

Hazardous Fuels Projects and the Blue Spring Fire

Before the 2005 fire season began, interagency partners in Color Country were planning for potential catastrophic fire events. By working together to build partnerships with communities and removing hazardous fuels near these communities, the partners felt they could mitigate the effects of cataclysmic fire. These fuels projects, in the event of fire, would slow down the fire's progress and enable firefighters to better protect lives and property. One such project, located to the south of New Harmony Utah, was Ash Creek.

The rapidly growing community of New Harmony has expanded along the boundaries of the Bureau of Land Management, the Dixie National Forest, and Zion National Park. Many homes and subdivisions now border the heavily vegetated foothills of Pine Valley Mountain. Recognizing the need to take action, the Color County Interagency Fuels Committee identified New Harmony as one of six interagency focus areas for reduction of hazardous fuels on public lands surrounding the community.

In the summer of 2002, as the Sequoia Fire threatened the community of New Harmony, fire crews constructed a 50 foot-wide fuel break on Forest Service land. Fortunately, the weather changed and the fuel break was not tested. But the contacts made with the community and the fire line preparation provided the basis for the Community Fire Plan completed in 2004 with the help of the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Dixie National Forest.

By the end of 2002, the BLM had completed the 1,500 acre Ash Creek Fuels Reduction Project. The project spans from I-15 to the USFS boundary. The treatments were designed to reduce the threat of wildfire to homeowners in the New Harmony area while also restoring ecosystem health.

In the summer of 2003, planning was initiated to extend and expand the fuel break on the Dixie National Forest. This would strengthen the fuel break and link it to the Ash Creek Project on BLM lands. Also, across the interstate from New Harmony, Zion National Park completed a hazardous fuel reduction project for the purpose of protecting the Kolob Visitor Center and surrounding private structures in the event of a wildfire.

With three federal agencies implementing fuel breaks in the area, New Harmony had fuel treatments on the east, west, and south sides of the community, and the Utah Forestry, Fire and State Lands worked with individual home owners to reduce fuel loading.

On June 25, 2005 at 1:49 p.m., lightning ignited the Blue Spring fire south of New Harmony. It grew over 5 days to 12,286 acres, ending in the backyards of Harmony Heights. BLM's Ash Creek and Dixie National Forest fuel treatments influenced the movement of the fire, allowing firefighters to protect the homes from destruction. While the Blue Spring fire was by no means the largest fire in southern Utah in 2005, it was significant in that the fuels projects were dominate factors in the rate and direction of the fire's spread. Homes were saved because of the fuel breaks created by these projects.

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Blue Springs fire ignited south of New Harmony community.