



Central Oregon in Pursuit of Fire Mitigation Priorities

Wildland fire is a natural part of central Oregon's ecosystem where vegetation evolved with and is adapted to fire. Summer thunderstorms track across central and eastern Oregon each year bringing thousands of lightning strikes along with the name "lightning alley." Historically, fires touched off by such storms were generally small and thinned much of the forest understory and shrub-steppe habitat.

However, over one hundred years of successful fire suppression have led to a buildup of vegetation with potential for extremely active fire behavior. Growing population and visitors add potential for ignitions from recreation use, trash burning, cigarettes, and industrial land uses. The combination of increased fuel and ignition sources means that more acres have burned in wildfires over the past five years in central Oregon than burned in the previous century. To address these issues and to identify treatment priorities, a multi-jurisdictional group of agencies, organizations, and individuals gathered to create a series of community wildfire protection plans.

As of September 2005, five community wildfire protection plans have been completed and three others are nearing completion, covering the majority of Crook, Northern Klamath, Jefferson and Deschutes Counties. Using a risk assessment model, planning committee members identified top priorities to mitigate wildfire. Priorities are risk potential for a fire to occur, hazard potential for a wildfire to spread once ignited, values at risk such as identification of key infrastructure and ecological and cultural values, structural vulnerability elements of a structure that affect the likelihood of it burning, and protection capability to prepare for, respond to and suppress wildfire.

General recommendations included developing year-round water sources, continuing to reduce fuels on private lands, improving defensible space, and developing or improving emergency evacuation routes. However, one of the greatest concerns identified in plans is fuel buildup on federal lands adjacent to the communities.

Consequently, Prineville District BLM and the Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests will be working together to reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfire around the communities at risk. As part of the five year plan, forests and rangelands in the wildland urban interface in central Oregon will be subjected to a variety of treatments including thinning, mowing, chipping, and burning. While not designed to eliminate fire, the goal of these treatments is to modify the vegetation to the point that ground fire is the norm, not the exception.

Contact: Lisa Clark, Fire Mitigation Specialist, (541) 416-6864; lmclark@or.blm.gov