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MONTANA

Cherry Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project – A Success Story
Plains/Thompson Falls Ranger District - Lolo National Forest

Before treatment

After treatment

The Sanders County (Montana) Fire Plan identified the Cherry Creek area as the highest priority for fuels reduction treatment. Fire history maps indicate that in1904 a fire stopped just west of the project area and acted as a barrier to the 1910 fire, so no significant fire activity has occurred over the past 100 plus years. The need for treatments in this area was highlighted during the 2003 Cherry Creek fire that threatened the city of Thompson Falls.

The Cherry Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was the first Healthy Forests Initiative hazardous fuels reduction project developed by the Plains/Thompson Falls Ranger District under the new categorical exclusion (Category 10) authority. The project was a result of collaboration between the Forest Service, rural fire departments, county officials, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the public. On-the-ground work began in January of 2005.

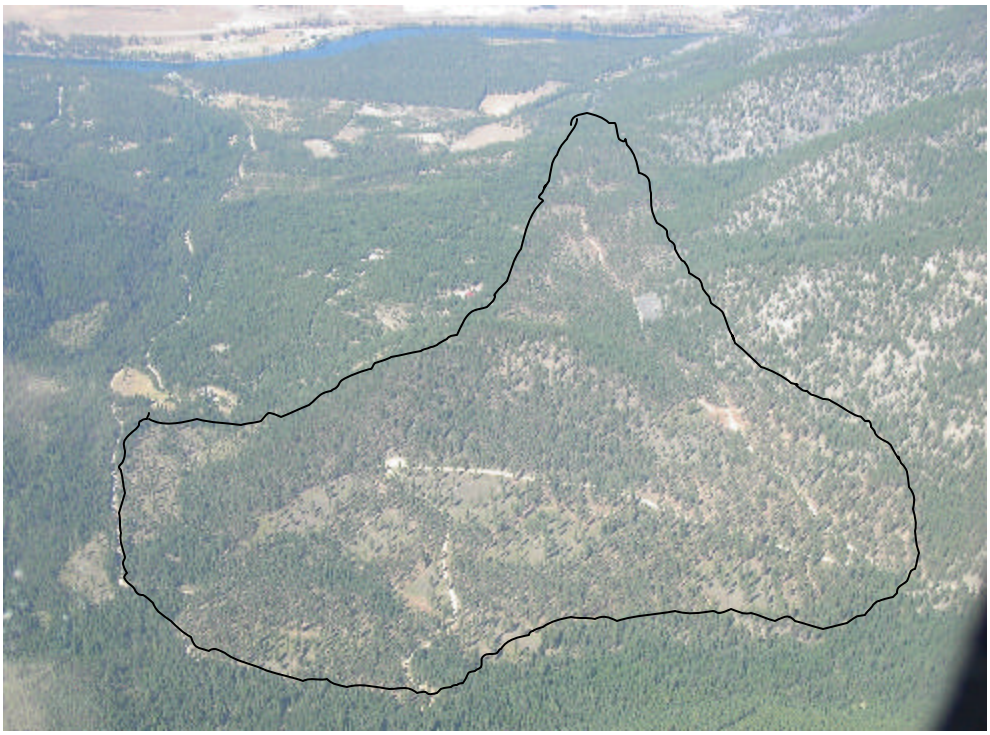
The project objectives were to reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland/urban interface. Additional benefits of the project include restoration of fire adaptive ecosystems, enhanced old growth, ponderosa pine, and increased firefighter and public safety. A total of 246 acres were harvested by ground based equipment and helicopters; and utilizing existing roads.

The harvest yielded approximately 1 million board feet of timber and 2,400 tons of chipped material shipped to Smurfit-Stone Container in Missoula, Montana.

The project lies within the Thompson Falls Impact Zone for air quality and smoke produced by burning grapple and landing piles was a concern. By removing the biomass from the site, the need for burning in the fall (when air quality concerns are the highest), was eliminated. The project area has been restored to a more open pine stand; Condition Class 1. Canopy base height has been raised, reducing the risk of crown fire initiation. Crown bulk density has been

decreased; reducing the risk of the stand sustaining a crown fire. Frequent, low intensity underburns in the spring or early summer will be used to maintain these stand conditions.

The project was completed in the early fall of 2005. The first cycle of underburning will occur in 2-3 years. Maintenance burning is planned for a 10-20 year cycle to replicate the natural role of fire consistent with Fire Regime 1.



This is an oblique, aerial view of the project area after harvesting and chipping treatments. The more open appearing areas are from previous harvesting in the early 1990's. Thompson Falls is along the river.