range concentrations of big-game, calving/fawning areas, migration corridors, and breeding seasons for sensitive and federally listed species.

It will also be important to retain and recruit key habitat attributes such as snags and downed logs, to take into account the Southern Rockies Lynx Plan Amendment, to continue to coordinate with CDOW and other interested stakeholders, and to implement monitoring programs to address wildlife management questions. There were additional comments about seeing many Rosy Finches, and not seeing many Ravens. Lately, there are many more Magpies and Banded Tail Pigeons are coming in.

During questions and answers, several important points were made:

- We have lots of trees which is good for habitat that need dense closed areas;
- but we are lacking openings which negatively affects edge-dependent species; some of the aspen groves are on the tail end of their life cycle;
- there is some concern about road disturbances created by ATV's going behind gates;
- appropriate entry times for mechanical treatment need to be established; [sbh1]
- burn times also needed to take into account hunting seasons in the fall and ground nesters in the spring;
- treatment locations need to take into account migration corridors;
- mechanical treatment areas need to address certain species such as Goshawks;
- and scale of treatment areas is always important.

Presentation by Steve Hartvigsen Brandy Richardson on Management Polygons:  
The Upper San Juan (north and east of the Town of Pagosa Springs) (See handout)

This landscape has high scenic quality and is fairly heavily used for recreation. Because much of the area is road-less [sbh2], Rx burning and management of natural ignitions for resource benefit become about the only tools for management [sbh3]. This is the the critical water source for municipal water for the town of Pagosa Springs; and DOW is working on improving Trout habitat. The Little Jackson Timber sale was made-awarded to Intermountain Resources, LLC, with a termination date of March 31, 2012; that date

has been extended to 8/31/13. The NEPA ~~work-decision~~ on the West Fork Restoration is scheduled for May 1, 2011. This project encompasses 246 acres.

Restoration management opportunities will focus on “very targeted projects.” Broadening Rx burning potential, reset succession back to Aspen, inventory and treat noxious weeds, and managing natural fires for resource benefits are the most viable approaches. Corridor connectivity from the South San Juan requires careful consideration, as do Lynx and Wolverine habitat. Large hazard trees have been removed near the Rainbow Hot Springs. (Public education is needed continuously about hazard trees.)

Plumtaw/Fourmile (bounded on the north and west by the East Fork of the Piedra River and on the east by the Weminuche Wilderness, and on the south by Martinez Creek and private lands.) (See handouts) While there is moderate road access, this is a heavily used recreation area with high scenic qualities. Numerous private inholdings present management problems for prescribed fire. Several projects have been previously planned in this area (O’Neal Timber Sale – 1999, Fourmile and Upper Piedra Fuels Treatment 2008, Dutton Creek Timber Sale -1994, Plumtaw Timber Sale 1997). The O’Neal Hill and Plumtaw Timber Sales were completed in the fall of 2005 and spring of 2002, respectively. The Dutton Timber Sale was withdrawn due to a lawsuit. The Upper Piedra Fuels Treatment has been partially cut; the Fourmile Fuels Treatment is yet to be implemented. [sbh4]

The draft EA on treatment in Pagosa Creek is scheduled for public comment in March 2011. The proposed action would be the second entry into this area since the first entry in the 1960’s.

Regarding future opportunities for management, smoke constraints are not as prohibitive since the polygon is some distance from Pagosa Springs. Also there is an opportunity to broaden the Rx burning potential into wilderness. There is an opportunity for biomass utilization of white fir in warm-dry mixed conifer, though thinning around Lost Valley, Pagosa Creek, and Dutton Creek.

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Earlier there were short discussions:

- How the restoration treatment by J.R. Ford’s operation was increasing in efficiency from an acre a day to 4.5 acres per day;
- about perspectives on fire behavior as Bob Frye laid out a series of photographs of a previous prescribed fire;
- and wildfire impacts on watersheds.

Mention was also made that with a fire regime of 10-250 years for ponderosa pine and warm-dry mixed conifer, [sbh5] existing wildlife species have developed in a landscape that would normally have burned at the rate of 10,000 acres per year. Across all types of treatment, the Pagosa District is currently addressing 2000 acres/yr, which demonstrates another perspective on the management challenges.

Mention was made of efforts to develop a biochar demonstration in conjunction with the Governor’s Office and in relationship to the Missionary Ridge Wildfire Area.

The next meeting of the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group is scheduled for March 31, 2011.