

Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group
Meeting 8, March 31, 2011
Pagosa Community Center
Meeting Notes

This eighth meeting of the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group focused on the Rio Blanco Basin polygon. The group also discussed public outreach.

Attendees: Doug Purcell, Kent Grant, Marcie Bidwell, Jimbo Buickerood, Beverly Warburton, Christina Schmidt, Bob Frye, Sam Burns, Thurman Wilson, Marsha Porter-Norton, Brandy Richardson, Kevin Khung, and Steve Hartvigsen.

We agreed to take the time at each meeting to ask if anyone had corrections to the meeting notes. This may become more important as the group moves towards recommendations. Steve had some corrections and some from Scott to pass along. Those have been incorporated into the February meeting notes.

Brandi and Steve did a presentation on Polygon #4, Little Blanco. The map and handout can be found on the Mixed Conifer Working Group website:
<http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/mixedconifer/>. The following notes add some of the discussion from the March 31 meeting.

This area offers road access to very scenic high country, particularly the Nipple Mtn. Road going towards Blackhead Peak.

Most of the mixed conifer in this geographic area is found in roadless areas. The Rio Blanco Timber Sale was offered about a year ago but there were no bids. It seemed like it should have been an attractive sale, with a good mix of species and some large trees. The lack of bids may have been due to the problems in the general economy. There is high mortality from fir engraver beetle in the geographic area and mortality is even higher moving east towards Dutton.

The area is prime goshawk territory, about 50/50 aspen/mixed conifer with dense cover for nesting and small openings.

Doug noted that the elk population is lower than CDOW would like. There have been three bad calving seasons in a row, probably weather related. He explained that if a cow loses more than three percent of her body fat, she wouldn't normally drop a calf. Deep snow could have stressed the animals, which may not have moved down to lower elevations due to the snows starting late last winter. You would normally expect to see about 40 calves per 100 cows to maintain a population; they have been seeing about 30. It could also be related to other things such as the timing of hunting pressure and stress from increased development. CDOW is trying to figure it out.

Some of the area is in a Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU). Some kinds of vegetation treatment would be OK; some wouldn't. The critical resource to be protected for snowshoe hare (lynx primary prey) is dense horizontal cover of small trees whose crowns are at a height intersecting the snowpack surface during the bulk of the winter. The Forest Service would need to be careful about reducing snowshoe hare cover in cool-moist mixed-conifer stands. Brandy will add lynx information on the next maps.

Winds in this area typically blow towards the South San Juan Wilderness and away from private land development. This reduces fire risk – and smoke production during daytime burning periods but there are exceptions.

The District is trying hard to reduce noxious weeds. Kevin expects everyone to inventory weeds as part of their normal business. The Forest Service treats weeds after projects that disturb the ground. They also do pre-treatment before timber and fuels projects. (As an example, the Rio Blanco Timber Sale area was pretreated prior to the offering of this sale.) There are normally two or three weed treatments over the course of a timber sale.

The Working Group then identified some of their concerns, which follow.

One issue that distinguishes this geographic area from most others is the large blocks of private land within the National Forest boundaries. As more development occurs, it will be harder to implement vegetation treatments. It would be easier to do fire mitigation at the front end of subdivision development than after people are living there. Some other counties, such as Montezuma, are requiring fire mitigation as part of the subdivision approval process.

More firewise engagement is needed – work with CSFS and Firewise Communities on the best management practices for dealing with private lands on fire mitigation. Outreach and education goals are needed. Potential partners should be identified.

The potential effects of development on wildlife, particularly wintering and transition, are also a concern.

Having some vacant range allotments so that there is flexibility to move livestock around to accommodate projects is helpful. Bob thought that there were both vacant range and sheep allotments. There are potential conflicts with bighorn sheep and domestic sheep if some of the sheep allotments are stocked.

It was noted that there is more opportunity for vegetation treatment in the Rio Blanco than in the landscape considered during the February meeting – Upper San Juan.

Funding was identified as being really limiting on the amount of treatment that can be accomplished. Even if a long-term stewardship contract was in place, it would probably only mean 1,500 to 2,000 acres per year of treatment for the Pagosa Ranger District.

There was a request to show vegetation in Wilderness on the maps in order to see where it would be easier to let fire burn up into the Wilderness. We need to look at where there are opportunities for fire for resource management.

We need to be thinking about state and private lands for opportunities; don't stop at administrative boundaries.

We should look harder for opportunities in less accessible areas, not just around roads. Prioritization needs to include a mix of less accessible areas as well as roaded areas.

We should look for opportunities to learn, especially in cool-moist.

Public Outreach - There was a discussion about having two meetings. One would be fairly short – more of an introduction to the process and pointing out differences in opportunities between areas. A later meeting could focus on recommendations when the group has some.

Having some focus group meetings would be another possibility. Topics could include recreation and economic development.

It would be good to continue showing up at other groups' meetings. The west side Turkey Springs trails meetings and Squaretop development meetings are two possibilities. Another would be CDC, the Community Development Corporation.

There isn't much word on the street about the mixed-conifer work. Most people probably won't care. People living in the WUI may be most affected. We should try working with realtors to share information.

It would be good to get an article in the Pagosa Sun to increase general exposure.

Bev will talk to Dottie Grant (Audubon and Backcountry Horsemen) about joining the group. Someone should also contact the Outdoor Club.

It would be good to identify a small group of community leaders and brief them and have discussions.

We will continue working with the Governor's Forest Health Advisory Committee and apply for a grant if money becomes available. Funding for the USFS Collaborative Forest

Landscape Restoration Program is looking shaky due to the overall federal budget problems.