



Success Stories from the Western Region

Spring Mountains National Recreation Area Hazardous Fuels Reduction Projects

The Situation

Less than an hour's drive west of Las Vegas, Nevada (population 583,756), the Spring Mountains rise high above the desert that completely surrounds them, reaching nearly 12,000 feet at the summit of Mount Charleston. Sacred to the Southern Paiute Tribe, the mountain range is a unique, isolated habitat that supports dozens of



Upper end of Kyle canyon adjacent to the Mt. Charleston wilderness

sensitive plant and animal species, many of which can be found nowhere else. The 316,000-acre Spring Mountains National Recreation Area (SMNRA), part of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, offers diverse recreational opportunities and numerous historic and cultural sites treasured by local residents, and drawing millions of visitors each year. In and around SMNRA are small mountain communities – Mount Charleston, Kyle Canyon, Cold Creek, Deer Creek, Trout Canyon, Torino Ranch, and Mountain Springs – all identified in the Nevada Community Wildfire Risk/Hazard Assessment project for Clark County as being at “high” or “extreme” risk of wildfire. A 2007 Forest Service report noted that, “Established egress routes for residents of these communities and forest users are compromised due to nearby vegetative conditions that may result in fire behavior that does not allow for safe fire suppression or evacuation.”

Each year. In and around

Useful links and contacts

Clark County Risk/Hazard Assessment (Sample Section – Lee Canyon), including risk and hazard reduction recommendations

<http://www.rci-nv.com/reports/clark/>

Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (Public Law 105-263) as amended

<http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/>

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Spring Mountains National Recreation Area Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/htnf/about-forest/offices/>

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Mount Charleston Residents Prepare for Wildfire

<http://www.livingwithfire.info/blog>

Key Players

The Clark County Risk/Hazard Assessment was prepared by Resource Concepts Inc. for the Nevada Fire Safe Council (NFSC) and financed through National Fire Plan grants from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the Nevada Division of Forestry (NDF). Others engaged in planning and/or carrying out subsequent mitigation projects include the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, the Nevada Association of Counties; Clark County. The Clark County Fire Department, volunteer firefighters from the area, and businesses and residents of the potentially affected communities. Working together they developed and commenced implementation of the 10-year Spring Mountains Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy.



Fuel treatment at the south end of Spring Mountains near the community of Mountain Spring

Financial Resources

A unique funding resource plus highly effective federal, state, and local collaboration combine to protect and benefit residents, visitors, and the environment. In addition to the initial National Fire Plan grants, agency and private entities participating in carrying out the multi-jurisdictional strategy also were able to draw on a funding source unique to their area: the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act of 1998 (SNPLMA). It authorizes the BLM to sell public land in a defined area around Las Vegas, with a portion of the revenues flowing to Nevada's general education fund (5%) and the Southern Nevada Water Authority (10%) as well as a number of smaller mandatory allocations. The balance goes into a special fund available to the Secretary of the Interior to be used for a variety of purposes in the project area including, among others, the acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands; work on parks, trails, and natural areas; and hazardous fuels reduction and wildfire prevention (which may include project level planning, fuels reduction treatment activities, biomass utilization, and biofuels energy development and production activities).

Five federal land management agencies – the BLM, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and USDA/Forest Service work together to implement the Act and (with the exception of the BOR) comprise the membership of the SNPLMA Executive Committee, which makes final project funding recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior. A Partners' Working Group reviews preliminary project proposals and makes the initial recommendations to the Executive Committee. Chaired by the BLM, the partners' group includes representatives of the five land management agencies as well one representative of the state of Nevada, two representatives of the local and regional governments in the area covered by the Act, and a member of the National Association of Counties appointed to represent rural Nevada. Still other partners serve on various SNPLMA Category Subgroups. The public also has an opportunity to review and comment on the projects proposed for funding.

Spring Mountains NRA projects funded by the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act, for reducing fuels and preventing wildfire include:



- 2006 – \$10,077,287 to the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest for fuels reduction in the SMNRA. Completed in Spring 2012. Created a 300-foot shaded fuel break around all seven communities in or adjacent to SMNRA and reduced the fuel loading on approximately 2,120 acres of National Forest System lands.
- 2008 –\$231,990 to the Nevada Fire Safe Council to facilitate creation of defensible space on residential properties in the Cold Creek, Kyle Canyon, Mount Springs, Lee Canyon, and Torino Ranch communities. The grant also funded a three-quarter time position to promote community wildfire protection. Now complete, the project was expected to treat 2,668 acres, thinning and creating fuels breaks across nine communities.
- 2009 – \$589,340 to the Nevada Fire Safe Council to continue the defensible space creation work begun with the previous year’s grant. NFSC’s FY2011 accomplishment report noted that “nearly 200 lots were inspected and treated. [Ten] acres were completed on the Camp Stimpson property.” The project’s curbside chipping program had 270 participants, and “22 tons and 180 cubic yards of hazardous fuel were collected.”
- 2009/2010 – \$2,106,000 to the BLM for its three-phase Red Rock Fuel Break Treatments. All proposed treatment acres are within the occupied zone of the Desert Tortoise, a federally-listed Threatened Species. First year accomplishments included near-completion of a draft Environmental Assessment. A subsequent planning document “will analyze the effects of fuels reduction treatments within an approximately 879,175-acre analysis area, including application of an annual grass pre-emergent herbicide, hand cutting of hazardous trees, hand piling and burning, and broadcast burning over a 14,016 acre treatment area. This project will treat approximately 3,000 acres with herbicide, creating strategic fuel breaks in the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. Treatment of the remaining acres will occur in future phases.”
- 2010 – \$200,000 to the Natural Resource Conservation Service to “complete defensible space prescriptions and work on approximately 45 private properties; conduct educational programs and increase the membership in each Nevada Fire Safe Council Chapter of the Spring Mountain Range; improve communication and direct project planning with increased coordination between all partners; continue a curbside chipping program and pine needle pick up program in the spring and summer; implement a door-to-door educational campaign; and support the Southern Nevada Woody Biomass Collaboration by providing materials, as funding permits, to biomass projects.”
- 2010 – \$450,000 to the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest to conduct the planning and environmental analysis for the Spring Mountain NRA Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project which will create defensible space around communities in Lee and Kyle Canyons and allow for safe fire suppression or evacuation along Deer Creek Highway. Future project phases will implement the fuels reduction treatments on approximately 1,650 acres covering seven different fuel treatment units.

This year, the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest has been nominated to receive \$761,500 to plan a fuels reduction project of 5,000 acres in the Angel Peak area of SMNRA between Kyle and Lee Canyons.

Challenges to the above projects include:

- **Future SNPLMA revenue uncertainties** – The significant slowdown in recent years of BLM’s public land sales, coupled with the drop in the rate of interest earned on funds in the Special Account available to the Secretary of the Interior has limited the amount of funds available for projects.



Fuel treatment below Clark County Detention Center and Angel Peak

- **Increased need for matching or leveraging project funds** – Beginning with Round 13, SNPLMA’s Executive Committee added an application review criteria that provides extra points for projects that include the matching or leveraging of funds. Applicants also are now required to explain “the impact of the lost opportunity to take advantage of such matching or contributory funds.”
- **Workforce availability** – Finding contractors locally with the equipment and skilled workers necessary to carry out fuels reduction projects has been difficult, and as one BLM manager noted, “It’s hard to get [out-of-area] contractors to go to Southern Nevada.”
- **Costs** – Having to utilize non-local contractors frequently results in higher per acre treatment costs, or in some cases requires the use of agency personnel to perform needed work.
- **Suspension of activities by the Nevada Fire Safe Council** – An audit of the NFSC conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Office of Inspector General in 2011 identified a number of deficiencies in accounting practices as well as a failure to have federally-required audits. The Forest Service is postponing further grant reimbursements (with some exceptions) and grant awards to the NFSC until it can come into compliance with federal requirements. Without operating funds, NFSC has discontinued its work, at least until the audit issues can be satisfactorily addressed. Local NFSC chapters have continued to play a key role in hazardous fuels reductions and the creation of defensible space on private lands in and around the SMNRA, but temporarily at least are without the technical and financial support previously available from NFSC.

Accomplishments

- **Successful collaboration** – At the community level (with local chapters of NFSC in the SMNRA playing a key role), strong and productive collaborative relationships have been built among private landowners, local governments, federal land management agencies, the Nevada Division of Forestry (NDF), volunteer fire departments, local businesses, non-profit organizations, and others.
- **Coordinated planning** – The SNPLMA administrative structure and grant review process helps ensure that effective collaboration continues into the planning, design and implementation of on-the-ground activities necessary to improve forest and rangeland conditions and protect the lives and property of both area residents and visitors to the SMNRA in the event of wildfire.
- **Community involvement** – A recent posting on the NFSC website about 2012 activities in Mount Charleston includes one community leader’s assessment of the value of community participation: “It takes a lot of work and a big commitment to reduce the threat of wildfire on mountain properties,” said Becky Grismanauskas, a member of the Mt. Charleston Town Advisory Board. “The fact of the matter is that when the Clark County Fire Department Explorers, the Spring Mountain Youth Camp and the Westcare residents come up and assist residents in reducing the threat of wildfire they are protecting the mountain for both the residents and visitors. The Mountain is a special place for everyone to enjoy. We all need to do our part to protect the Spring Mountains from wildfire danger.”
- **Local capacity building** – Capacity is being built in many ways. For example: NDF provides basic wildland fire training and annual red card recertification for Clark County Fire Department volunteers to increase response capacity. NFSC has trained landowners to effectively prepare and maintain defensible space around their homes. Local governments and community groups generate in-kind or cash contributions to help improve the competitiveness of projects for which SNPLMA or NDF funding is sought.
- **On-the-ground accomplishments** – Significant progress has been made in creating fuel breaks around communities and reducing hazardous fuels along roadways and around heavily used recreational sites and facilities.
- **Monitoring** – The Spring Mountains NRA Inventory and Monitoring Strategy is enabling the Forest Service to effectively use adaptive management in its work in the SMNRA. A 2010 audit of Mechanical Hazardous Fuels Treatments and Wildland Fire Suppression and Restoration, for instance, contains numerous recommendations regarding future hazardous fuels treatments. A U.S. Geological Survey-directed project, meanwhile, established a set of baseline vegetation plots that can be tracked in the future to determine the post-thinning effects of fuels treatments on the many sensitive plant and butterfly species in the SMNRA. These and other monitoring activities will be enormously helpful in managing on-going activities and planning future ones.

