

Hazardous fuels treatments slow fire advance on HK Complex

September 5, 2019

Overview: Proactive hazardous fuel treatments on the Heppner Ranger District of the Umatilla National Forest were instrumental in changing fire behavior of the HK Complex, which burned approximately 2,700 acres. Thinning treatments happened over the course of a decade to reduce fuel loading in the project area and restore resilience to the Forest.

Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project:

This 10,280 acre project, located approximately 15 miles south of Heppner, Oregon, was implemented on the Umatilla National Forest in order to reduce fuels and the risks of stand replacing wildfire within the area through timber harvest activities and mechanical fuels treatments (4,020 acres), followed by non-commercial thinning (2,760 acres), and, yet to be completed, prescribed under burning (10,280 acres). Prior to treatment, the project area consisted of dense, overstocked mixed conifer stands loaded with dead and down fuels.

HK Complex:

On Aug. 5, 2019, multiple new fires were reported on the Umatilla National Forest following widespread thunderstorms with no precipitation. Numerous new starts were reported near the Alder Creek Skookum Trailhead, approximately two miles east of Tupper Guard Station on the Heppner Ranger District. A total of 12 new fires were identified and managed as the HK Complex. Hot and dry conditions, as well as strong afternoon winds, contributed to rapid fire growth.



Driven by the strong winds, the Little Bear incident within the complex burned into the Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project area. Once in the treated area, fire behavior moderated, reduced flame lengths, and allowed firefighters to more safely and effectively suppress the wildfire.

In addition to providing more opportunities for firefighters to safely engage and contain the fire, the fire thinned out the underbrush, small trees and shrubs, while leaving many of the large trees still intact. The fire has set back succession, providing some excellent forage for big game and good brood rearing habitat for upland game birds like grouse and wild turkeys. Additionally, 59% of the entire area burned at a low severity and only 1% was deemed a high severity fire.

The Forest will continue to monitor treatment activities and benefits from the HK Complex utilizing an interagency system called Fuel Treatment Effectiveness Monitoring (FTEM). This learning tool allows agencies to better understand the effects of fuels reduction projects on wildfires across the landscape so we can tailor future treatments to further increase the forests resiliency to natural disturbance.

