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NEWS

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Agreement Allows Federal, State Foresters to Battle Beetles Across Boundary Lines

Note to editors: Photos of the Husko-Cree Creek project are available upon request.

SALIDA, Colo. – A soon-to-be-completed wildfire mitigation project in central Colorado’s Sawatch Range highlights a program that lets foresters work across ownership boundaries to more effectively deal with mountain pine beetles, fuels mitigation and other forest health issues.

The Husko-Cree Creek Timber Sale was established to improve forest health and create a fuelbreak to prevent the spread of wildfire between private and public land. Located on the San Isabel National Forest and an adjacent tract of private property impacted by mountain pine beetles, it is considered a sale because a logging contractor is paying to remove the valuable wood. This cross-boundary timber project is possible because of the Good Neighbor Authority – a little-known agreement between the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) and federal land management agencies like the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

CSFS Salida District Forester Damon Lange, who acted as timber sale administrator for the Husko-Cree Creek project, says that the Good Neighbor Authority allows foresters to expand and more strategically locate fuelbreaks than those created on private land alone.

“In essence, we have doubled the effectiveness of this fuelbreak by using the Good Neighbor Authority,” Lange said.

“Boundaryless Management”

The Good Neighbor Authority was established by the 2000 Interior Appropriations Act, intended to provide “boundaryless management” when implementing forest management projects in the West. The authority was later revised by the National Forest Insect and Disease Emergency Act of 2009, which made the authority permanent. This authority allows the CSFS to extend forest treatments from state or private lands onto USFS or BLM lands, under agreement with those agencies.

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“Good Neighbor allows us to work across boundaries,” said Lange, a 15-year veteran of the CSFS. “It lets us focus on utilizing environmental features like openings in the forest that serve as natural fuelbreaks, regardless of ownership.”

Lange says another benefit of the authority is that it results in more natural looking fuelbreaks than boundary-line projects that result in a “checkerboard” of straight-edged patches where trees have been removed.

Any project executed under the umbrella of the Good Neighbor Authority must demonstrate similar management objectives on both sides of a property line, such as the removal of insect-infested trees, hazardous fuels reduction or wildlife habitat improvement. CSFS Forest Management Division Supervisor Joe Duda says the authority was initially established to deal with fire mitigation along property boundaries in the wildland-urban interface (WUI).

“The benefits of the Good Neighbor Authority are apparent in the wildland-urban interface, where access may be difficult or costs for small projects are high,” Duda said. “The authority allows us to combine smaller individual projects for a greater landscape-scale impact.”

The Good Neighbor Authority also provides the means to create fewer miles of new roads in order to meet forest management objectives, as existing roads on private land often can be utilized when extending projects onto federal lands.

“We have a lot of national forest lands that border private property, but it’s hard for the U.S. Forest Service to access some of these properties through private land,” said USFS Forester Sam Schroeder, who was involved in some of the first Good Neighbor projects in the Salida Ranger District. He says that by utilizing the authority, the USFS can meet management objectives on national forest land that may have otherwise been inaccessible.

Filling Gaps in a Fuelbreak

In high-elevation lodgepole and ponderosa pine forests west of Salida, Colo., the CSFS and USFS are working together on the Husko-Cree Creek Timber Sale to prevent a catastrophic wildfire. A Chaffee County logging contractor is removing the trees – about half of which were killed by mountain pine beetles in 2000-2001 – as part of a massive fuelbreak.

“A lot of beetle-killed pine would have ended up dead and downed, and may have ultimately caused a very intense, unstoppable wildfire,” said Lange.

The sale has become part of a larger project designed to improve forest health in the area through thinning and prescribed fire. Ultimately, the Cree Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project will yield a 1,500-acre fuelbreak in Chaffee County.

“Good Neighbor made it possible for us to manage the forest in a healthy manner on both the private and federal sides of the fence,” said Justin Anderson, referring to his role as the USFS timber sale contractor for the Husko-Cree Creek project. He says that without the program, the USFS would not have been able to create contiguous fuelbreaks surrounding nearby private land.

“It allowed us to connect the dots between fuelbreaks,” said Anderson.

By utilizing the Good Neighbor Authority, Lange and the CSFS were able to facilitate a cross-boundary agreement with the USFS and the private landowner, Bill Husko. Husko allowed a logger access through his property to the national forest, while the USFS permitted Husko’s 144-acre fuelbreak to extend onto the national forest to enhance its own project. The logger was willing to pay to remove the timber because it was valuable enough to sell for a profit, so he absorbed the majority of the project costs.

Husko said that although landowners may be leery that the Good Neighbor Authority would allow a contractor to spend several years crossing through their private property to harvest timber on the other side, the parties involved in this sale made sure they had the right planning and equipment to complete the project in a reasonable amount of time.

“They really knocked it out,” he said.

Colorado lumber mills have purchased the green wood from the Husko-Cree Creek project for use as pallets, while the beetle-killed blue-stain wood is being used for heating pellets for stoves or as ornamental construction logs. In addition, a wholesaler has bought some of the dead wood that has been converted to firewood.

Colorado the Good Neighbor Pilot State

Although the Good Neighbor Authority applies to 12 Western states, Colorado test-piloted the policy over the past decade. USFS and CSFS personnel in the Salida and Leadville ranger districts, who served as some of the state’s figurative guinea pigs, had no definitive procedures to direct their combined efforts.

“There was no manual. There were only basic guidelines, but we learned how to make it happen,” said Lange.

Anderson and Lange suggest that private landowners should consider utilizing the Good Neighbor Authority when it makes sense to extend their private land forest treatments onto adjacent public lands. They also encourage foresters throughout Colorado and other Western states to use the Good Neighbor Authority to strengthen their local inter-agency relationships and capitalize on the program’s benefits.

“I’m hoping that we become the example... that people see our success and get on board,” said Anderson.

To learn more about the Good Neighbor Authority, contact the nearest CSFS district office.

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