



An Industrial Urban Interface Partnership

Not all wildland urban interface involves homes. Interface also includes values such as industrial sites. This is the case in a location west of Meeker, Colorado in the Piceance Basin of Rio Blanco County.

The largest known, naturally occurring, commercial deposit of sodium bicarbonate in North America is home to Natural Soda Inc. Natural Soda is a large mining operation producing 125,000 tons of sodium bicarbonate a year and it's located within the Bureau of Land Management White River Field Office.

The mine recovers sodium bicarbonate using a process known as solution mining. Natural Soda produces approximately \$350,000 annually in royalties which come back to the state and county and employs over 30 local people.

Piceance Basin is a high fire occurrence area containing dense, continuous, pinion-juniper stands interspersed with sagebrush. Natural Soda has experienced 45 fires within two miles of the mine facility in the last 10 years, so there is potential for wildfire to impact the mine.

Natural Soda's plant is powered by electricity which is supplied by a twin wood power pole line coming into the plant, then on to well locations on numerous single power pole lines. During the development of the Rio Blanco County Fire Plan, the industrial facilities and power lines that traverse the Piceance Basin were identified as values at risk and the county's highest priority for treatment. Access and egress were also a concern since there is only one road into and out of the plant creating a hazardous situation for firefighters as well as employees.

Wood power poles igniting during a wildland fire wasn't the only concern. Smoke acts as a conductor and arcing from the power lines is a possibility. If lines are damaged it would close the plant until repairs could be made, which would impact the county economy. The economic impact of a power outage to the county and Natural Soda could potentially be devastating.

These factors led BLM Fuels Planner Ken Holsinger, to establish a partnership between Rio Blanco County, Natural Soda, Colorado Division of Wildlife and White River Electric Association to effectively address the existing conditions. In order to mitigate dangers, a hazardous fuel reduction plan was developed. The plan was developed utilizing the new categorical exclusion tool provided from the Healthy Forest Initiative in order to move things along.

BLM thinned pinion-juniper stands under and around power lines and the access road to approximately 15 foot canopy spacing so that crown fire could not be supported, burned slash and pulled back heavy fuels from around mine pipelines. Thinning included widening

the road corridor 50 feet on each side of the road and also thinned dense pinon-juniper stands upwind from the main power line supplying power to the plant. Mechanical treatment consisted of brush beating approximately 400 acres of sagebrush in strategic areas around the mine to break up continuous pinion-juniper and sagebrush stands.

Much of this work was done in critical winter range for mule deer so Natural Soda offered to provide native seed to supplement for the degraded sagebrush under story and to seed burned locations created by slash disposal. This project gave cooperators an opportunity to provide wildfire mitigation for the mine facility and improve declining mule deer winter range.

The mitigation work accomplished by the project provides a platform to support fire use and raise the comfort level of the participating companies.

Benefits from this project include closer working relationships between Natural Soda, White River Electric Company, Division of Wildlife and Rio Blanco County. Seeding by Natural Soda to stave off cheat grass invasion and improve browse for wildlife, safer firefighting environment, and protecting the infrastructure and economic health of Rio Blanco County were also benefits.

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Treated area with a stand of pinon juniper to the right of the building showing the density of surrounding stands. (9-16-CO2.tif)