

# National Fire Plan

## Improving Habitat and Reducing Fire Risk

### Idaho

### 2002



As the smoke settles, Clearwater National Forest fire managers are able to declare a prescribed burn just east of the community of Syringa an overwhelming success.

The East Bridge prescribed burn was ignited October 22, 2002 when a helicopter equipped with a helitorch dropped flaming globs of jellied gasoline into the area. The technique allowed fire specialists to control the size of the flaming material and the pattern of its dispersal within the burn site. According to Lochsa Ranger District Fire Management Officer Charlie Elliott, the burn came off as planned, spreading across 700 acres. “It’s not a solid burn,” Elliott stated. “It’s a pattern of burned and unburned areas that we call a mosaic.”



The East Bridge prescribed fire, completed in partnership with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, had multiple benefits. Forage production and quality were improved due to the removal of overgrown brush. New, tender growth will emerge to be utilized by big-game species, including elk.

The prescribed fire also removed a buildup of fuel—accumulated vegetation on the forest floor—that could cause a wildfire to burn at high intensity. Elliott said firefighters have a better chance of protecting homes and property of residents in the Lowell and Syringa communities because of the East Bridge project.

Finally, vegetation that would normally perish in frequent, low-intensity fires was removed. Many of the young fir trees that had sprouted were fatally scorched, leaving the desired open stands of Ponderosa pine trees.

The East Bridge project was initiated in 1999. It included both timber harvest and prescribed fire components. Much of the area was treated with prescribed fire in 1999. That fire was purposely ignited at a time and in a manner the burn would be less intense.

“Because of the way fuel had built up, we needed to stage the burning” Elliott explained. He said the first burn consumed “fine fuels”—pine needles, branches, and other material that had accumulated on the forest

floor. This second, more intense, burn cleared old brush and some of the small grand fir trees that had grown up under the large Ponderosa pine stands.”

Without human intervention, fire would have typically would have spread through the East Bridge area every 25 years, cleaning up materials susceptible to fire on the forest floor while sparing the more fire-resistant Ponderosa pine trees. But after 60 years of successful fire suppression, the East Bridge area had changed. Brush had grown beyond the reach of big-game animals and it was no longer growing vigorously. Young fir trees began growing under the Ponderosa pine forest, crowding out other vegetation.

Historically, frequent low-intensity fires had removed the young fir trees, leaving grassy slopes under stands of large Ponderosa pine trees. Brush fields flourished. “We believe this project was a good first step in restoring the land to a more natural condition,” Elliott said.

While the smoke was visible in the nearby valley during the burning operation, it quickly dissipated. “We can’t make our fires smoke free, but we can burn at times when the smoke is predicted to disperse well,” Elliott said.