

## ***National Fire Plan***

### ***Hungry Horse/West Glacier***

**Written by Betty Higgins, Incident Information Officer**

Flathead County, Montana, covers 5,257 square miles, roughly the size of the State of Connecticut. Approximately 77% of its land area is in government ownership, including large portions of the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park. Of the remaining 23% in private ownership, 62% is forested. The forest products industry is the county's largest manufacturing activity, in 2000 it directly employing 1,877 persons and supporting another approximately 3,000 derivative jobs, together totaling 15.5% of the county work force. The tourism industry is also heavily dependent upon forest resources for its viability. Tourists come to northwest Montana to enjoy their chosen recreational and aesthetic pursuits.

Arguments about how the areas public forest resources should be managed are frequent and impassioned, and all too often the failure to achieve acceptable resolution of those disagreements has led to cancellations or litigation of proposed federal or state management projects.

In 1994 two organizations were formed to explore ways resolve the situation.

- The Flathead Forestry Projects' (FFP) mission statement is *"Recognizing the need for pro-active, community-based solutions to mutually-dependent social, ecological, and economic concerns. The FFP has three unifying goals: (1) to promote community trust and collaborative processes; (2) to ensure forest and ecosystem health; and (3) to provide for a sustainable resource-based economy within the region."*
- The Flathead Economic Policy Center's (FEPC) mission statement is *"FEPC's mission is to develop and pilot ways for communities to achieve economic and environmental sustainability. Its particular focus is community-based stewardship forestry and collaborative problem solving in natural resource-based communities."*

Both organizations are using collaborative partnerships to enable the communities of Hungry Horse to West Glacier to strive and be sustainable in a fire adapted ecosystem. The following are a few success stories from this endeavor.

#### **Cedar Flats Demonstration Project**

In May 1996, Deputy District Ranger Deb Manley asked FFP participants whether they might be interested in the Cedar Flats area on the Glacier View Ranger District as a potential project site. The major activities she foresaw were fire hazard reduction in the urban/wildlife interface and the beginning of an effort to restore the site to more natural historic conditions. FFP was intrigued by the possibilities, particularly since Cedar Flats was easily accessible from a paved road and close to a major town (Columbia Falls). This offered an optimal situation to facilitate significant community involvement in the project. In July 1996 the first field tour was held.

Cedar Flats is a part of a much larger area burned in 1929 by a wildfire that started near Half Moon, west of Columbia Falls. Old stumps indicate that extensive logging occurred probably before and certainly after the fire. Ponderosa pine was planted in parts of the area after the fire, probably during the Civilian Conservation Corps era. The rest of the trees on the site developed through natural regeneration. Lodge Pole pine dominates most of the new forest, and in some areas there are over 2,000 trees per acre.



**Hungry Horse and West Glacier citizens  
meeting to discuss Cedar Flats Project.**

## ***National Fire Plan***

### ***Hungry Horse/West Glacier (cont.)***

In 1967 the gentlest terrain in the area was thinned using a dozer that pushed through the forest, pulling behind it a roller equipped with cutting blades. The “roller thinning” created straight, 14-foot-wide strips of knocked down and cut off vegetation, with untouched 2- to 8-foot-wide leave strips in-between. In aerial photographs of the area, it looks like a giant comb was dragged through the forest. After the thinning, trees at the edges of the uncut sections received more sunlight, and for awhile, less competition from the greatly reduced vegetation in the cut areas. This “released” them, producing temporary growth spurts. In time, however, the cut areas grew back dense stands of birch and mountain maple, again increasing competition for sunlight, space, and nutrients.



During a field tour, FFP participants explored potential issues and options. The area is immediately adjacent to residential developments and is heavily used by many recreationists. Also, wildlife such as deer, bear, smaller animals, and a variety of bird species use the area. Therefore, any forest treatment would need to take into account the different, and sometimes competing, needs of adjacent private landowners, recreationists, and wildlife.

It was fairly obvious that the roller thinned areas needed restoration – reducing tree densities, “softening” the edges of the strips, and creating conditions which would encourage the growth of the broader diversity of species traditionally found on the land, such as larch. But it was also important that the roller thinned strips not turn into “shooting galleries” – long, visually open strips that do not afford game animals reasonable escape or hiding cover and make them more vulnerable to hunters. Wildlife needed secluded areas with good feed sources.

Numerous grants were received to fund this stewardship project. The National Forest Foundation, Henry P. Kendall Foundation, and North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation, Weyerhaeuser Family Foundation, and the U.S. EPA offered grants. The demo project was completed in 1999. The goal of the Cedar Flats project was to show “that ecosystem management can result in both a healthy environment and a sustainable economy” and to continue “to demonstrate the power of inclusive public processes to effectively engage citizens in resolving their shared problems.”

The treated ecosystem has definitely been placed in a healthier condition, and the value of increased citizen involvement clearly shown. A more sustainable economy *could* be achieved if the community along with state, federal and local agencies could implement more projects like the Cedar Flats Demo Project.



Cedar Flats Demonstration Site before thinning and other fuel reduction projects.



Cedar Flats after thinning, slash and piling. Pile were burned during the winter months.

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### ***Hungry Horse/West Glacier (cont.)***

#### **Hungry Horse to West Glacier Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program for Landowners**

Sparked by the fuel reduction work on federal lands the Flathead Forestry Project and Flathead Economic Policy Center applied for and was awarded \$190,000 in National Fire Plan grant money from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. The overall goal of the grant funding is to help lessen catastrophic wildfires and its threat to public and firefighter safety and to property. Specific objectives are to:

- Create conditions in and around individual structures that will limit the transmission of fire from Wildland to structures.
- Remove or modify fuels in and/or adjacent to developed areas in the Wildland urban interface through the creation of fuel breaks, thinning, and pruning, etc.
- Enable local fire departments/districts to up-date their community fire plans



Home before treatment



Home after treatment

#### **Hungry Horse to West Glacier Fuels Reduction Project**

The Hungry Horse Ranger District selected the communities of Coram, Hungry Horse and West Glacier for it's top priority for treatments on federal lands. The project will create 198 acres of defensible space zone on federal lands. The objective is to reduce the fuel loading and tree stem density, thereby decreasing the potential for a severe crown fire and allowing for more effective direct or indirect fire suppression tactics. This also allows fire suppression personnel a safer and more effective location from which to take action against a wildfire in the immediate vicinity of homes and other structures.

**These defensible space zones will extend 100 to 500 feet into the federal lands from the private land boundary.**

#### **Cedar Spoon Fuel Reduction Project**

Planning for the area between Teakettle Mountain and Trumbull Creek has started and will include treatments similar to the Hungry Horse to West Glacier Fuel Reduction Project. It will also include control burning along Teakettle Mountain.