

Land, Water and People

Managing Fire with Fire

Now that spring has arrived, the fire managers at San Luis Valley Public Lands Center (SLVPLC) have begun to closely monitor fuel moistures and the weather. These conditions are monitored this time of year not to prevent fires, but to determine when and where we might actually start fires.

This probably sounds crazy to a lot of people, but fire has always played an important role in shaping the plant and wildlife communities in the Rocky Mountains. Fire managers use prescribed fire as a cost effective tool to reduce fuels that may feed an uncontrolled wildland fire and to improve the habitat for certain wildlife species.

The process of planning for a prescribed burn generally begins many months before any burning occurs. Fire and wildlife managers first locate areas that need treatment due to the type, age and density of the forest. Then, they sift through several other factors to determine what method of treatment to propose. This is followed by an environmental analysis to determine potential impacts to both the natural and human environment. The opportunity for public involvement occurs at several stages during this planning process.

Next, a comprehensive burn plan is developed if the decision is made to use a prescribed burn. The burn plan gets into the all the nitty gritty details needed to make sure the prescribed fire will meet management goals and objectives. The plan spells out what conditions are necessary to make sure the fire and smoke behaves as desired, what personnel and equipment will be needed, and what techniques will be used to carry out the burn. The plan also includes safety procedures, how the burn team will communicate with each other and what to do if things don't go as planned.

After much planning and organizing, the team is finally ready for action. First the area to be burned is prepared to ensure the fire stays within the planned area. Then, the team must wait until the burn "window" appears. The burn window occurs when the amount of moisture in the fuels to be burned reaches the target levels and the weather conditions are right. At that point, members of the burn team light a small test fire. If all goes well, the team can begin burning.

The prescribed burning proceeds in a very systematic manner to make sure that the fire is hot enough to meet management objectives, but not so hot that it burns too much or gets out of control. Members of the team constantly monitor the fire, the smoke and the weather conditions. After the burn is completed, the area continues to be monitored as the fire will often smolder for several days before it is completely out.

The above barely scratches the surface of the detail that goes into the planning and implementation of a prescribed burn. Sometime soon you may see smoke in the air above your public lands as we use fire to manage the land. This work will help reduce the risk of uncontrolled wildland fire while improving the habitat for the wildlife we all love to see.

Mike Blakeman is the acting public affairs officer for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. When not working, he's most often found scrambling around the mountains in the Upper Rio Grande Basin with a camera in his hand.