



Northern Rockies Ledger

*Considerations for the 2007 Fire Season
from the Northern Rockies Coordinating Group*

Doing Homework in the Fall

#6 – September 7, 2007. The number of fire managers tending the remaining large fires is dropping in the Northern Rockies, and they are returning to their planned land management projects. As the imminent danger from active fires subsides, we are revisiting the landscapes we plan to treat with prescribed fire. Some firefighters remain assigned to ensure the large fires behave until it snows, others remain ready for initial attack, and still others are assigned to these fall fire projects. Prescribed fires are ignited in areas previously analyzed to determine if fire would be beneficial and the proposals offered to citizens for comment.

The terms used to describe these fires might deserve some exploring. When land managers ignite the landscape, the projects are referred to as 'prescribed fires'. We also use terms like 'treating the land'. These medical analogies are one way of explaining that without the natural force of fire, these landscapes are not healthy. Reintroducing fire can also help protect the future health of the area by reducing the ladder fuels that help wildland fires to jump into the treetops and burn more destructively. Our fall homework can reduce the threat of large fires to communities to compliment communities' spring homework in creating defensible space.

Prescribed fires burn old vegetation and areas overstocked with young trees to make room for new plants and grasses used as browse and cover by wildlife. As they burn, nutrients from the burned vegetation are released back into the soil to promote the life cycle of the land. Another benefit of prescribed fire was reinforced this

summer as firefighters steered parts of dangerous fires into areas previously treated. In the treated areas, the flames normally drop out of the treetops to the ground where firefighters can be more effecting at slowing or stopping the fire.

While some may question the decision to start new fires after a very long and volatile wildfire season, years of experience teaches us that reintroducing fire to benefit and protect the forests and rangelands is as important as suppressing unwanted, destructive wildfires.

With any fire comes smoke. The difference with prescribed fire projects lies in the advance coordination and permitting with Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Idaho DEQ and the North Dakota Department of Health to determine how much and where smoke will be released, and any impacts on the airshed and public health. Federal and state fire and air managers continue this dialogue as weather and fuel conditions line up for a successful project.

Clearly, nature can be fickle and an unexpected weather change can undo all our preparation, but the goal of the project plans is to burn when the fuel moistures levels and weather conditions will allow us to meet the treatment objectives, and reduce the smoke impacts on people in the long term. When those weather and fuel moisture readings all come together, we call that our burning 'window' of opportunity. The nip in the September morning indicates that the window is slowly opening.

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