

### Community Helps Establish Firebreak

Local residents from Palominas, Arizona, and Boy Scouts from Tucson joined forces to build a firebreak along the San Pedro River that will help protect public and private property from wildfires. Volunteers used a large, heavy combination hoe and rack to rip out unwanted vegetation and to prepare bare soil for low growing native grass species. The project was completed on both sides of the Arizona Highway 92 bridge crossing the river on the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area about 90 miles southeast of Tucson.

This project was one of the first steps necessary for the Palominas Firewise Community group to reach the dual goals of reducing fire risks and reclaiming an overgrown area along the river. By tying the firebreak to the bridge, the width of the firebreak is increased by 75 feet. The Firewise group is also working to achieve Firewise USA status in 2004.

An Eagle Scout candidate from Tucson organized the community service project. Eagle Scout is the highest achievement in Scouting, with only one in 50 scouts reaching this rank. The scout spent six months working with BLM staff to prepare for the day long project.

Fires occur along the San Pedro River each year, many started by undocumented immigrants who use the river course as their road north. The area north of the highway bridge is an area of concern to private land owners living near of this section of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. If a wildfire were to move north of BLM land, it would run onto private land. This wildland urban interface area is considered an “area of concern”, based upon the wildfire hazard assessment and mitigation plan completed for the Palominas community 15 months ago.



Looking at the finished product, an improved firebreak next to the bridge.

To complement annual mowing of the firebreak to protect the community from wildfire, fire staff consulted with the Natural Resources Conservation Service Plant Materials Center in Tucson. Plant specialists helped determine the best species to plant to reduce flame lengths in the event of wildfire. Such species will slow the spread of wildfires while reducing the risk to firefighters. Noxious weeds and taller growing grasses will eventually be replaced by shorter growing native species, which were planted by the volunteers.

This firebreak will also benefit a 70 acre prescribed fire planned for this winter. The location of the prescribed fire is within the conservation area, just south of the bridge. This burn will also help to protect homeowners north of the conservation area. Volunteers also pulled woody flood debris away from cottonwoods and willows, so they will be more likely to survive the prescribed burn this winter.

In addition to the hazardous fuels treatment aspect of this project, BLM has been working with The Nature Conservancy and Audubon Society during the past year to prepare seven fire interpretation signs at portals along the conservation area. Signs will be placed at the nearby parking lot for river hikers to inform them about the firebreak projects and partners involved.



Volunteers work together to create a firebreak.

Project partners are the Arizona Department of Transportation, Arizona Firewise Communities, Boy Scouts of America, Home Depot, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Audubon, Palominas Community Alliance, Palominas Fire Department, Palominas Firewise Community, Take Pride in America, The Nature Conservancy, Cochise County Board of Supervisors, and the Bureau of Land Management.

Contact: David Peters, Safford/Tucson Fire Management Zone, Fire Mitigation Specialist, (520) 258-7207