

Forest Products Modernization: Innovation Underway

Sharing the Workload Through an Intra-regional NEPA Team in Region 5

The need for post-disturbance restoration and salvage projects in the Pacific Southwest Region has increased significantly over the past few years due to extensive fires, bark beetle outbreaks, and drought. To meet the growing workload for environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the region is considering sharing interdisciplinary team (IDT) staff across provinces. The region tested the feasibility of sharing IDT staff across units with the Railroad Fire Restoration Project. After the 2017 Railroad Fire, several national forests in the Southern California Province shared staff with the Sierra National Forest in the Southern Sierra Province to assist with NEPA documentation for post-disturbance forest health restoration, fuels management, and salvage harvest. The project has successfully distributed a heavy NEPA workload across the region to fully utilize available staff and ensure implementation of needed work in response to recent disturbances.

Ingredients for Success

The success of the Railroad Fire Restoration Project intraregional IDT lies primarily in the diversity and experience of the team members and their prioritization of the project. Most critically, the Pacific Southwest Region made it a high priority to complete the NEPA process using IDT staff from the Southern California Province. In addition, the Sierra Nevada Province added a co-leader to the IDT to provide local expertise and additional direction for staff from the Southern California Province. Over the course of the project, leadership and team members adjusted priorities and workloads to accommodate project deadlines and unexpected changes.

Lessons Learned

While the team was very successful overall, some specific procedural steps have helped or hindered the project's progress:

- The team allowed changes to the planned program of work throughout the NEPA process. Setting a deadline for changes would have facilitated the NEPA process and kept everyone on the same page.



Damage from the Railroad Fire. Credit: Jeff Wells, Cleveland National Forest

- The team saved time by using the Farm Bill Categorical Exclusion template and the Sierra National Forest Land Management Plan standards and guidelines and best management practices.

Next Steps

Given the success of the Railroad Fire Restoration Project intraregional IDT, Region 5 aims to implement more projects with staff-sharing across units for NEPA review. If widespread disturbance continues, the region now has an opportunity to utilize intraregional NEPA resources to implement needed forest health restoration and fuels management and to salvage projects.

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