

Community-based Fire Management Innovation for Private Lands

Final Conservation Innovation Grant

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PROJECT PARTNERS & FUNDING SOURCES:

Bitterroot RC&D; Blackfoot Challenge Forestry Committee; Blackfoot Community Conservation Area Forestry Work Group; Bureau of Land Management (BLM); DNRC and DNRC Western Competitive Grant and Jump Start II; Greenough/Potomac and North Powell Fuels Mitigation Task Forces; Helena and Lolo National Forests; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP); Montana State University Forestry Extension; MAIRS Blackfoot Project; NRCS and NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant; NPCD; private landowner cost-share participation; Southwestern Crown Collaborative Project; University of Montana/College of Forestry and Conservation; and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Abstract

The Blackfoot Challenge worked directly with NRCS, using DNRC Technical Support to assist with the development of conservations plans across multiple and adjacent parcels. Additional public and private partners are assisting through the collaborative MAIRS Blackfoot Project involving FWP, DNRC, BLM, US Forest Service (USFS), NRCS, Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and USFWS/Partners Program.



In partnership with NRCS, DNRC and Montana State University (MSU) Forestry Extension, the Blackfoot Challenge worked on forest stewardship planning and implementation for multiple and adjacent landowners through direct contact by letter, invitation to workshops and presentations, and site visits with landowners to discuss objectives, develop plans, and assess wildfire risks and forest health. The partners provided private landowners with access to technical planning assistance and available financial incentives, particularly through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).

We worked with NRCS and DNRC to identify landowners interested in pursuing an EQIP Special Initiative for forest health and fire management practices. Based on the demand identified through this contact, the NRCS District Conservationist submitted a proposal for a Special EQIP Initiative requesting \$413,000 for 2010 and \$200,000 for 2011. We assisted landowners with submitting their applications and worked with NRCS and DNRC to rank the applications. Overall, all residents in the Blackfoot Watershed were informed through broad outreach, and 100 private forest owners were directly contacted about interest in fuel mitigation for fire management and forest restoration.

We helped form and coordinate the Seeley Swan Blackfoot Biomass Working Group to look for opportunities to better utilize woody biomass. The Working Group hosted a biomass utilization demonstration in February that renewed many landowners' and contractors' interest in biomass.

Significant communication occurred through monthly or bi-monthly meetings of the MAIRS Blackfoot Project working group, in addition to periodic Forestry Working Group meetings of the BCCA Council, the Blackfoot Challenge Forestry Committee, the Potomac/Greenough Fuels Mitigation Task Force, the North Powell Fuels Mitigation Task Force, the Blackfoot/Seeley/Swan Biomass Working Group, and monthly meetings of the Lincoln Restoration Committee.

The Blackfoot Challenge hosted two planning sessions with fire management personnel to further define the Primary Line of Defense in the MAIRS Blackfoot Project area, and along the north and south sides of the Blackfoot Watershed, as well as a contractor workshop to provide better access to forest related contracts.

Overview, Purpose, and Objectives

Healthy forests are a critical component of our Nation's landscape, providing multiple public and private benefits. However, recent changes in weather patterns now are creating longer fire seasons and dryer fuel conditions, causing fires to increase in number, size and intensity. This threat is expected to continue due to overly dense forests, increases in insect and disease susceptibility and mortality, and the resulting build up of fuels. Land managers are working to address these problems on public lands, but privately owned forests make up a substantial share of this forest resource base. Exasperating these concerns, these forests are increasingly being divided into smaller ownership parcels, and only 3 percent of family forest owners have a written management plan while 16 percent have sought management advice.

The objectives of the Blackfoot Challenge, NRCS and DNRC are closely intertwined and both entities are heavily committed to assisting private landowners in addressing resource concerns. While much has been accomplished through the parallel conservation tracks taken by the Blackfoot Challenge, NRCS and DNRC to date, all entities, and most importantly, many of the private landowners in the watershed, currently recognize that a powerful partnership between the Blackfoot Challenge, NRCS and DNRC will best promote private lands conservation and greatly benefit fire management across ownerships in the future.

With 80 percent of the Blackfoot watershed in forest cover, and 20% in private, non-commercial ownership, considerable amount of private forested land is an opportunity to make long-term conservation investments that will benefit forest health, wildlife habitat, private landowners and public safety. Our natural resource management and community supported approach relies on effective communication, strong involvement by producers and private landowners, and tangible benefits that are directly tied to livelihood interests.

Our innovative approach has transferability to other locations where forest health, wildlife habitat, wildfire, and private land values overlap. Public and private partners are benefiting from the innovations and practices developed when planning and implementing projects under management agreement. Such a project is underway in the Blackfoot watershed with the Multi-Agency Integrated Restoration Strategy (MAIRS).

In 2008, the Blackfoot Challenge completed the Blackfoot Watershed Fuels Assessment (BWFA - Figure 1) to address fire risks throughout the watershed. The assessment provides consistency across the watershed and guides community-based fuels mitigation task forces in making decisions on fire management priorities based on private landowner interest and local knowledge.

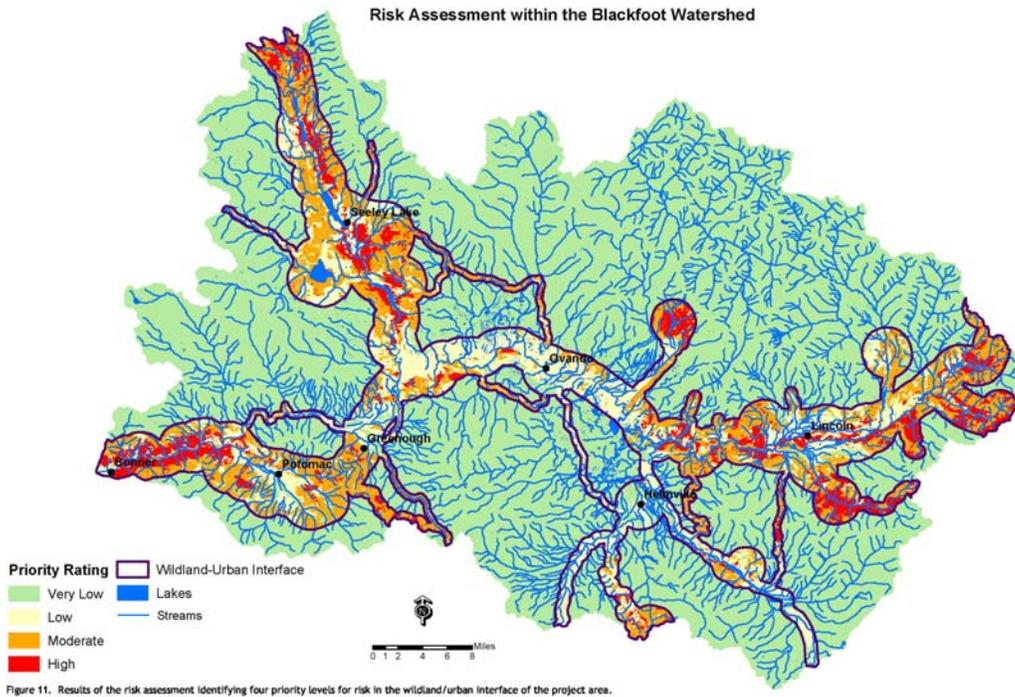


Figure 1.

Conservation planning efforts in the Blackfoot watershed are being coordinated by the Blackfoot Challenge through the Blackfoot Sub-basin Plan in cooperation with multiple private and public partners including local community members working under the vision for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. The Blackfoot Sub-basin plan identifies as high priorities: maintaining or restoring the viability of low severity fire regime ponderosa pine and western larch forest communities, and middle to high elevation coniferous forest communities. In particular, fire management is addressed as a critical issue to coordinate with forest health practices

This project provided benefits to energy efficiency through additional innovations in use of forest products in biomass projects. Benefits to rural economics are provided through contracted forest management, associated support service jobs, and commerce in the local communities. Environmental benefits are provided through innovative natural resource conservation on private land in cooperation with public land management.

Montana's 1.5 million acre Blackfoot Watershed (Fig. 2) has been significantly altered from historic conditions by many years of wildfire suppression and logging history. For more than a century, the forests and associated vegetative communities in the Blackfoot watershed have contributed significant biological, agricultural and cultural value to communities living across the valley.

Producer Participation

Over 200 private forest owners and other forest management partners participated in meetings, workshops and projects. We had participation from 53 producers, community leaders, agency partners and fire managers involved in GIS mapping through the MAIRS, Fuels Mitigation Task Forces, Blackfoot Challenge Forestry Committee and BCCA Forestry Work Group and Lincoln Restoration Committee.



We reached 163 private forest landowners through planning efforts with MSU Forestry Extension. Twelve landowners participated directly in planning efforts through two Forest Stewardship Workshops organized by MSU in collaboration with DNRC and Blackfoot Challenge.

Twenty-two producers applied up for EQIP contracts with final deliver of nine contracts.

Project Activities

This grant supported two deliverables and five objectives.

Deliverables

1. Contracts with 40 Eligible Producers for 800 acres.

Initially, 22 producers applied for the program. Due to eligibility, ranking or reluctance by the landowner, contracts were signed with nine Eligible Producers for over 400 acres during the grant period.

Although limited access to technical assistance is always a factor in delivering EQIP financial assistance to private landowners, significant access to technical assistance was provided through this grant and leverage with NRCS staff, Technical Service Provider DNRC, NPCD, MSU Forestry Extension and the Blackfoot Challenge. More access to technical assistance and leverage would have provided more contacts with private landowners, but we do not feel this was the only limiting factor for delivering 40 contracts for 800 acres.

Technical assistance delivered:

Outreach through collaborative efforts with agencies to reach private landowners

- Poster outreach to all residents in the Blackfoot Watershed
- Specific target of 100 landowners in project area through:
 - One-on-one
 - Local community workshops
 - Forest Stewardship Workshops

Factors limiting contract delivery for this grant were:

- Limited outreach of technical assistance to small acreage private forest landowners prior to this grant period that limited knowledge by small acreage private forest landowners of resources concerns for fire management and forest health.
- Limited community engagement in landscape level fire management prior to this grant period.
- Limited public agency involvement with private forest landowners related to fire management and forest health practices prior to this grant period.
- Limited access to adequate financial assistance to cost-share practices on 800 acres. Montana NRCS Announced an EQIP Special Initiative Funding in 2010, and an announcement for 2011 is anticipated, to assist with Fuel Break practice on private forested land. The final 2010 Announcement of \$300,000 was fully obligated through nine contracts on over 400 acres. The anticipated 2011 Announcement of \$200,000 would provide financial assistance for Fuel Break and pre-commercial thinning practices on approximately 200-300 additional acres if fully obligated.

Significant additional work with private landowners was provided through the partnership efforts supported by this grant. The MAIRS provided the initial concept for this grant forming the MAIRS Blackfoot Project work group in 2009 to coordinate public and private partnerships in landscape scale fire management and forest restoration planning and implementation through collaborative efforts. This is directly tied to the North Powell Fuels Mitigation Task Force in the project area through delivery of technical and financial assistance to private forested landowners. Since the inception of this grant, more than 1,040 acres of fire management and forest restoration have been completed or contracted with private landowners through partnership efforts using multiple financial assistance sources, including EQIP, DNRC grants (Western States and Western Competitive) and BLM Community Assistance grants.

2. *Attend at least one NRCS CIG Showcase or comparable NRCS event during the period of the grant.*

Multiple showcase or comparable events were delivered during the period of this grant.

- *Biomass To Electricity Demonstration*, Open House Feb. 23, 2010 (see attached UM News release in Appendix A)
- Local community and contractor presentations by NRCS, DNRC and Blackfoot Challenge (see Appendix B)
- Special EQIP through partner participation (see appendix C)
- Initiation of two local fuels mitigation task forces – North Powell and Greenough/Potomac (Appendix D)
- Field tour to review application of EQIP cost-shared practices with NRCS, DNRC and BC (see Appendix E)
- MAIRS Blackfoot Project (see Appendix F)

Objectives

Objective 1: Assist NRCS with EQIP Delivery of Forest Health Practices with 40 Eligible Producers using Technical Service Providers (TSP) for conservation plans across multiple and adjacent parcels

We assisted the NRCS with delivery of EQIP contracts for eligible producers for forest health projects for fire management of overstocked forested lands. We worked in partnership with the NRCS and TSP Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to help deliver conservation plans addressing fire management across multiple and adjacent private forest parcels.

The purpose of this objective was to maximize the NRCS-DNRC-Blackfoot Challenge partnership so as to facilitate conservation on private lands and the delivery of EQIP Statute, Final Rule, and Manual. This project provided NRCS with a greatly expanded level of communication with DNRC and Blackfoot Challenge partners, and catalyzed opportunities for EQIP delivery through technical and financial assistance partnerships.

The concept for this Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) emerged through discussions in Multi-Agency Integrated Restoration Strategy Committee (MAIRS) Blackfoot Project meetings in 2009 where public and private partners are participating in landscape scale fire management and forest restoration planning and implementation through the collaborative efforts. The MAIRS was attracted to the Blackfoot Watershed by the cooperative conservation track record, and began work on their second statewide effort between Montana FWP, Montana DNRC, BLM, USFS, NRCS, MT DEQ and USFWS.

The Blackfoot Challenge is bringing private landowners together with agencies to cooperate on a landscape level. The MAIRS committee approached the Blackfoot Challenge as the community-based group in the Blackfoot to assist in cross-boundary work and involvement of private landowners. The project area has been identified for inclusion in agency work plans if processes allow. The Blackfoot Challenge, NRCS and DNRC are integral in supporting private landowner participation in the MAIRS project.

The Blackfoot Challenge developed a comprehensive list of over 100 landowners in the three focus areas (see Appendix C). The Blackfoot Challenge and NPCD contacted the majority of landowners by phone to discuss whether they were experiencing forest resource concerns on their property. Landowners were informed of future public meetings in their area about forest health, wildfire risks, management, and potential financial and technical opportunities available to private landowners. As expected, many landowners were experiencing forest resource issues and eager to discuss them.

The Blackfoot Challenge coordinated public meetings in each of the three focus areas including invitations to all landowners, coordination of venues and presenters, and provision of forestry literature to the public. Presenters included NRCS, Blackfoot

Challenge, DNRC, USFS, NPCD, BLM, MSU, and local fire managers. Topics included Basic Forest Ecology, Forest Insects and Disease, Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), and updates by FS representatives. Attendees were informed that a Special Initiative (with financial and technical assistance) could potentially be developed to address specific resource concerns if public demand existed. Approximately 165 landowners attended the public meetings. Interested landowners were asked to sign their names on a list for more information on EQIP and/or a site visit by a representative.

An initial field review of practices was coordinated by the Blackfoot Challenge, including participation by NRCS, DNRC, NPCD and the Blackfoot Challenge (see Appendix F). This field review was critical to establish the proper use of practices to benefit natural resource conservation on private land.

Once interested landowners were identified and confirmed, several planning teams were assembled including NRCS personnel, Blackfoot Challenge, NPCD, and DNRC to visit each property and develop a draft plan based on landowner objectives and applicable forestry practices. Approximately 22 properties were visited.

NPCD worked closely with NRCS and FSA to ensure all applicants were eligible. We maintained a Landowner Status Spreadsheet to track eligibility status, practices, acres, and remaining fieldwork needed. This spreadsheet was updated regularly as information changed and plans evolved. NPCD also assisted NRCS with a variety of fieldwork and planning documents including: project plans, schedules, landowner communication, vegetation plots, cultural resource surveys, narratives, environmental assessments, job sheets, and species screening tools.

Following contracting, multiple projects started immediately. NRCS, NPCD, DNRC, and Blackfoot Challenge worked cooperatively to ensure that practice specifications were being met. Multiple inspections were also carried out following completion of individual Contract Item Numbers. During inspections, representatives assessed the final product, took GPS waypoints to identify final acres, conducted fixed-plot tree counts, and took digital photos. All information was forwarded to NRCS. All representatives maintained frequent communication with relevant landowners and in some cases the contractors to ensure all participants understood the implementation, inspection, and reimbursement process.

Based on the positive response of 22 landowners, NRCS requested funding for an EQIP Special Initiative to specifically address fuel risks and forest health issues. NRCS, DNRC, and NPCD worked together to develop local ranking criteria for the special initiative to ensure that funding was directed to the highest priority projects. The EQIP Special Initiative was granted by NRCS for \$300,000. We assisted landowners with submitting their applications and worked with NRCS and DNRC to rank the applications, and we

continue to produce management plans for private landowners. All funds were allocated and several applications did not rank out successfully. Thus, the total number of contracts were limited by available funding and lack of wholesale interest by multiple and adjacent landowners. Over 400 acres were treated through the Special Initiative.

The North Powell and Greenough/Potomac Fuel Mitigation Task Forces were organized to manage grant funds from various sources to assist landowners with fuel risks around their residence and access routes. North Powell is directly involved with the MAIRS Blackfoot Project area and the Greenough/Potomac serves the lower watershed. The Blackfoot Challenge coordinated and liaised with the task force to ensure that funding was used wisely and in some cases to leverage matching funds for particular EQIP projects.

Objective 2: Utilization of forest slash as biomass for Eligible Producers and Local Communities

Fire management and forest health practices of fuel breaks, forest stand improvements, and prescribed forestry will produce forest slash. Coordination of these practices across multiple and adjacent parcels will allow for more efficient use of forest slash if management practices are coordinated to treat multiple and adjacent parcels under a conservation plan. Emphasis was placed on use of forest slash for the private landowners and local communities in partnership with agencies and organization working on biomass projects.

Market value for woody biomass (chips and hog fuel) has significantly changed in the project region since inception of this project creating difficulty in utilization of forest slash as woody biomass. However, public and private interest remains high, and new markets for small, mid and large scale are beginning to develop. We are seeking woody biomass contracts with the University of Montana, Northwestern Energy and local, small-scale users.

In 2009, the Blackfoot Challenge was able to grind woody biomass by-product from a portion of the project to restore Ponderosa Pine/rough fescue communities on the BCCA with Pyramid Mountain Lumber Company funded by a JumpStart II grant from DNRC. In addition, the Blackfoot Challenge coordinated the grinding of forest slash for biomass utilization from the BCCA Haul Road Fuel Break project. At that time markets



outside the region provided incentives to haul woody biomass. In 2010 and 2011, markets did not provide incentive to haul or utilize forest slash material, thus pile burning increased to dispose of the by-product.

The Blackfoot Challenge became a founding member of the Seeley Swan Blackfoot Biomass Working Group and is serving as its co-coordinator. This group is working to determine additional opportunities to utilize biomass in the watershed.

In February 2011, the Working Group organized a biomass utilization demonstration in conjunction with the University of Montana, Missoula Electric Cooperative and Paws Up Ranch. This was the first direct feed of electricity produced from woody biomass into MEC power lines. The Biomax, a biomass gasifier and electrical generator, processed waste wood into electricity that was transferred onto the grid. Over 50 contractors, landowners and agency partners attended the demonstration, and it piqued interest in continuing to seek viable biomass markets.

We held a workshop for forestry contractors in April 2011 that included information about how the EQIP program works and how to access it. Information about woody biomass utilization opportunities also was provided. See attachment in Appendix C.

At the time of writing this final report, a new biomass operation opened in Bonner by Boise, Inc. Boise is currently contracting for 20 loads of green woody biomass per day with plans to increase to 50 per day for a total annual projected market of 200,000 tons of green woody biomass. We anticipate accessing this market through local contractors that are treating private forest lands.

Objective 3: Assist NRCS, DNRC and other TSP with cooperative agreements to write conservation and forest stewardship plans for multiple and adjacent Eligible Producers

The Blackfoot Challenge coordinated community-based plans with NRCS, DNRC and other TSP to assist in developing conservation plans across multiple and adjacent private parcels. This coordination helped to make recommendations to integrate plans and processes to facilitate landowner access to forestry-related technical and financial assistance. The community-based innovation promotes: 1) the delivery of timely, coordinated interagency forestry assistance to landowners through increased use of TSP and technology, and related actions that increase assistance for working lands, and 2) facilitates collaboration with other appropriate entities to develop and implement conservation plans and agreements on forest lands.

In partnership with NRCS, DNRC and MSU Forestry Extension, we are worked on a three phase approach to conservation and forest stewardship planning for multiple and adjacent landowners, which assisted these landowners with certain eligibility requirements for EQIP. Through direct contact by letter, invitation to workshops and

presentations, and direct site visits with landowners, the partners provided individual access to technical planning assistance and available financial incentive.

A three-day forest stewardship workshop was held May 20-21 & 28, specifically targeted at the approximately 100 private forested parcels in the MAIRS project area to provide landowners with qualifying forest stewardships plans and a deeper understanding of forest ecology and management. Three additional outreach workshops were held for focus areas within the MAIRS project area of 1) Blackfoot Community Conservation Area, 2) Cooper Lake/Ward Creek, and 3) Arrastra Creek/Patterson Prairie. Landowners from the nearby Lone Point area, which is a priority fire management area for the community of Lincoln, also attended the third workshop. These workshops took the form of community meetings and were held for 2 hours to provide access to technical planning assistance and available financial assistance in coordination with multiple public fire and forest managers including NRCS, DNRC, BLM and USFS.

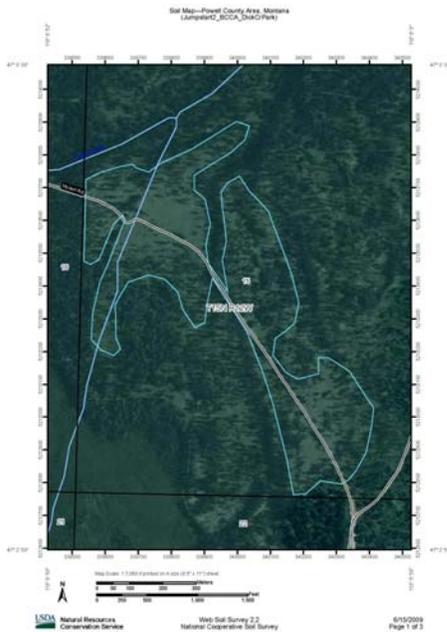
We held a daylong workshop on January 9, 2010 with 55 private landowners participating and eight presenters. Follow up technical assistance was in the form of a visit by the DNRC Service Forester or the Blackfoot Challenge Land Steward or Forestry Coordinator (see Appendix B).

A portion of the applicants already had forest management plans, which is a requirement for forestry related practices. For those properties that did not have management plans, DNRC and NPCD representatives assisted with basic management plans that outlined landowner objectives, stand conditions, and desired conditions, and recommended treatments. DNRC and NPCD developed a Forest Management Plan Template that was based on the Forest Stewardship plan outline (see Appendix D). Approximately 8 plans were written. Draft plans were reviewed with Landowners and adjusted accordingly.

Objective 4: Work with NRCS to facilitate EQIP delivery for multiple and adjacent Eligible Producers under a cooperative forest management plan

The Land Steward worked with NRCS to facilitate EQIP delivery for multiple and adjacent Eligible Producers under a cooperative forest management plan through the community-based relationships maintained and encouraged by the FC, BCCA Council and the NPCD. Homeowner associations or other agreements served as points of contact for multiple and adjacent private parcels, or other community agreements like the BCCA were explored.

The Blackfoot Challenge continues to work with fire management personnel to further define the Primary Line of Defense in the MAIRS project area, and along the north and south sides of the Blackfoot Watershed in consideration of the BWFA. This is providing focus to public and private efforts to work across ownership lines to plan and implement treatments for fire management in the Blackfoot Watershed.



The Blackfoot Challenge hosted two planning sessions with fire management personnel to further define the Primary Line of Defense (PLOD) in the MAIRS project area, and along the north and south sides of the Blackfoot Watershed. This information, combined with the BWFA is providing focus to public and private efforts to work across ownership lines to plan and implement treatments for fire management in the Blackfoot Watershed.

Discussions about the role of partnership efforts to share technical assistance and leverage partnership funds continue. This technical assistance is critical to providing access to financial assistance, and the partners are working together to help provide more access to both technical and financial assistance.

Objective 5: Maintain Communications Among Project Partners

Effective communication and collaboration among project partners is essential to implementing our objectives. We coordinated regular meetings to bring more partners together throughout the Blackfoot Watershed. Included in this communication were discussions about current fire and forest management practices and agreements, and opportunities for new directions for cooperative conservation to benefit the health of our natural resources.

Specific to these discussions is the ability to use the technical expertise of NRCS, DNRC and other partners, and leveraging financial resources between federal, state and private sources. A key to landscape level natural resource management is integrating all ownerships to create efficiencies of scale, resulting in better fire management across more acres.

MAIRS Blackfoot Project meetings

Significant communication is occurring through a monthly schedule of meetings of the MAIRS working group. The result is more integrated implementation of agency restoration activities, and integration of private landowner fire management.

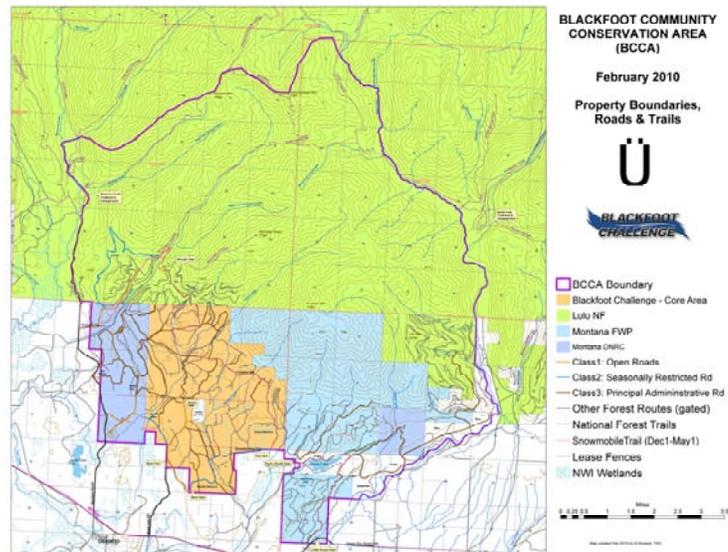
Blackfoot Challenge Forestry Committee

The Blackfoot Challenge Forestry Committee (Committee) seeks to leverage high local capacity and interest in the economics of forest restoration and fuels mitigation, with the local benefits of private and public partnerships. The Challenge's conservation of industry-owned land with the formation of the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area

(BCCA) models how community-based decision making works to rejuvenate rural economies while preserving recreation, wildlife, and watershed values. The BCCA is managed by a community council (Council) through a BCCA Forestry Work Group (Work Group).

The Committee formed to provide a collaborative effort to address forestry needs and issues in the Blackfoot Watershed and meets periodically to review a plan of work to address fire risks across the various Community Wildfire Protection Plans using a consistent fuels assessment for the entire watershed. By establishing local fuels mitigation task forces throughout the entire watershed represented by all parties with fire management responsibilities and local fire departments, fuel mitigation efforts are coordinated among agencies and assist private landowners in reducing fuels on their lands.

The Council seeks to implement collaboratively developed plans for active management on the highest priority acres on the core 5,609 acres of the BCCA. Guided by a signed MOU with the private and public landowners of the entire 41,000 acre BCCA, the Council's Work Group are guiding cooperative habitat restoration and fuels mitigation across ownerships.



North Powell and Greenough/Potomac Fuels Mitigation Task Forces

The North Powell and Greenough/Potomac Fuels Mitigation Task Forces held quarterly meetings or convened as needed to review cost-share applications. Following a model started by the Seeley Lake Rural Fire Department, in conjunction with DNRC, USFS and Swan Valley Volunteer Fire Department, the Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force was created to implement the community fire plan and has functioned effectively in this role for the past several years.

In 2008, the Blackfoot Challenge contracted through a competitive bid process with the Ecosystem Management Research Institute to produce a watershed-wide fuels assessment to help guide other efforts in the Blackfoot watershed. Following the model developed by the Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force, the Greenough/Potomac and North Powell Fuels Mitigation Task Forces were formed in 2009. A major task of the Task Forces is to provide convenient, professional assistance to private landowners with regard to fuels mitigation.

The Task Forces offer "one stop shopping" for private land owners who want assistance with mitigating fuel loads on their land. Federal and state funds are available for fuels thinning work on private lands, but determining which lands meet the criteria for which source, knowing when and where to apply for the funds, knowing how to complete the appropriate paper work, and knowing contractors that are available to do the thinning have been obstacles to landowners in the past.

These difficulties have been reduced by establishing local programs to apply for funds and a standard procedure for obtaining cost-share assistance. They developed one application form that is used to apply for any of the available funds. Once completed, they review applications and, for appropriate landowners, provide matching funds from an appropriate source. Landowners are provided with a list of reputable contractors to choose from to conduct the thinning project, and the forestry coordinator is available to assist with harvesting and thinning assessments and paper work.

Lincoln Restoration Committee meetings

The Lincoln Restoration Committee (LRC) is a group of private citizens reflecting diverse community interests. We formed in the fall of 2008 with the purpose of developing recommendations for restoration projects on the Lincoln Ranger District of the Helena National Forest. The work of our group is supported by the Montana Forest Restoration Committee (MFRC), which in 2007 adopted 13 restoration principles for on-the-ground use. The LRC's monthly meetings have been devoted to assessing where and how these principles might be applied in ways that are beneficial to the Lincoln community, the broader public, and the health of the land.

During the period of this grant, the LRC proposed three collaborative restoration projects on the Lincoln Ranger District. Two of these projects (Stonewall I and II) are currently under review following procedures of the National Environmental Policy Act for forest restoration and fire management on 1,500 acres. An additional project (Dalton Mountain) is currently in the initial scoping process to treat over 2,500 for forest restoration and fire management benefits.

Results

Potential for transferability of results

This grant resulted in benefits to producers and private landowners of the Blackfoot Watershed by implementing cooperation conservation planning across multiple and adjacent private parcels. We delivered more for fire management by coordinating forest improvement projects by collaborating with public agency planning efforts for landscape scale outcomes. We believe that our efforts are already benefiting public safety and forest health. However, we understand that this is only the initial stages of fully integrating public efforts with private participation.

Our natural resource management and community supported approach relies on effective communication, strong involvement by producers and private landowners, and tangible benefits that are directly tied to livelihood interests. This approach takes time in order to deliver proper pacing through programs that are non-threatening, pragmatic, and cost-effective. We have witnessed increased interest and participation in the two years of this grant. This follows from a three year history of building private landowner participation through NRCS and other partner cooperative efforts throughout the Blackfoot Watershed. We expect public agency integration to increase through the cooperative efforts of the MAIRS, and private participation to increase through collaboratively delivered technical assistance between NRCS, DNRC and the Blackfoot Challenge through local NRCS working groups and fuels mitigation task forces.

Interest in fire management and forest restoration continues to increase as more technical and financial assistance is delivered. This innovative is transferable to other locations where forest health, wildlife habitat, wildfire, and public and private land values overlap. This cooperative conservation planning is immediately transferable through the continued efforts of the MAIRS Blackfoot Project and local fuels mitigation task forces.

Conclusions

This innovative project leveraged NRCS investment in fire management and the conservation of forested lands by using a community-based approach for EQIP delivery of innovative Forest Health Practices in the Blackfoot watershed of Montana, focused on landscape level fire management by involving multiple and adjacent landowners. It substantially increased awareness of fire management practices and opportunities for private forest landowners, while increasing the integration of multiple agencies in delivering landscape level implementation of restoration activities. In addition, significant treatments occurred on private lands as a result of the technical and financial assistance leverage by the multiple public and private cooperators.

This grant resulted in strengthening cooperation among NRCS, Technical Service Provider Montana DNRC, the Blackfoot Challenge, and local community groups like the fuels mitigation task forces in coordinated interagency and partner delivery of forestry-related conservation assistance to private landowners in order to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of private working lands. All partners continue to have a long-term commitment to the conservation and stewardship of natural resources that will endure beyond the life of this grant.

This grant substantially increased the availability of technical expertise and assistance to private non-industrial forest landowners, and helped to integrate planning and other administrative issues between public and private land managers and owners, increasing the ability of private landowners to participate in forestry and conservation programs. This grant increased the level of communication and will result in continued cooperation among the partners.

In partnership with NRCS, DNRC and MSU Forestry Extension, we are working on a three phase approach to conservation and forest stewardship planning for multiple and adjacent landowners, which will provide these landowners with eligibility for EQIP. Through direct contact by letter, invitation and presentations, the partners are providing individual access to technical planning assistance and available financial incentive.

This grant identified several opportunities to strengthen these results and increase the level of transferability of lessons learned for increasing participation by private forest landowners in natural resource conservation and fire management on a landscape level.

Technical Assistance:

It was highly beneficial to have the assistance of trained NRCS forestry personnel and Technical Service Provider DNRC in partnership with community-based process coordinated by the Blackfoot Challenge in delivering on the ground awareness of local forest resource concerns and opportunities for private landowners. We highly recommend continued leverage of these collaborative partnerships and leveraging more “boots on the ground.”

Ranking criteria for 2012 is being collaboratively reviewed by partners thru the local NRCS working groups in early 2012 to identify priority resource concerns and strategic EQIP funding. 2011 ranking were as follows:

Lewis and Clark County

1. Will the application involve addressing timber stands that have not been infested by insect or disease by contracting practices that promote healthy and productive forest land?
2. Will the application involve the implementation of water quality practices to be contracted following forestry Best Management Practices (BMPs)?
3. Will the application involve developing and contracting a weed management plan?

Missoula County

1. Does the application include practices which improve the health and productivity of the local forest stands?
2. Does the application include practices which address the health of forest understory vegetation such as noxious weed management, grazing management (including facilitating practices), and the reseeded of disturbed sites?
3. Does the application include practices which improve or maintain air quality (example - chipping/shredding of slash instead of burning)?

North Powell Conservation District

1. Will the planned project(s) address fire hazard reduction issues?
2. Will the conservation plan/contract address noxious weeds?

We recommend continued involvement by all partners in these local NRCS working groups in order to deliver technical assistance and provide local resources benefits. In addition, the MAIRS Blackfoot Project is providing significant collaboration between public and private landowners in supporting a landscape approach to fire management and forest restoration.

Financial Assistance:

Larger scale forest health and restoration projects are more appropriate for the EQIP program where the more rigorous planning process and technical assistance is more relevant and cost effective as a whole. In addition, large-acreage forested producers are familiar with the financial assistance process through traditional EQIP.

However, small-acreage forest landowners would deliver more benefits to natural resource conservation through a cooperative program between NRCS and DNRC, much like how the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-313) revised the authority of the USFS to provide technical and financial assistance to states and private landowners on a variety of forestry issues, including forest management and stewardship, fire protection, insect and disease control, reforestation and stand improvement, and urban forestry. Such a program would increase the financial assistance from NRCS to small-acreage landowners by

providing a community-based approach to delivering financial assistance. In addition, this would provide more timely delivery of financial assistance to small-acre forested landowners by, as expressed by NRCS Chief Dave White at the Farm Bill Forum on June 1, 2011 in Bozeman, Montana, “Why can’t I walk in today and walk out tomorrow with a contract?”

We recommend that the partners continue to explore ways to establish such a financial assistance program administered by DNRC through a competitive process where watershed groups like the Blackfoot Challenge may be applied for financial assistance accessed through local task forces like the North Powell and Greenough/Potomac Fuels Mitigation Task Forces. This would streamline small-acreage private forest landowner access to assistance and increase delivery of financial assistance. Such a program also would reduce paperwork and timely contracting process for multiple landowners.

For example, fuel mitigation treatments around structures and access routes on a small property may total 6 acres. The administrative and personnel costs by NRCS personnel to develop a relatively small EQIP plan and contract far outweigh the amount of cost-share provided. The frameworks developed and utilized by the fuel mitigation task forces are timely and efficient with low overhead and thus lend themselves to multiple and adjacent applications. We recognize that it is unclear how current NRCS and FSA eligibility requirements, environmental assessments (CPA-52), adjusted gross income, species screens, etc., would be addressed under such an arrangement.

Landscape Applications:

The development of EQIP contracts with multiple and adjacent Landowners met with limited success due to the short time frame to increase knowledge and participation by private landowners in landscape level fire management, the time frame to deliver EQIP, and the limited availability of Special Initiative EQIP funds. Multiple and adjacent landowners were contacted individually through direct mail and personal contact, as well as through local community presentations focused on the “neighborhood” approach in the focus areas. However, multiple adjacent landowners did not apply for the program. The current NRCS planning and contracting process is demanding for small acreage landowners given the short time frame of this funding and the needed technical assistance to deliver knowledge and participation in fire management. In addition, substantial time is needed for each conservation plan and contract.

Practices:

Forest Slash Treatment (384) – Cost share incentive with producers for slash treatment is paid for after disposal of slash piles. This has posed a problem because contractors spend a significant amount of time (~80%) accumulating and treating slash yet in many cases landowners are required to wait a year to burn the piles and receive reimbursement for the practice. We suggest that the slash treatment practice be contracted as two practices or

allow for partial payments. For example, TSP DNRC withholds 10-15% until final slash disposal for similar forest treatment practices.

Fuel Break (383A) – While planning and implementing this practice, it became understood that the “Zone” specifications for this practice is unclear. Zone 1 is labeled as “Intensive Fuel Reduction” and Zone 2 as “Moderate Fuel Reduction.” However, the canopy separation in Zone 1 is often 10’ (based on 0-20% grade) and Zone 2 requires 20’ canopy separation. In cases where Zone 1 is 21-40% grade the canopy spacing is 20’ which is the same spacing as Zone 2. Thus, the explanation and justification to landowners for these zones was often challenging.

A review of the specifications and job sheet for this practice revealed that Zone 1 and 2 are quite similar with regard to actual treatments. A potential solution is to combine both Zones into one and base all separation distances on Charts 3, 4, and 5. A minimum width could be identified (i.e., 2 chains) or based on average tree height.

Forest Stand Improvement (666), Prescribed Forestry (409), Restoration of Rare or Declining Habitats (643), Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645) or other practices that address forest stand conditions for mixed conifer habitat types – During the grant period, the partners spent considerable time reviewing the use of Fuel Break (383A) practice as applied to treatment of forest resource conditions for fire management and restoration. It was clear during field reviews that the Fuel Break practices was well suited to deliver fire management outcomes in all forest types. However, in mixed conifer forest types (representing roughly half of forested acres in the Blackfoot Watershed) the Fuel Break practice is not well suited to restore ecosystem function. We recommend providing continued technical and financial assistance for the Forest Stand Improvement (666), and considering the Prescribed Forestry (409), Restoration of Rare or Declining Habitats (643), Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645), Restoration of Rare or Declining Habitats (code 643) or a similar practice other than Fuel Break to deliver restoration outcomes in mixed conifer forest types (cool-dry and cool-moist forest types) following initial guidance from the report Native Terrestrial Ecosystem Diversity of the Blackfoot Watershed, NRCS CIG 65-0325-08-015.

EQIP Awareness:

The EQIP and the associated application process needs further outreach of technical assistance in order to clarify opportunities to private landowners and producers. The process is often familiar to agencies and partner groups. However it is very complex to a landowner hearing about it for the first time. Very detailed information exists on the NRCS website. These descriptions often focus on national allocations, financial framework, final rule and legislative details. In contrast, landowner’s need information that directly affects them, such as: the planning process, practices available, taxable income, one practice started in the first year of contract, commitment to maintain project for life of project, AGI and species screens (and potential USFWS consultation). NRCS, NPCD, DNRC and other

partners spend considerable time explaining the framework and process of the program to landowners. It became clear that a simple information sheet covering the EQIP program would be helpful and reduce confusion over what the program does and does not do. An example of such an information sheet is attached in Appendix D.

EQIP Special Initiative - Phase 2:

NRCS requested a second phase of the Special Initiative for 2012. It is unclear whether this funding will be available, however it has been observed that adjacent landowners often see their neighbor's completed work and become more interested after seeing the results. A second round of Special Initiative may capture more adjacent landowners and begin to deliver on treating multiple and adjacent small-acreage forested parcels and achieve a landscape approach to fire management.