

Chaffee County Fire Protection District

Chaffee County, Colorado

Final Report on BLM Community Assistance Grants

by *Capt. Kent Maxwell*

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management twice awarded funding to the Chaffee County Fire Protection District for biomass utilization efforts. Grants for fiscal years 2003 and 2004 were combined in a single task order. The fire district cooperated with private landowners, neighboring fire departments, and local, state and federal agencies in Chaffee, Lake and Fremont counties, to administer and implement fire mitigation projects.

2003 Grant Accomplishments

The fire district's 2003 Tub Grinder Project produced an estimated 5,000 cubic yards of wood chips from slash piles at 10 different sites in Chaffee and Lake counties. Piles at 2 other sites which might have yielded an additional 1,000 yards were instead burned, because of inadequate access for our rented Morbark 13' tub grinder.

At the time the 2004 grant was awarded, approximately 2,500 yards of chips remained at the Buena Vista rodeo grounds site, while the slash pile had grown to about 6,000 cubic yards during the winter months.



The Morbark 1300 tub grinder finishes off the Mesa Antero pile in 2003. The chips were spread in the park as grinding progressed.

2004 Grant Initial Accomplishment

The 2004 Slash-Grind-Haul Project got off to a strong start with the contracted use of the new Buena Vista Correctional Facility wildland fire inmate crew in October and November, 2004. Through Juniper Valley Products (Correctional Industries), we employed a 12-man inmate hand crew for one day and an 18-man crew for 9 days of work.



Inmate crew thinning on USFS property adjacent to 3 Elk subdivision.

Our original estimate was for 3 to 5 acres production per day in saw-intensive thinning on both public and private lands, when using the 12-man crew. While the daily acreage varied widely depending on fuel type and treatment, we treated 72 acres.

With the assistance of volunteer firefighter Mark Thomas, the crew accomplished the following:

- 12 difficult acres of dense lodgepole stand on a Good Neighbor project on U.S. Forest Service property adjacent to the 3 Elk subdivision, in cooperation

with the Colorado State Forest Service. An additional 2 acres of lodgepole were treated within the subdivision, in exchange for private property access to a USFS timber sale.

- 8 acres pinyon-juniper on Anderson property, to mitigate fire hazard along access to Eureka Ranch subdivision.
- 30 acres of pinyon-juniper in the Canyons subdivision near Poncha Springs.
- 20 acres of ponderosa pine in the Adventure Unlimited camp. These were some of the easier acres, as some had previously been treated for a dwarf mistletoe.



To meet the prescription on this slope - which was too steep for the adjacent commercial timber sale - the inmate crew 'logged' the lodgepole stand. The sale bidder then was allowed to harvest the stacked timber along with his sale, achieving a desired fuel break that would not have happened otherwise.

2004 Setbacks

The “grind” portion of our project literally ground to a halt, as the fire district was unable to find a suitable grinder within our budget. Several machines that had been available during the summer months were sent to Florida in the fall, after the severe 2004 hurricane season.

The biomass project manager for the Holcim cement plant suffered a career-ending injury, which derailed their plans for wood chip utilization at their Penrose facility.

A meeting was held with representatives of BLM, USFS and CSFS to consider options. Although not a preferred option, consensus approval was given to burn the

slash piles over the winter, if possible.



Fecon grinder finishes slash pile. This pile was later hauled away for composting.

2005 Progress

The fire district contracted with Alternative Land & Forest Technologies for use of their Fecon Bull Hog grinder mounted to a trackhoe excavator. Slash piles at 4 sites were treated in April and May, with mixed results. After 65 hours of grinding, the contractor had 8 hours of re-grinding and 48 hours of site clean-up. The exposed grinder head is not particularly

suited to pile grinding for biomass utilization. 300 cubic yards of wood chips (and larger debris) were hauled from the Tucker site in Fremont County, for composting at a City of Salida site.

Otherwise 2005 saw was characterized by “rumors of grinders and rumors of grinders to come.” A private contractor with a 10-foot, Vermeer tub grinder submitted a bid which would have cost an estimated \$30,000 for the Buena Vista rodeo grounds pile that had grown to 25,000 cubic yards of slash. In the summer we had a glimmer of hope: Alamosa County purchased a 14-foot tub grinder with self-loading grapple. A promise of a week’s worth of work in August slipped away with delayed delivery and trouble hiring an operator.

BLM granted the first of 2 task order modifications to allow for delays in project completion. A considerable amount of time was spent reassuring landowners that piles would eventually be ground.

2006 Accomplishments

The arrival of a new contractor in Salida allowed us to finally complete our project. The Arkansas Valley Grinder was contracted for 60 hours of machine time at 6 sites. An estimated 7,000 cubic yards of slash yielded about 2,500 yards of wood chips.



Waste Management truck loads roll-off dumpster from Tucker pile in Fremont County to haul to City of Salida site.

The Buena Vista rodeo grounds pile had grown to perhaps 35,000 cubic yards by the start of summer. It was set on fire during an arson spree, causing the town trustees to close the site to future slash collection. None of the other piles required transport of chips to a different site.

Newly appointed as wildfire mitigation officer, Mark Thomas saw this project to completion by working on new efforts in Alpine and the Trail West subdivision.

Conclusion

Despite the many difficulties encountered during 2 years of delays, this project was a success. Fire mitigation has continued at a substantial pace.



A mini-excavator is used to load slash on a Shred-All 5600 horizontal grinder.

While we regret the loss of the rodeo grounds as a slash collection site, it does minimize our need to address future hauling issues for wood chips. Hauling of wood chips is happening, without requiring arrangements by the fire district.

Community-based efforts for slash collection and grinding will continue across ownership and jurisdictional boundaries.

