



Making the Link: Community Wildfire Protection Plans, Fuel Breaks, and Fire

The Thomas Fire, which burned almost 3,800 acres of pinyon-juniper, sagebrush, and grass in mid-June, undoubtedly had the potential to burn many more acres and several homes. But thanks to fuels reduction efforts by both the BLM and the community of Greystone, that circumstance didn't happen.

“We know that cutting fuel breaks and thinning dense forests can be a big benefit to slowing or stopping a fast-moving wildfire,” said Dave Blackstun, Associate Field Manager for BLM's Little Snake Field Office in northwestern Colorado, “but we never know whether it will be one year or thirty before we put those fuel breaks to the test.”

The Browns Park area, where the Thomas Fire occurred, is located just north of Dinosaur National Monument approximately 66 miles west of Craig, Colorado. Large blocks of BLM lands are interspersed with private land. In northwest Colorado, the area records 200 natural fire starts in an average or below year. “The Greystone area can be pummeled with over 4,000 lightning strikes during one thunderstorm,” said Cathy Hutton, the Craig Interagency Dispatch Center Manager.

Conducting fuels treatment projects in the Browns Park area is nothing new to land managers with the BLM's Little Snake Field Office – they've been doing them since the 1980's. However, after the devastating fires of 2000 and the advent of the National Fire Plan, land managers became more engaged with both Moffat County and the residents of Greystone, a small community of about 15 homes in the Brown's Park area. Both areas determined to be potentially at high risk from a fast-moving wildfire, like the Thomas Fire. That involvement ultimately resulted in the development of a County Fire Plan for Moffat County, which included a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for the Greystone community.

The combination of dense, continuous vegetation, such as piñon juniper trees, no viable water sources, response time of over an hour for a fire engine, and lightning, have caused local fire management officials to harbor grave concern for many years.

Over the last several years, fuels treatment projects have moved closer to the public/private land boundary. Several Greystone residents called during the fire and thanked the BLM for putting in the fuel breaks – stressing they didn't really feel their homes were threatened – even as they watched the blaze grow to more than 800 acres with 100 foot flame lengths in just over three hours. Fuels treatment work completed prior to fire in Greystone area included:

- Mechanical treatments (brush beating and hydro-axe) in summer, 2003
- Prescribed burning accomplished in the fall of 2003, 2004, 2005
- Hand thinning, piling and burning accomplished along roads in area from 2003-2005 through force account.
- CWPP finalized for Greystone area in December, 2004 in conjunction with Moffat County Fire Plan.
- Individual property owners in Greystone have completed a lot of work on their lands in conjunction with the BLM projects and have been supportive of the overall efforts.

The Thomas fire, a lightning holdover, began on June 13 and was contained five days later. An Incident Management Team arrived the second day to assume management of the fire. Fortunately, the fire never reached the community of Greystone.

“Receiving the CWPP was helpful not only in establishing an initial action plan, but also in establishing a structure protection plan,” said Structure Protection Specialist Chris White. “CWPPs that describe structure locations, potential water sources, site specific mitigation plans, and which homes have defensible space aid greatly in providing for both firefighter and public safety and save reconnaissance time. Hopefully, all communities will have CWPPs someday.”

Firefighters reported the fire behavior moderated significantly when it reached the treatment area. Some observations of modified fire behavior due to the treatments included:

- Fire stayed out of the tree crowns and on the ground where initial attack crews could fight it.

- The fire was halted at one location and did not burn onto private land saving the landowners beloved landscape.
- Spot fires were fewer and easier to detect and suppress.

“It’s great when several efforts come together the way they did on the Thomas Fire.” said Blackstun. “If any one of the components – the BLM fuel breaks, the CWPPs, or the homeowner’s defensible space - hadn’t been there the situation could have turned out a lot differently.”

It’s quite possible that if the area had been left untreated, the outcome could have reflected the worst case scenario identified in the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis. That situation would have included the fire spotting over the county road, burning many additional acres and resources and increasing the risk to firefighter safety. The cost could have been well over \$2,250,000 instead of \$900,000. The cost of the combined fuels reduction work is about \$200,000.

“You’re mitigation program has achieved success and made a difference when landowners are calling to say thank you for the fuel break during the fire,” reported Fire Mitigation/Education Specialist Lynn Barclay. “They (landowners) want others to know these types of cooperative efforts can work when it counts.”

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Note defensible space work done by the Greystone resident to the west of the house and driveway (Photo taken by a Greystone resident on the afternoon of June 13, 2006).