
The Black Ridge Fuel Break and the Cox Canyon Fire

Since 1996 the Southern Ute Agency and the Southern Ute Indian Tribe have jointly developed a fuel break along the top of Black Ridge, located 15 miles southwest of Durango, CO. Construction of the fuel break is ongoing with 98 acres covering approximately 1.5 linear miles completed and an additional 2.5 linear miles or 379 acres to be developed.

The plan for the fuel break was developed following the Black Ridge fire in 1994, which burned 17,000 acres, and was intended to discourage crown fire from moving across the ridge top on Black Ridge and into the adjacent Cox Canyon and Animas River drainages where private property and structures are present.



Black Ridge Fuel Break

On July 3, 2004 initial smoke was reported by well service personnel. The lightning strike ignition began just west of the existing fuel break. Burning in heavy, continuous fuels, the fire spread quickly and engulfed the pinyon/juniper fuels and began a crown run upslope toward the fuel break pushed by winds at 10 – 15 MPH. As the crown fire moved east, driven by terrain and wind, it encountered the open fuels of the fuel break and dropped to the ground where aerial retardant from a single engine air tanker was effective at stopping its forward spread.

The fire behavior exhibited while burning in an untreated area would undoubtedly have continued to the top of the ridge had the fuel break not been present. Given the dry fuel conditions it is probable that the fire would have continued to the east into the Animas River drainage, possibly exceeding 1,000 acres.

The eventual outcome is debatable as to the size and cost of the Cox Canyon fire if the fuel break had not been there. However, it is certain that there was potential for the fire to become a large conflagration; thankfully that never became a reality.

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