

FEATHER RIVER STEWARDSHIP COALITION

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Meeting Notes

December 5th, 2019

Plumas National Forest Supervisors Office Conference Room
159 Lawrence St, Quincy

Attendance: Ryan Bauer, Plumas National Forest; William Brendecke, Plumas National Forest; Nancy Francine, Plumas National Forest; Brad Graevs, Feather River Resource Conservation District; Hannah Hepner, Plumas County Fire Safe Council; Dave Kinatader, Plumas National Forest; Sue McCourt, Plumas County Office of Emergency Services; Matt West, Plumas County Fire Safe Council; Lindsay Wood, Plumas Audubon Society; Ashley Bomar, Sierra Institute PCREW; Chuck Bowman, Graeagle Firewise; Michelle Coppoletta, USDA Forest Service; Colin Dillingham, Mt. Hough Ranger District; Jeff Dupras, Mt. Hough Ranger District; Meredith Hackleman, Meadow Valley Fire Department; Les Hall, Meadow Valley Fire Department; Jill Harris, Pacific Forest Trust; Maurice Huynh, Mt. Hough Ranger District; Michael Jackson, environmental attorney; Marty Senter, Plumas National Forest; John Sheehan, private citizen; Micki Smith, Mt. Hough Ranger District; Mike Yost, Taylorsville Firewise

Presentation: Dr. Brandon Collins

Dr. Collins presented information from his research with the PSW Research Station and UC Berkeley. He highlighted the information with photos and tables in slides (available from the FRSC website). His research looks at how to build capacity to use fire in long fire-excluded forests. He noted that high severity fire is “not always terrible” because it creates structural diversity – it is the scale at which it occurs that is important.

A new data set of historic timber inventory on Collins Pine lands indicates an average of 18 trees per acre over 12” DBH.

Landscape vegetation change from 1941 aerial photos suggest that forests were “dense” but that the trees were bigger and that patches of dense forest cover were smaller in size.

Dr. Collins conducted a GIS exercise to approximate how much National Forest land is available for mechanical treatment. On the Plumas National Forest a significant percentage of productive forest land becomes “broken up” and managed fire becomes a viable option.

When pre-treating, lop & scatter and mastication treatments have a pulse of surface fuels which are a trade-off to the benefit of the treatment. About 7-8 years later the masticated material had significantly decomposed at the Blodgett Field Station research sites. At these sites, thinning and burning had the greatest reduction in torching potential, but created a homogenous environment that had significant ceanothus

regeneration. Fire-only treatments didn't significantly change the forest structure. The second entry with fire provided needed structural change and created heterogeneity.

Dr. Collins explained that prescribed fire is a more precision tool, while managed fire is a blunt tool. Moderate severity managed fire gets close to historical reference basal area, but creates legacy fuels that need to be dealt with. There is a window of opportunity after fire in which a follow-up burn is needed to address the legacy fuels, otherwise the beneficial effect of the first fire will be lost. High severity fire has been shown to perpetuate more high severity fire.

Dr. Collins concluded by saying that mechanical treatments have co-benefits, but also limitations. He suggested to "do as much as you can." He reiterated that patch size of high severity fire is critical and that patches of dense forests should be broken up in anticipation of that potential.

Maurice Huynh asked how to avoid habitat fragmentation when taking this approach.

Jeff Dupras pointed out that there is limited capacity for second entry fire. He said the National Forest is "moving forward but not moving backward."

Partner Updates

Feather River RCD: Brad Graevs reported that the RCD has been working on reforestation in the Moonlight footprint. They have incorporated aspen restoration this year. The RCD is coordinating the Plumas Underburn Cooperative, which empowers community members to burn on private lands. The RCD's long-range plan is to work on a programmatic EIR for specific activities, including fuel breaks along roadways. There is potential to undertake a similar effort with NEPA. This would eliminate the need for a document for each project.

Michael Jackson asked who would act at the lead agency for a programmatic CEQA document. Mr. Graevs replied that the RCD can approve the document and the projects under that document.

Plumas National Forest: Ryan Bauer said that progress has been made on the contracts in Little Grass Valley, Butterfly and Empire. Phase I of the Lakes Basin field work for layout has been started. There is currently no Contracting Officer Representative on the Beckwourth District. Plumas National Forest's proposal to the Wildlife Conservation Board for Little Grass Valley Phase II was recommended for funding. The Sierra Nevada Conservancy may also be interested in funding the project and may be able to execute agreements sooner. There has been a small amount of prescribed fire on the Big Hill project and some piles burned at Little Grass Valley before the region went into a prescribed fire shutdown. Pile burning started again on the Feather River District after Thanksgiving. The Forest has an ambitious pile burning program this year. There were three managed fires this year: Meadow Fire, Creek Fire (on the face of Mt. Hough), and West Fire (in high elevation red fir forest). There is opportunity for success at higher elevations because there are a lot of natural barriers. Jeff Dupras added that Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship trails were used as fire line on the Creek Fire.

Nancy Francine said that the Forest's program of work has been set. The Walker Fire will include some fuels management as well as timber components. Some of the post suppression repair is still being determined. Will Brendecke added that the Walker Fire had about 50% high severity with a medium patch size of about 200-2,000 acres of stand replacing fire. The Forest is currently responding to timber acquisition but snow is slowing progress. They are looking at installing a study in burn areas that have significant fuel loading and a high re-burn potential to evaluate how to break the cycle of high severity fire.

Mt. Hough RD: Colin Dillingham said that there was a field trip to Protected Activity Center (PAC) fuel reduction treatments. 2,000 – 3,000 acres of PACs have been prepped for underburning. He has been working extensively with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Walker Fire burned Goshawk and Owl PACs.

Michael Jackson asked about the size of Plumas National Forest's budget. Mrs. Francine said that they have been operating under a continuing resolution, which has potential impacts when there are substantial contracts. The fire funding fix will positively affect the budget by stopping fire borrowing since fire accounts for about 50% of the budget nationwide. There is little "shelf stock" NEPA and limited staffing for new planning. She suggested the best option is to be poised to leverage resources. Supervisor Carlton added that the Forest Service is changing the way the budget is structured and some funds will be held at the Region. He said that the budget is heavily committed to labor. A more detailed presentation of the budget was offered for the next meeting.

John Sheehan asked if Plumas National Forest can visualize having resources other than employees managing fire on public lands. Mr. Bauer said that that effort has been made with Greenville Rancheria. There has been a struggle to have adequate on-call fire crews, so the Rancheria crew will be a local resource to draw on.

Pacific Forest Trust: Jull Harris said that she works in policy outreach and communications. The organization's primary work is in developing working forest conservation easements to keep forests in timber production. To-date the Pacific Forest Trust has conserved 600,000 acres in California. They are currently promoting the Healthy Watersheds California initiative seeking to implement restoration and conservation efforts in the 5 key watersheds that feed the Shasta, Trinity, and Oroville dams. Specifically, the Upper Trinity, Upper Sac, McCloud, Pit, and the Feather watersheds. The passing of AB2480 and AB2551 created the legal definition of watersheds as infrastructure - part of the state's water system, and the designation of this region as eligible for funding similar to any large infrastructure project. This is a landscape scale project, encompassing 7 million acres of the state's most critical watersheds for water supply. HWC is a multi-benefit natural infrastructure project: for water security and reliability, climate resilience, economic sustainability, and for reducing fire and flood risks. It is collaborative, engages regional communities, and enhances wildlife and fish adaptation.

Plumas Audubon: Lindsay Wood said surveys in the Moonlight Fire were recently completed. She is working with the Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship to do surveys for their Hough project. Funding for the Audubon's Grebe project has ended. She is working with Audubon California to address water drop impacts on the grebes. She anticipates a spring burn on the Genesee project. Plumas Audubon has submitted a South Park planning project proposal to SNC and CAL FIRE. They have applied to Audubon National to support bird curriculum, native plant consultations and an ACT forestry internship.

Graeagle Firewise: Chuck Bowman has been doing outreach to landowners to participate in a Mohawk Valley hazardous fuels reduction project. Valley Ranch has 79 lots, of which 52 have committed to the project and 14 already meet specs. There are currently about 600 acres total in the project.