



Portneuf Fire Manageable Thanks to Ongoing Fuels Reduction Project

When Pocatello area BLM and Forest Service fuels specialists designed the Portneuf Westbench project, many proposed treatments were couched in theory. They recently proved those theories when a fire accidentally broke out in the treatment area.

The joint BLM and Forest Service Portneuf Westbench Project, one of ten pilot projects proposed under the President's Healthy Forests Initiative in 2002, is composed of several smaller working areas. Mink Creek is a 370 acre treatment area, where thinning thick stands of Utah juniper is the target.

The Portneuf Fire was reported on September 1, 2005 at around 3:30 p.m., and the Eastern Idaho Interagency Fire Center immediately dispatched firefighting resources. Because the fire was burning in a treated portion of the Mink Creek thinning project, flames advanced through chipped debris and remained on the ground rather than consuming the juniper canopy and becoming unmanageable.

Because fire kept to the ground, firefighters with various types of equipment were able to use direct attack methods rather than an indirect attack. "Juniper produces more flying, flaming debris, which increases spotting distance. The flame lengths on a juniper fire are usually too much for crews to directly attack the fire," said BLM Assistant Fire Management Officer Joel Gosswiller.

"The objectives of this project include decreasing the likelihood of homes burning in a wildland fire, decreasing soil erosion and enhancing wildlife habitat," said BLM Pocatello Fuels Specialist Sarah Heide. "We want to create a mosaic of grassland, shrub land and woodland on the landscape, instead of the expanse of juniper that currently exists in the project area."

BLM contracted a specialized piece of heavy equipment to create irregularly shaped openings in strategic locations within the Mink Creek woodlands. Fuel breaks will be built so that, in the event of a wildfire, flames can remain on the ground surface rather than climbing into the canopy and turning into a crown fire that firefighters cannot manage safely. The contracted machinery is designed to cut and chip the juniper trees as a one-step process.

The outstanding work this contractor completed thus far helped prevent this blaze from quickly growing large. Had it not been for the previously treated acres, Gosswiller believes fire behavior seen on this fire would have been much more intense.

"The fire behavior from the junipers burning would not have allowed for ground resources to conduct direct attack tactics on the fire, and it would have become much larger," he said.

Proof that the Mink Creek fuel reduction project is making a difference was evident to

Gosswiller on Thursday afternoon. “If the fuel project had not been done, the fire would have more than likely spread into the next drainage.”

Fire officials were able to maintain firefighter safety and preserve natural resources by having a water tender place a wet line along a ridge top just over the Portneuf Fire eventually lost energy and died out.

Because of pre-existing fuels breaks, approximately 65 firefighters successfully used engines and hand tools to directly attack and contain this 54 acre ground fire in just five hours, during the hottest part of the day. Gosswiller claims that “reducing the junipers on and near the ridges allowed us to use air tankers and retardant in the lighter grass fuels on the ridge and prevent the fire from spreading into the next drainage.”

Fuels specialists consider the work of initiating and fostering fuel reduction programs not only important, but imperative. Now they have evidence in a treated area like Mink Creek to back up the theory of the positive effects of keeping wildfires on the ground and out of the crowns.



9-16-ID-6.tif The Portneuf Fire backs into the treated area of the Mink Creek fuel reduction project. Where there once were thick stands of Utah juniper, the fire now has only chipped debris to consume. *Robert Barnes photo*