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National Fire Plan Grant success stories and how you can help

BY TIM GONZALES

Since the implementation of the 2001 National Fire Plan (NFP), federal funds have been allocated to encourage private landowners to make their properties more wildfire-resilient. The goal of the NFP is to protect communities from wildfires. Two main tools to achieve the goal are thinning dense vegetation to slow fire spread, and educating landowners on ways to create properties with good fire safety standards. NFP funds were awarded in grants to non-profit organizations, rural fire departments, counties, and state forestry departments.



Access with fire engine after fuels treatment during the Lone Mountain Fire 8-24-09.

One such grant was awarded to the Illinois Valley Community Development Organization (IVCDO) in the O'Brien area south of Cave Junction. The project work is being administered in partnership with the Illinois Valley Fire Department (IVFD) and is credited with saving at least one home along Lone Mountain Road. Grant work is still in process, but last August (2009) a fire started near Lone Mountain Road and spread rapidly in dense, dry fuels. Quite predictably for fires in the Illinois Valley, the Lone Mountain Fire traveled northeast, right toward the town of O'Brien. Due to typical afternoon summer winds, the fire soon had flame lengths exceeding 100 feet, and moved upon homes and other structures. Fortunately, several properties in the line of fire had already benefited from hazardous fuel-reduction work either through the NFP grant or by the homeowners themselves. Regrettably, the fast-moving fire destroyed five buildings but thankfully, no one lost their home. Two homes were spared thanks to fuel reduction around the house creating a defensible space, and access/escape routes providing safe passage for fire trucks. Along one driveway work had just been completed, resulting in a dramatic reduction of dense brush and small trees which allowed an IVFD fire truck access. That fire company assisted the property owner in saving his house and evacuating livestock and pets.

The outcome of another grant was also positive. Ashland Fire and Rescue developed the fuels-reduction prescription and coordinated the project. The work, performed by Lomakatsi Restoration Project, is credited with helping save at least 30 homes in the south Ashland area. In September 2009, less than one month after the dangerous Lone Mountain Fire, a fire started near Siskiyou Boulevard just 3.6 miles from downtown Ashland. Like the Lone Mountain Fire, the Siskiyou Fire spread quickly but in a westerly direction (due to strong dry east winds) toward hundreds of homes near Tolman Creek Road. The fire moved so quickly that several residents did not know about the fire until it was on their property. Unfortunately, one home and three other buildings were destroyed. It was truly amazing, however, that more property damage did not occur. Considering that over 160 homes were threatened

and 150 homes were evacuated, the Siskiyou Fire had the potential to do far more damage. As the fire traveled through dense vegetation, it arrived at the parcels treated by Lomakatsi, and flame lengths and fire intensities were reduced, enabling firefighters to stop the fire before it reached Tolman Creek Road. One resident near Tolman Creek Road attributes the work performed on her 20 acres to saving her home which was in the line of fire.

These are success stories. Our goal is to limit property damage, and avoid injuries to both the public and firefighters. The fires were contained at approximately 50 and 190 acres respectively because of able fire responders, excellent fire commanders, and available resources. But enough cannot be said about how the lack of fuel continuity retarded the spread of wildfires, thereby contributing to these successes. The unsung heroes in this success story are the diligent, responsible landowners who either signed up for available grant help or reduced hazardous fuels on their own recognition.

While firefighting is obviously inherently dangerous work, we as a society have a responsibility to make it as safe as possible by providing a safer fire environment near our homes. While paid state and federal firefighters have the enormous job of corralling a fire along its perimeter, city and rural fire departments (rural fire departments are composed mostly of volunteers) have the onerous responsibility of protecting residents and helping to evacuate occupants. By not providing adequate fire safety standards at our homes, we put ourselves and our firefighters at unnecessary risks. Let us not forget the fire in Southern California in 2009 which consumed 209 structures. As climate change is slowly altering our environment to encourage larger, more severe fires, it is more urgent than ever to provide more defensible space for our firefighters.

Dozens of NFP grants have been awarded to date in Jackson and Josephine Counties over the last seven years. Over 20,000 acres of private land have been treated through the grants. Many other landowners have treated their property on their own. There are still active cost-share grants available in both counties. There are also special needs grants which pay 100 percent if you qualify.

O'Brien resident Nigel Cooper escaping with pals Amos and Otis during the 8-24-09 Lone Mountain Fire.



If you are interested in having your property assessed for fire safety, please call me and I will provide you the phone number to contact the organization in your area.

Tim Gonzales is a Fire Mitigation & Education Specialist for the BLM in Grants Pass, OR, and can be reached at 541-471-6643. Tim has fire qualifications which include: Incident Commander Type III, Wildland Fire Investigator, Division/Group Supervisor, Safety Officer II and Structure Protection Specialist.

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