Upper White Fuels Reduction Project

Summary of 2020 Field Season Activities

April 6, 2021

Background

This ongoing project is funded by the Washington Department of Natural Resources' (WA DNR) *All Lands Grant* agreement (93-100843). The purpose of this funding is to implement the Upper White Fuels Reduction Project (UWFRD) on the south end of Gifford Pinchot National Forest (GPNF).

Objectives

The primary objective of the UWFRD is to enhance forest health and public safety across different land ownership jurisdictions. These include United States Forest Service (USFS) lands, the Yakama Nation, WA DNR lands, and the Trout Lake Community Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Increasing forest health in the context of this project involves a targeted reduction of understory fuel loads to enhance landscape-level resilience to large-scale wildfires. In doing so, this project entails utilizing local resources and organizational capacity (e.g., local timber crews, stewardship crews) to achieve these goals. Ultimately, this work will serve to protect local residents (e.g., businesses, homes, recreation resources) from potential wildfire impacts that might otherwise decimate public and private lands.

Partnerships
Project partners include the USFS, Mt. Adams Resource Stewards (MARS), Cascade Forest Conservancy (CFC), and the South Gifford Pinchot Collaborative (SGPC).

Field Activities
The primary fieldwork associated with this project include the following on-the-ground methods:

- Prescribed burn unit preparation
- Prescribed burning
- Public engagement activities
- Project monitoring

These methods are described in greater detail below.

Prescribed burn unit preparation entails mechanical fuels manipulation and fuels piling in the high-risk Gotchen EIS stands. This project area had initial fuels reduction completed between 2007-2009 and is now in need of prescribed burning. This is part of a 4-year USFS work plan to reduce fuels in all size classes, reduce grand fir (*Abies grandis*) regeneration, promote early seral species, and increase the vigor of remaining live trees. Treatment of these stands will increase the depth of defensible space for the Trout Lake Community WUI. Fuels manipulation work includes small-diameter tree removal, clearing of surface and ladder fuels around large ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) trees, re-arrangement or removal of coarse woody debris, and fire line construction.

Prescribed burning was planned on a total of 565-acres prepared via mechanical fuels manipulation, fuels reduction, and control line work. USFS fire crews were slated to lead both prescribed burns with potential support from Yakama Nation fire crews based on availability. WA DNR staff have been invited to participate as a training opportunity. MARS stewardship crew staff have assisted USFS fire personnel.

Public engagement activities are aimed at involving diverse audiences including SGPC members, project partners, landowners, elected officials, and other interested members of the public. Specifically, these efforts target the following objectives:

- Sharing information about and viewing project accomplishments
- Involving volunteers in prescribed burn preparation work
- Providing opportunities for feedback on the project

Educational outreach was conducted with the Trout Lake High School Biology class. Over several sessions, a MARS staff-member virtually presented the topic of "Living With Wildfire," which focused on the need for fire preparedness and associated potential treatments. Students were instructed to go out into a local forest of their choosing to make observations on current conditions, potential fire hazards, and potential treatments that could be used to mitigate these hazards.

Project monitoring aims to assess the effectiveness of burn preparation activities including duff pullback and lining of legacy trees through pre- and post-treatment level monitoring of old/large-diameter ponderosa pine. Monitoring of fire behavior and effects was designed to pilot the *WA 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan Treatment Level Effectiveness Monitoring Protocol* and provide data for USFS personnel to create fire behavior model simulations.

In specific, monitoring involves collecting the following tree, vegetation, and fuels metrics before and after burning:

- Diameter
- Species composition
- Canopy cover

Project Accomplishments

The SGPC continues to work with the WA DNR, the GPNF and MARS to direct state funding to a major effort to reduce wildfire risk to communities and resource values on the south flanks of Mount Adams. Financial support through Washington DNR's *All Lands Grant Program* has funded fuels reduction and preparation work for prescribed burn units being led by MARS between Forest Road 82 and the historic Gotchen Guard Station.

MARS has dedicated a 6-person field crew with chainsaw skills to the project. Additionally, a local contractor, Husum-based J&R Dirtdiggers, has been utilized to masticate brush and small trees to create strategic fuel breaks. Furthermore, CFC led 3 volunteer work parties involving 21-volunteers to support the project during the 2020 field season. All told last season, 512-acres benefited from fuels reduction treatments or preparation.

Project Setbacks

Due to the impacts from the global COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 field season activities experienced a host of delays with regard to project timelines. These setbacks related personnel/hiring and logistical barriers related to social distancing, equipment, and certification delays.

2021 Planned Field Season Activities

Prescribed burns are anticipated to begin in the fall of 2021. Associated activities will be reported in a future article describing project accomplishments to date.

More Information

For more information on this project, please contact the SGPC at our web site: www.southgpc.org. Alternatively, you can contact our Collaborative Coordinator at: joshua.petit@southgpc.org, who can then connect you with the appropriate parties.