NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

Thinning on BLM Land in Durango Hills/Edgemont Ranch

San Juan Public Lands, Durango, CO

Many parcels of BLM land around Durango are completely surrounded by private land, so to access them agency personnel must get permission from an agreeable landowner. One such 40-acre parcel lay within the Edgemont Ranch and Durango Hills subdivisions northeast of Durango. The area was stocked with approximately 175 trees per acre of young, dense second-growth ponderosa pine with an occasional old, large yellow bark pine and the BLM wanted to remove some of those young trees to reduce the fire danger to nearby residents.

Photo 1. Area prior to thinning. Note how close together the trees are.

The BLM partnered with the Colorado State Forest Service and went out to talk to nearby residents. One landowner agreed to grant access through his property, and the CSFS worked with other landowners on mitigation projects on their private land. A primary concern of residents was the noise of chainsaws, so contractors first cut all trees and then went back into remove the slash.

The goal of the project was to reduce the ladder fuels and create gaps in the canopy so that a crown fire could not be sustained without extremely strong winds. Approximately 100 trees per acre were harvested; of these, 75 trees were less than 10 inches in diameter. Emphasis was placed on leaving the healthiest and largest trees. Some of the trees harvested were sold as firewood and others to woodworkers for use in decorative railings. Slash was piled at the landings for later burning.

Photo 2. Area after thinning. By removing some trees so that tree tops are not touching it will be much easier to keep a fire on the ground where firefighters have a chance of controlling it.

During the project several goshawk nests and an historic cabin site were found within the treatment area. The tree canopy immediately around these goshawk nests was not thinned but an understory treatment was accomplished by hand with the Southwest Youth Conservation Corps. The old cabin site was easily avoided during the thinning. Watershed improvement included creating slash-sediment traps by placing cull trees in an old roadbed that in places had become a 4-foot deep seasonal stream channel.