U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Region X
130 228th Street, SW
Bothell, WA 98021-9796

FEMA

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

FireCorps – Fire Mitigation and Education Project
Valley County, Idaho
FEMA-LPDM-PJ-10-ID-2008-009

The University of Idaho's College of Natural Resources applied to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Legislative Pre-Disaster Mitigation (L-PDM) program for funding assistance with a wildfire fuel load reduction project in Central Idaho. The FireCorps project would reduce risk from fire to people and property on 3,165 acres of Valley County's wildland/urban interface.

Although the area surrounding McCall has a history of wildfires, in 2007 the forest fire season has shattered previous record years for acreage burned and money spent. Fires burned over 600,000 acres across Payette and Boise National Forests at the cost of over $82.6 million. Areas surrounding McCall face particularly high-risk due to high development rates coupled with dense vegetation. Valley County is one of the fastest growing counties in Idaho and has experienced recent and rapid growth of homes in wildland/urban interface areas. The area is also a large tourist destination, with over 240,000 visitors each year to Ponderosa State Park and the UI McCall field campus.

Although infrequent, fires in Valley County have the potential to result in large, intense and damaging fires such as the 1994 Corral Fire, 1994 Blackwell Fire, and the 2000 Burgdorf Junction Fire. Due to a rapid rise in population and expanding development, many people are now living within high wildfire risk areas of the wildland/urban interface, in the forests between and around primary population centers. There is little differentiation between forest and urban fuels in many areas, creating conditions in which homes essentially become a component of the wildland fuel complex.

The geographic areas near the community of McCall targeted for wildfire vegetation management under the proposed action were identified as high risk in the *Valley County Wildland/Urban Interface Wildfire Mitigation Plan*, the *Valley County All Hazard Mitigation Plan*, and is listed in the Federal Register as a Wildland/Urban Interface Community within the vicinity of Federal Lands that is at high risk from wildfires.

The need for this action is to reduce or eliminate the risk to people and to property from wildfires in Valley County. From this need, Valley County identified the preferred alternative (vegetative fuel management and removal) as a high priority in the *Valley County All Hazard Mitigation Plan*.

The Proposed Action would 1) selectively remove excessive vegetation with light equipment used by private contractors on approximately 3,165 acres of publicly-owned lands, and 2) continue to firewise the UI McCall field campus with structural and non-structural retrofits. The geographic areas targeted for wildfire mitigation include the UI McCall field campus (14 acres), Ponderosa State Park (1,515 acres), and the Herald Nokes Family Experimental Forest (1,650 acres). The vegetation to be removed would be brush, small live trees, and dead/downed vegetation. Work would occur mostly in the summer and sites would be accessed from existing roads. Essential light equipment to be used to implement fuels reduction includes chainsaws, power brush saws, power, and hand-held pruning tools, small wheeled tractors with front load forks, power chippers, quad rider, pick-up trucks and trailers. Vegetation removal activities would not occur within 100 feet of wetlands or water resources.

Fuels Reduction

All true firs within the UI McCall field campus would be removed. The remaining trees (Grand Fir, Douglas Fir, and Ponderosa Pine) would have branches pruned to a height of about 12 feet above the ground. Throughout Ponderosa State Park and the Herald Nokes Family Experimental Forest (Nokes Forest), true firs and Lodge Pole Pines contributing to ladder fuels (only up to about eight inch breast height diameter) would be felled by hand. Ponderosa Pines and Douglas Firs would be branch pruned up to about 12 feet from the ground on trees with a diameter at breast height (DBH) of 14 inches or greater. Work would initially be concentrated in the wildland urban interface along property boundaries in locations to optimize hazard reduction relative to nearby home concentrations. A 30-foot boundary area free of highly combustible material will be established between structures and roads, and the forested areas. From this perimeter, extending about 100 feet into forested stands; dead vegetation, brush, true firs and Lodge Pole Pines will be removed, and lower limbs will be pruned (as described above), Large debris may be used as firewood or milling for buildings, and chipped debris may be used as pathways or compost at the UI McCall field campus. Disposal of vegetative debris removed from Ponderosa State Park would be by burning at a previously approved and permitted burning site within the Park. Debris would be chipped and left as ground cover at the Nokes Forest. The UI McCall field campus would work with the Nokes Forest and Ponderosa State Park to hire private crews to manage vegetation and reduce fuels for the 2 year project. The Nokes Forest would manage the work of crews on University of Idaho property, while Ponderosa State Park would manage the work of crews on park property. Estimates from the Nokes Forest and Ponderosa State Park report that approximately 5 weeks would be spent on the Nokes property each year and 5 weeks would be spent at Ponderosa State Park each year.

McCall Campus Firewise Retrofits

The McCall Outdoor Science School (MOSS) would work with sub-contractors to firewise existing UI McCall field campus facilities. Structural and non-structural retrofitting would be accomplished so that facilities would meet or exceed current building codes. Improvements at the UI McCall field campus would include: replacing all cedar shake roofs with metal (exclusive of the dining lodge, as UI has already completed work); replacing remaining single pane windows, vent screens, and wood doors with firewise materials such as metal grates and window frames, double pane glass, and metal/fiberglass doors; repairing and replacing hydrants and fire hoses; and installing landscaping and an irrigation system.

Limited ground disturbance is planned for installation of the irrigation system. The irrigation system would be in the open area around the Administration building, student living units, and the faculty/family units. Contractors would dig shallow, narrow trenches (approximately 3 inches wide by 8 inches deep) and bury automated irrigation lines. Contractors would augment and improve the remaining soil and seed with native vegetation throughout the 3 acres and install turf grass in high impact areas. Turf placement would be on approximately 1/3 acre.

Members of the general public would have the opportunity to observe the results of the vegetation removal activities, as well as to learn the rationale behind it. MOSS program staff would be primarily responsible for educational interfaces and educational programs that communicate the purposes, goals, and techniques used in mitigation, and show the public how to implement these lessons onto their property.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and FEMA's implementation regulations, FEMA prepared a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) to identify and evaluate potential environmental impacts resulting from the alternatives presented in the EA and to determine whether to prepare an Environmental Impacts Statement (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). Alternatives evaluated in the EA include: 1) reduction and management of fuel loads through manual means in the UI McCall field campus, Ponderosa State Park, and the Herald Nokes Family Experimental Forest (Preferred Alternative) and 2) No Action. Other alternatives were considered but not carried forth and are described in the EA. The Draft EA was submitted for public review and comment on July 9, 2009. FEMA did not receive substantive comments on the Draft EA.

FINDINGS

Based upon the attached Mitigation and Conservation Measures and Final EA, and in accordance with FEMA's regulations in 44 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 10 for environmental consideration, including Executive Orders (EO) addressing floodplains (EO 11988), wetlands (EO 11990), and environmental justice (EO 12898), FEMA determined the proposed project will not significantly affect the quality of the natural and human environment. As a result of this FONSI, an EIS will not be prepared (44 CFR Part 10.8) and the project as described in the attached Final EA may proceed.

APPROVAL

9-24-09

Mark G. Eberlein
Regional Environmental Officer
FEMA Region X

Date

Attachment A:

MITIGATION AND CONSERVATION MEASURES

Mitigation and conservation measures refer to actions that would minimize or eliminate potential adverse environmental impacts that could result from the Proposed Action. Measures include:

- The applicant is responsible for selecting, implementing, monitoring, and maintaining best management practices to control erosion and sediment, reduce spills and pollution, and provide habitat protection.
- Any change to the approved scope of work will require re-evaluation for compliance with NEPA and other laws and Executive Orders.
- In the event that archaeological or historic materials are discovered during project activities, work in the immediate vicinity shall be discontinued, the area secured, and the SHPO and FEMA notified.
- Care should be taken during project implementation to avoid affecting historic properties including the McCall Field Campus Dining Lodge and Nazarene Camp facilities in Ponderosa State Park.
- In the event that Canada lynx or northern Idaho ground squirrels are discovered during project activities, work in the immediate vicinity shall be discontinued and the IDFG and USFWS would be notified.
- Work on the trees should occur outside of the nesting season of migratory birds, which typically occurs from March to the end of August. If clearance activities must take place within the nesting season, a breeding bird survey shall be performed prior to removal activities by a qualified professional.
- Vegetation removal shall not occur within 100 feet of wetlands and water resources.