

## High Priority Community Wildfire Protection Plan Project Underway

If you've spent any time in the southwestern United States you know what a nuisance salt cedar is to land managers and landowners alike. Once this invasive species has become established, it spreads rapidly excluding all other plant life as it forms into impenetrable thickets. Any human dwellings near these thickets are highly susceptible to damage by wildfire as salt cedar burns incredibly hot and fast regardless of the time of year or growing season. Long range spotting is also a real problem due to the unique chemical and physical properties of the plant.

Community leaders, firefighters and land managers have known for some time that the area along the Rio Grande River in New Mexico is a prime target for salt cedar invasions. One area that is of particular concern is the river corridor just below Elephant Butte Dam and adjacent to the communities of Truth or Consequences and Williamsburg, New Mexico.

Old-timers can tell you that forty years ago the areas along the river were dominated by grasses, cottonwoods and willows, but in that short time span, things have changed drastically. Now many of the water-loving, exotic salt cedars are 20 feet tall with trunks over 18 inches in diameter and crown spreads of 25 feet. Their thick stems and branches are so completely interwoven with adjacent salt cedars that would-be fishermen can't penetrate the thicket to access the stream.



Community members appreciated a by-product of the project...free firewood.

The community wildfire protection plan for Sierra County appropriately targeted this area as a high priority for treatment. The problem was that the jurisdiction fell under the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, an agency faced with enormous responsibilities and a shrinking budget. The solution came about as a direct result of the collaborative efforts that made the local plan a reality.

The BLM Las Cruces District funded mechanical and herbicide treatments on 17 acres through the Wildland Urban Interface Community Assistance Program and the U.S. Forest Service funded similar treatments on 98 acres. The Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District is coordinating the project, serving as the Contracting Officer Representative and providing technical assistance and oversight.

The project is currently underway with a local contractor, a crew of sawyers, and a skidder. As salt cedar is removed, large diameter stems are being cut into firewood and made available to local residents free of charge. The Bureau of Reclamation is providing a 275 horsepower Rayco mulcher to treat the remaining slash as their contribution.

This project provides an excellent example of how multi-party coordination and cooperation, envisioned in the local community wildfire protection plan can work. The local conservation district, county government, and federal agencies all contributed to mitigate the hazardous fire situation while restoring the local environment. Similar projects are planned in the area as partners are identified and funding secured.

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