

Land, Water and People

May 29, 2021

A day on a prescribed fire

By: Gregg Goodland

Light puffy clouds dot the lower levels of a slightly hazy and mostly blue sky. In an open meadow with stunning views of Mogote Peak, Blanca Peak and the Culebra Range, the light breeze tickles the few dozen firefighter's faces as they gather for the critical briefing. The scene is similar to one we see often during the summer wildfire months. Women and men, donning their signature dirty yellow Nomex shirts and green pants, listen intently as the burn boss and other leaders provide clear instructions on the planned prescribed burn. The briefing will ensure everyone proceeds into and throughout the operation with the same purpose and intent.

Straddling the Colorado/New Mexico border the Bighorn/Stateline prescribed fire was designed to reduce heavy surface fuel loading and rejuvenate a traditionally open forested area. Ponderosa and pinyon pine are intermixed with the Douglas and white fir in a forest that frequently gives way to open grass meadows. In this area, where the vegetation scheme was influenced by frequent wildfires over the millennia, the return of fire is a much-needed disturbance.

The firefighters break from the briefing and move purposely into their respective positions. It often reminds me of a football coach drawing player positions and movements on a white board. Smooth. Drip torches are opened, primed and lit. The first drop of burning fuel touches the dry pine needles and a small fire is born. More burning fuel is applied to the landscape and soon a full acre of land has spots of pine needles and dead logs burning in what is called the "test fire." The burn boss, other fire managers and the agency administrators keep a critical eye on fire behavior and the results of what has burned. After an indeterminate period of time, the leaders discuss whether or not the burn will meet their objectives lined out in the burn plan. It's a go.

The "firing boss" lines out the lighters who begin a systematic fire treatment on the landscape in front of them. One lighter is near the road that acts as a control line on this fire. Every 30-50 feet another lighter is stationed increasingly deeper into the unit. On this burn, the lighters use a spot ignitions approach which is simply a tip of the torch and a dot of fire applied to areas of heavy needle cast or thinning slash, while progressing at a steady and purposeful pace.

On the edges, the holding crews stand at the ready and watch patiently as the lighters progress through the unit. Hand tools, bladder bags, ATV's with water tanks and fire engines are all tools being utilized on this burn. A single tree torches. The holders watch intently as the burning embers fall to the ground safely within the burn unit. This is the way it will likely go during all three days of ignitions. Typically, if the lighting operations go well, the holding crews will have very little work to do. By design.

The firing boss calls for a pause. Down in the unit, a very special single tree is identified to need extra attention. The lighters, a holder with a bladder bag, and an ATV with water all gather around a Culturally Modified Tree and begin the methodical process outlined in the burn plan. These trees are historic legacies that hold knowledge of the past and the people who lived here before. The larger logs are quickly removed from near the trunk and under the lowest branches. A light scraping of the pine

needles removes thick concentrations from the trunk. Designed to reduce high heat pulses, fires are strategically set in several locations around the tree so many fires begin consuming the light fuels. A few minutes later, the lighters continue their mission and the holders are left to cool the tree, should the fire be burning a little hotter than desired. Oh, she'll let the bark get scorched and the lower branches be fire pruned, just as mother nature has done for thousands of years.

I head home after taking what seems like 200 photos. I post a few to Facebook and Twitter to show everyone what was happening and tell the story. I would venture to guess that most folks around here understand why we conduct prescribed fires. The land needs it. Plain and simple. Wildfires shaped the vegetation structure and the land, and fire should be used as a tool to balance our needs with nature's needs. In what is left of my career, I doubt the land managing agencies will be able to increase the acres of prescribed burns to the extent the landscape needs. But I will be one of the biggest advocates for it, wherever and whenever it makes sense.

Gregg Goodland is the Public Affairs Officer for the Rio Grande National Forest. An avid outdoor enthusiast, you'll find him enjoying all public lands as often as possible.