



Success Stories from the Northeast Region

Cohesive Strategy Success Story: Fuel Reduction and Fire Response on Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation Wisconsin

In 2003 the Great Lakes Agency (GLA) started wildland urban interface (WUI) fuel reduction projects on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation (LCO) near Hayward, WI. The first project that was done was fuel reduction, and fuel breaks around two communities, Drytown and Water Tower. These areas have a 100 acre young red pine plantation in the center that is about 20 years old with grassy openings. The area was experiencing an increase of juvenile fire starts, most of which had been suppressed at small acreages (>5). This area had the potential for intense fire behavior on the very high fire danger days.



Increase in defensible space, ladder fuel removal

The fire started at approximately 1300 on the west side of a red pine plantation. Eric Crowe chief of the LCO VFD was the first on scene, and the WIDNR was not far behind them. The WIDNR Hayward Ranger Kim Lemke was the Incident Commander. With the extreme fire conditions and the heavy fuels in the area being in the WUI; he ordered additional resources from local fire departments and law enforcement. Six fire departments the Sawyer County Sheriff and LCO Police had the evacuation of 55 homes underway within 13 minutes of the initial report. A SEAT (single engine air tanker) was ordered after initial size up to support the tractor plows and structure branch.

With consultation from the tribe and the foresters, it was decided not to remove any of the pines because of their value. The fuels treatments implemented were: increasing defensible space around homes, creating fuel breaks around the plantation, mowing the high ignition areas, and reducing the ladder fuels between the breaks and homes.

April 29th 2007 was a red flag day with humidity around 15%, temperature in the 80's and winds out of the west at 12-17mph, gusting to 25mph. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WIDNR) had pre-positioned staff and tractor plows from the southern part of the state because of the extreme fire danger. The GLA-Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) contracts to the state all wildland fire suppression at LCO, however the BIA staff was also on call.



LCO VFD preparing to fight fire when it drops to the ground



Sustained crown fire going through plantation; fuel treatment around the LCO Boys & Girls Club

The fire moved quickly to the east through one pine plantation and into a young aspen stand and then continued into the Drytown pine plantation. When the fire hit the Drytown plantation the winds picked up and it quickly became a sustained crown fire heading toward about 55 homes to the east. The suppression started at the heel of the fire and worked the flanks with two tractor plows on each flank; they were using an indirect attack method and burning out the line as they progressed. There was a ten foot wide break constructed to stop surface fires in 2003/04, that is still maintained every spring, that was between the plantation and the woods directly adjacent to the homes. The crown fire easily jumped the break and went to the woods adjacent to the homes. A 60' area around the homes had all the ladder fuels chipped in 2004. Because of this treatment the fire fell to the surface and the firefighters were able to safely suppress the fire before it reached the homes.

Eric Crowe the LCO VFD said "Without those treatments, the fire would surely have gotten into the big pines next to the houses and we would have had no chance to save the homes until after the fire went by." That fuels treatment along with the good coordination between fire departments and the WIDNR saved the structures.



Aerial view after the fire was contained





After the fire the BIA LCO field foresters worked on getting the dead and dying trees out. They learned that the local lumber mill would be interested in the trees as biomass for their furnaces. A contract was signed and they started whole tree cutting and hauling to the plant seven miles away.

With the trees now gone there is still going to be fire danger to the homes from the tall grasses that have replaced the trees in the past. We are looking into prescribed fire to treat the grasses and eliminate the fire hazard in the future.

Whole tree biomass removal; by local contractor for lumber mill's furnace

In conclusion, the BIA Great Lakes Agency WUI fuel treatments combined with the great coordination of suppression efforts between the WIDNR, Lac Courte Oreilles, Town of Hayward, City of Hayward, Bass Lake, Stone Lake, Round Lake, and Spider Lake fire departments, LCO Police Department, Sawyer County Sheriff's Department, and the LCO Utilities, who had to increase water to the community fire hydrants, saved 25 homes considered to be in imminent danger and more than 55 homes saved if the fire would have continued to spread.

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Photos provided by Dave Pergolski

