Successful Fuel Mitigation through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

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We recently passed the landmark of one million acres burned in 2017. So far. We have been choking on smoke for months now, and are unable to see our beautiful mountains. The loss of 2 firefighters, homes, livestock, wildlife, historic structures and damage to grazing lands, forests, streams, and national parks is beyond disturbing.

Figure 1 Overstocked Forest Site

A recent epidemic of forest pests resulted in high mortality in both the pine and Douglas-fir forests. With some of the dead trees still standing, some on the ground and in various stages of rotting and falling, many of ourforests on both private and public land are a dry, tangled mess and combined with drought, a severe fire hazard. With many houses built in the forest now, some forest management practices like prescribed fire and timber harvest are unusable in these inhabited areas.

Figure 2 Fuel Break-Before

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can help private landowners plan a strategy to protect their property and homes, improve forage for livestock, or accomplish wildlife goals. The practices used to help landowners develop these plans can create defensible or survivable space around structures, create fuel breaks in the forest, thin and prune precommercial sized trees, dispose of slash and control weeds. These plans, based on landowner goals and developed through our technical services can go through a competitive ranking process for financial assistance through the EQIP program. EQIP is not a "grant", but rather it is a program where NRCS shares in the cost of installing these fuel-reducing practices at a flat rate per acre.

Fuel reduction measures will not stop a fire, but are intended to keep a fire on the ground, giving firefighters a chance to control it, instead of in the crowns of the trees where it cannot be fought. Precommercial thinning is intended to improve the health of the trees remaining on the site through reduced competition for light, moisture, nutrients, and space. Maintenance is needed for all practices, to continue the crown or stem spacing achieved with the work. Scouting for and controlling noxious weeds must be done for several years after fuel reduction treatment. Grass seeding is also needed sometimes in disturbed areas.

Successful forestry work has been accomplished through the EQIP program in all private forested areas of the county, from Wolf Creek and Craig to Rimini to York. Two homes in the Scratchgravel Hills survived the Corral Fire, and the owners had recently completed fuel breaks through EQIP.

Figure 3 Fuel Break-After

The Helena NRCS field office welcomes the chance to come out and look at your property with you, discuss your goals, and help you lay out a plan to achieve them. If you are interested in funding for your plan, we can help you with the application and eligibility for that process. We can also show you completed practices on the ground to give you an idea of what the property could look like, post-treatment. If you are interested, please contact the Helena NRCS office at 406-449-5000 extension 3.

Stewardship Part 4: Forestry

The preceding article gives good background on good stewardship practices on forested property. Part of living in forested land, whether it's in a truly rural setting, or in the Wildland Urban Interface (which Lewis & Clark County has so much of), is learning what is a healthy forest. The forests we live near (and in) have evolved with fire as part of the overall "management". Along with precipitation and temperature, fire is a part of the balance within forested environments.

Figure 4 Five years post treatment

As the county has allowed for subdivisions in these forested areas, landowners have learned—some to their own detriment—that management of forested land will always be necessary. Since we cannot allow fires to just burn in developed property, landowners need to understand the need to manage their trees to mimic what a fire would do. Removal of understory, management of new trees, thinning of trees (200 or so per acre) and removal of lower limbs all help to reduce the risk of a catastrophic fire.

A lot of people who live in the trees worry that their view will change or that the current population of animals will change and both things are true. What they don't always realize though is that in most areas around here, we're not seeing the forests as they would be if they were allowed to just exist naturally with periodic fire. The suppression of fire means that plants that would normally burn frequently are allowed to grow and create ladder fuels for fire to climb into the crowns of the trees, which leads to a crown fire on top of a ground fire. That type of fire causes the most destruction and takes longer to heal up after the fire is out. It can cause the soil to not effectively absorb water which can increase flooding risks. Any trees that are left are more susceptible to death from the aftereffects of the fire.

The risk of fire is real, as we all saw in the past several months. Please take the measures necessary to protect your home and lives from catastrophic fire.