

NORTHEAST OREGON

EAST FACE OF THE ELKHORN MOUNTAINS PARTNERSHIP

“If you didn't clean up some of the fuels, the fire would just spread and everything would be gone.”
—Shelly Gray



PRODUCER PROFILE: Shelly Gray Union County, Oregon

Eastern Oregon ranchers Shelly and Jerry Gray understand the importance of protecting their land from wildfire. Their 1,100-acre property includes a mix of rangeland and forestland and is located in an area prone to high wildfire risk.

To help improve and protect their land, the Gray's entered into a contract with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to do pre-commercial thinning and slash disposal on their forestland. The primary objective of the thinning is to reduce the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire, but the work also provides many benefits to improve the health of the forest.

“In the summer, we get a lot of dry lightning, and that's what causes most of the fires up here,” said

Shelly Gray. “You can't control nature. If you didn't clean up some of the fuels, the fire would just spread and everything would be gone.”

Under the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains project, the Grays signed a contract with NRCS, in partnership with the Oregon Department of Forestry, to thin 52 acres of their forest for fuels reduction.

“Our primary goal was fuels reduction, but forest health was also key,” said Lane Parry, a private forest consultant working for the Grays.

“Pre-commercial thinning is a critical conservation practice to reduce the threat of loss to catastrophic wildfire,” said Mike Burton, NRCS district conservationist for Union County. “Overstocked forests are subject not only to catastrophic wildfire, but also to insects and disease that can really reduce the productivity of the forest and the value for wildlife habitat. By thinning timber stands and





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reducing ground fuels, a wildfire has less potential to spread into the crowns of trees, and it increases safe options for firefighting resources to suppress the fire. Managing stand densities also improves the overall resiliency and health of the forest.”

The Grays chose to use hand cutting and hand piling to achieve the thinning because they desired the aesthetic benefits of that method.

“With hand cutting, you have a lot better visibility in seeing which trees are the healthiest ones to leave, and which ones may have diseases or insects that you need to remove,” Parry said. “Hand cutting also has less ground disturbance. Once the piles are burned, you can’t tell that anything has been in there. And it makes more economical sense to hand cut a smaller acreage, because you save money on the transportation of large equipment.”

The property has been in the Gray family since Jerry’s father purchased it in the early ‘60s. Shelly and Jerry have done some pre-commercial thinning in the past to treat mistletoe, but they knew they needed to do more.

“We knew that it needed to be managed, but we didn’t want someone to come in and log it and take everything out,” Shelly said. “But we knew that we needed to help the land by improving the health of the forest.”

In 2008, the Grays enlisted Parry’s expertise and started doing some pre-commercial thinning. Later, they were able to do some commercial logging while still maintaining the natural aesthetics and beauty of the property.

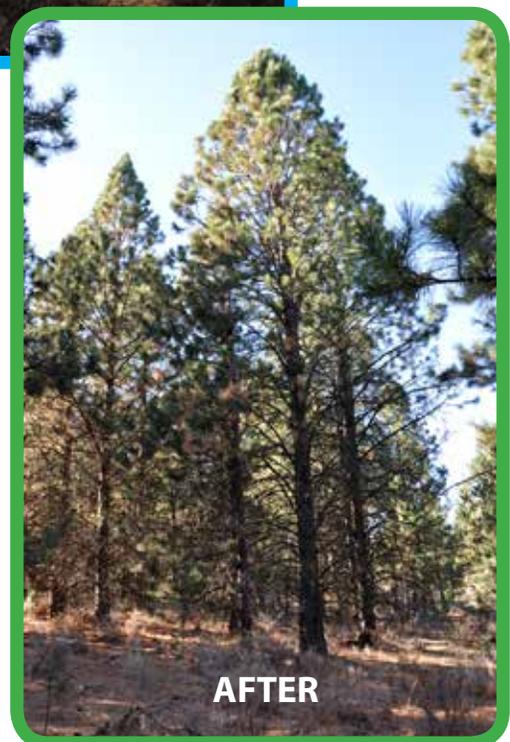
“The logging opened it up and now we can see down more through the trees, but it doesn’t look like it’s been logged,” Shelly said. “That’s the beauty of it.”

Now that they have done pre-commercial thinning, combined with commercial thinning, the Gray’s feel confident that their forestland can withstand a wildfire. Plus, it provides excellent grazing areas

for their cattle and recreation opportunities for the family.

“With it thinned, it’s easier to see the cows,” Shelly said. “They really do well up here. They eat the grasses they prefer first, then they come back through and eat some other grasses. It’s spread out enough and we don’t put too many cows in here. They like being up here in the shade in the trees when it’s hot.”

“This land is our pride and joy for our recreation area,” Shelly said. “We love to bring our family up here and relax and hear the wind in the trees—it’s



just beautiful. You can really forget about being at work when you come up here.”

Many of the Gray’s neighbors are also doing pre-commercial thinning on their forests under the East Face project. The overall goal is to reduce wildfire risk across the shared public and private boundary in the Powder River – Grande Ronde watersheds.

“The East Face project is a collaboration with the Forest Service and private landowners, using the services of the NRCS and ODF,” Burton said. “Collaboration is necessary on a watershed scale to achieve the large-scale impacts to reduce the hazard of catastrophic wildfire. We have to work together across the federal and private land boundaries, because resource problems like wildfire don’t observe any of those political boundaries.”

NRCS has funding available in 2016 for the East Face project. To apply, contact the USDA Service Center in Baker City at (541) 523-7121 or La Grande at (541) 963-4178.

About the East Face Partnership

The East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains project is funded by the Joint Chief’s Landscape Initiative—a collaboration between the chiefs of two USDA agencies, the NRCS and the U.S. Forest Service. The project aims to accomplish goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy by reducing the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire through forest fuels reduction, restoring and maintaining landscapes, and improving fire response.

The East Face project combines the skills and expertise of the NRCS, the Forest Service, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These agencies are working together to proactively address wildfire issues in the East Face project area with an “All Hands, All Lands” approach—spanning both public and private lands. The project targets fuels reduction treatments on more than 46,000 acres in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; 1,224 acres of BLM land; 4,000 acres of ODFW land; as well as adjacent private lands.

The long-term goal is to minimize potential impacts from wildfire on private residences, natural resources, and public infrastructure, while also improving overall forest health.

The East Face project will reduce the impacts of wildfire to the watersheds supplying the irrigation needs of local farmers, and create areas of reduced fuel loadings near the municipal water supplies for La Grande and Baker City. It will also protect key habitat for federally-threatened bull trout, steelhead, and Chinook salmon.

NRCS’ role in the partnership is to provide funding and manage contracts for eligible landowners to implement conservation practices on private lands; while ODF provides technical assistance to private landowners to support the development of forest management plans.

The Forest Service completed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) in October 2015, which provides several alternatives to treat the federal lands within the East Face project area. A final EA is slated for release in early 2016. Work on federal lands may begin as early as summer 2016. For more information about the EA, visit the East Face project website at:

www.fs.usda.gov/goto/EastFace

Published November 2015 by NRCS Oregon.



ODF Forester Jana Peterson, consultant Lane Parry, and landowner Shelly Gray discuss her forest management plan. NRCS photos by Tracy Robillard.