

Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group
Meeting 9, April 15, 2011
Pagosa Community Center
Meeting Notes

This ninth meeting of the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group focused on water issues and two polygons - the Blanco Basin and Devil/Turkey.

Attendees: Mike Reid, Doug Purcell, Dan Wand, Marcie Bidwell, Jimbo Buickerood, Beverly Warburton, J. R. Ford, Thurman Wilson, Marsha Porter-Norton, Becca Smith, Kevin Khung, and Steve Hartvigsen.

The February meeting notes were approved. The March meeting notes will be discussed along with the April ones at the May meeting.

Becca Smith gave a presentation on water issues in forested watersheds on the Pagosa Ranger District. She explained that it is difficult to tie watershed health just to mixed-conifer forests because they encompass a variety of vegetation types. Becca's presentation is well documented in her meeting handout, which 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 April 15 meeting.

The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) did a lot of gully plugs and other watershed stabilization work in the area in the 1930s. The land has recovered a lot from earlier disturbances.

Wildfire can have a big effect on watersheds. Fire can result in loss of vegetation, ground cover, and small roots near the surface. Then water doesn't soak in as well and runs over the surface. Sediment can carry into and down streams, sometimes a long distance. After the Jasper fire in the Black Hills, sediment ran 70 miles to settle in a reservoir. However low severity fires usually have little to no negative effects on watersheds.

Julie Korb's soil compaction study was discussed. It might make sense to add some out-year data – 3 or 5 years after harvest. Steve mentioned that there is now about 10 years of data in a long-term soil productivity study for the Forest Service that can be found on the internet (<http://www.ncrs.fs.fed.us/ltsp/>).

Becca works with project interdisciplinary teams to tailor watershed management practices to projects. She also works with timber sale administrators and loggers during implementation. See the handout for some of the best management practices.

Thinning vegetation to reduce the risk of severe fires is generally good but projects should be designed and implemented using best management practices.

There was a brief discussion of potential climate change effects on the hydrograph. Snow seems to be melting about three weeks earlier. Dust-on-snow events are probably affecting this, as well as warmer temperatures. Soil drying increases fire risk. It is harder to say what is happening in terms of amounts of precipitation but it is probably becoming dryer.

Dan mentioned that tree density can have an effect on how much snow reaches the ground which can also influence the hydrograph. Jimbo wondered if there are ways to affect or counter earlier run-off such as having more woody debris. Becca stated that "roughness" – things like woody debris or more meanders – could potentially have an effect but not much is known on that.

Pagosa Area Water and Sanitation (PAWS) has a source water protection plan. No one at the meeting was aware of city or county officials requesting fuels reduction projects on the Pagosa Ranger District for the purpose of protecting watersheds from high-severity wildfire. That has happened in some other locations.

Thurman discussed some work he has been doing on the Watershed Condition Framework, a new effort by the US Forest Service to have a nationally consistent system to classify watershed conditions, prioritize watersheds for restoration and improvement work, and then plan, fund, and monitor the work. The classification was completed in March and is undergoing a consistency review in April. The Washington Office expects to release the classification information on the Forest Service's Internet site in May. A link to the site will be provided to the Working Group then.

Steve then did a presentation on the Devil/Turkey and Blanco Basin polygons. The maps and handouts 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 April 15 meeting.

Devil/Turkey is one of the areas on the San Juan National Forest that have lodgepole pine. The San Juan is south of the natural range of lodgepole pine. The existing trees were planted here in some locations after efforts to restock burned and harvested areas with native trees failed. Planting a non-native species wouldn't be done now and ecologists think it would be good to eliminate the planted trees now rather than having them reproduce.

Mike Reid pointed out that the Devil/Turkey area includes important big game migration corridors. They see fewer animals in the area these days, probably because of pressure from recreational users.

Blanco Basin has higher energy potential than most areas on the Pagosa Ranger District. Exploration activity is occurring, not field development.

Doug noted that this area includes a lot of transition areas for wildlife.

Several streams and lakes – Opal, Buckles, and Harris - have fisheries problems due to the effects of water diversions and drawdown. Opal and Buckles might have some potential for improvement; probably not Harris.

Banded Peaks Ranch is a large area of private lands that has had more planning and actions for vegetation management than most.

Mike mentioned that public education could be an important product of the mixed conifer work.

The remaining two polygons, Price Lakes and Piedra will be discussed at the May meeting. Then we will begin examining how the polygons differ in terms of needs and opportunities for management. Steve passed out a handout titled “Mixed Conifer Working Group – Issue and Poly Prioritization Guide” to get people started thinking about that.

The next meeting will be May 20.