

Plumas County Fire Safe Council

Gold Mountain Hazardous Fuels Reduction

Project Final Report:

Grant Agreement: CA Fire Safe Council 09USFS0124

December 31, 2010

General

This project was carried out by Plumas County Fire Safe Council (PC FSC) on private, industrial forestlands abutting (to the South and West) the Gold Mountain Subdivision, southwest of Portola. The treated parcel has 320 acres of second growth Eastside Pine type forest. The project was initiated by the Gold Mountain Homeowners Association (HOA) and the Gold Mountain Community Services District (CSD). There were two major iterations of the project by PCFSC. The first (and unsuccessful) version took place from early 2004 until the fall of 2006, when it was ended by PC FSC disencumbering two executed funding agreements with Plumas County and Plumas National Forest. The second phase began in July of 2008 and was successfully completed by September of 2010.

187 acres received fuels treatment under the project versus the goal of 120 acres. The project was primarily funded by California Fire Safe Council (\$86,750), Plumas County Board of Supervisors (Title III funds spent in 2004-2006 for site and environmental analyses) and the Gold Mountain Homeowners Association/Community Services District (\$26,100)

Project Area

Gold Mountain is a recently developed, gated community with a championship-level golf course. Its physical location [on the SW flank of Beckwourth Peak (7,200'), just above a gorge of the Middle Fork of the Feather River (Federal Wild Scenic Designation) at 4,600'] exposes the development to relatively remote

wildfire starts, a mainline railroad near the river, the prevailing winds from the southwest as well as the 'chimney effect' found on in many wildfires on uneven terrain.

The *Plumas County Hazardous Fuels Assessment and Strategy* (PCFSC, 2005) was developed to categorize the relative wildfire dangers in the 50 plus communities in Plumas County. It describes the Gold Mountain area in this manner:

Community: Gold Mountain

Dominant Historic Large Fire Behavior by Community:

Uphill runs for one burning period on southwest slopes, railroad ignitions.

Tactical Considerations:

Very exposed to large-scale winds. Poor access below community. History of railroad ignitions. Limited ingress/egress, structure protection needs may limit resources available to fight fire's spread.

Fuels Comments/Recommendations:

High priority for Fuels treatment. Heavy fuels along access road from below. Emphasize projects to south and west of community. South side of the development has steep slopes with thick undergrowth and heavy fuels. Need for thinning and fuels removal this project is now funded. Continue to work on greenbelts and common areas inside of the community.

Photopoints

GM 1, GM 2

Fire Behavior

Extreme Fire Behavior with Active Crowning along southern edge.

The First Project (a False Start) - Plumas Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) funding (2003-2006)

The severity of the wildfire danger to the Gold Mountain community was recognized early in the planning and project development efforts of Plumas County Fire Safe Council. A solicitation for Registered Professional Foresters (RPF) was held for seven prospective Plumas FSC community level thinning projects in 2003. Local RPF Pete Thill (forester for the landowner [Graeagle Land and Water Co.] adjacent to Gold Mountain) was initially hired in September 2003 by PCFSC and Plumas Corporation, fiscal agent for PC FSC.

Application was made to the Plumas County Board of Supervisors in early 2004 for planning funds at Gold Mountain for the forester and for environmental reviews. That planning funding (from Title III of the federal Secure Rural Schools... Act,

2000) was used in 2004- 2006. It led to development of a 6/2/04 application for Hazardous Fuels Reduction funds from the Plumas County Resource Advisory Committee (RAC), seeking Title II funds from the federal Secure Rural Schools... Act, 2000. \$140,000 was approved by the RAC. Although the landowner was formally agreeable to the proposed thinning, at the time, the reality of doing thinning work on private, industrial forestlands caused delays in contracting. The RAC agreement between PC FSC and USDA Forest Service was not executed until 1/2/05.

There were also continuing project-level philosophical and economic issues on the part of the landowner. Fuels reduction efforts by PC FSC have always focused on primarily treating so-called 'ladder' and 'surface' fuels. The *surface* fuels are mainly brush and dead/downed material and could be treated in different ways (e.g. chipping, masticating [grinding up], hand pile and burning, etc.). The *ladder* fuels are generally small-medium sized trees which demand more mechanical equipment and generally cost more to carry out. These larger, ladder fuels (and even overstory or 'canopy' fuels) are where revenues are generated for small logs sales to lumber mills or the tree material is reduced to chips on-site and then trucked to generate power at the area's electrical generators. Ladder trees, rather than canopy trees are a focus of Hazardous Fuel Reduction efforts.

Industrial forest landowners must comply with all environmental laws and permits. They, in any particular harvest scheme, must focus both on the current costs versus revenues but also plan for what trees will be available for harvest in approximately 20-40 years when the particular forest stand will regrow enough to be re-entered for commercial purposes. Ladder fuels are thus a strong component of prospective future income for a forest landowner. Canopy trees (particularly dead, diseased or 'forked' trees) are usually where revenues are generated in the forest management business.

The agreed-upon harvest scheme for the RAC project was intended to have two distinct phases and permits. First, the landowner would carry out a biomass 'thin from below' prescription on 192 acres (versus their usual maximum growth and yield system) in which they would pay for logging costs and receive revenues under a 'Timber Harvest Plan' permit. That first phase, while meeting state laws on remaining surface and ladder fuels (including some logging 'slash' left on-site

[through a 'lop and scatter' technique]) would not be expected to meet the more rigorous PCFSC standards for wildfire resiliency (e.g. 2-4 foot expected flamelength in normal wildfire conditions). Phase 2 was to be paid for by the RAC grant and was intended to (only) masticate or chip up the surface or very small ladder fuels on all 320 acres, including the previously 'biomassed' acres. This phase was to be paid for by the RAC grant, with matching funds from the Gold Mtn. Home Owners Association and Community Services District.

This scenario did not work out. Market conditions were then somewhat depressed so projected revenues were lessened. The landowner ultimately believed they would be inappropriately constraining their future revenues through the agreed-upon 'thin from below' treatment.

The landowner sent a letter to PCFSC in 8/06 ending their involvement in this version of the project. PCFSC sent a letter to the USFS (Plumas NF) in 9/06 disencumbering the RAC funds (\$140,000) and subsequently to the Board of Supervisors, disencumbering the remaining Title III planning funds (\$7,000 remaining from \$15,000 initially approved in 2004).

The main project proponents (PCFSC, the HOA and the CSD) continued to discuss with the landowner possible new scenarios to accomplish the fuels reduction work in 2006-2008.

The More Successful Approach- CA Fire Safe Council Funding (2008-2010)

The proponents and landowner continued to discuss the issues during 2006-2008. The concept of trying to split the project into different components and their different permits (e.g. revenue producing logging in addition to needed surface/ladder treatments) became more and more focused in 2007. A grant proposal was submitted in 2/08 and a contract executed on 10/13/08 with CA Fire Safe Council. This called for a different scenario, whereby the landowner would secure a (revenue producing) Harvest Plan for certain acres, approximately \$25,000 in matching funds from the HOA and CSD would then help chip and haul the resultant surface fuels to the electric generator in the first phase. A second phase would use a much smaller amount of grant funds (\$ 86,750 versus the

previous RAC grant of \$ 140,000) to masticate a goal of 120 acres, removing surface and ladder fuels.

The project progressed as follows:

The landowner, PCFSC and the RPF secured a Forest Fire Prevention Exemption (a lower level of permitting within specified [and smaller] tree size constraints) on 8/6/08 from Ca Department of Forestry. This met the State (California Environmental Quality Act-CEQA) environmental standards. Actual field activity began soon thereafter, subsequent to the CA FSC grant approval.

Meanwhile CA FSC was working, during the summer of 2008, with their federal environmental analyses support group to review the project for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the federal Endangered Species Act. These analyses were completed between 8/08 and 10/08, and final clearance to proceed was received from the CA FSC in November, 2008.

Field activity was carried out from early August into December of 2008 by the landowner. The HOA and CSD provided \$ 42,750 to the landowner to haul chips to the electric generator in nearby Loyalton during this period. The only match 'counted' was that expensed by the local entities for activities after the CAFSC grant execution and NEPA analyses. These funds supplied most of the \$29,000 cash match promised by PCFSC, the CSD and HOA to CA FSC. \$26,100 was counted as match for expenses after the environmental analyses were completed.

All this field activity was completed by the landowner and resulted in 63 acres thinned by the end of 2008, with no CA FSC grant funds yet expended for fuels treatments but with significant matching funds expended for hauling chips.

The RPF and Plumas FSC then began developing bid offers for loggers, called a 'Prospectus'. The treatments mandated were all in the form of 'mastication', using different machines depending upon the forest stand conditions and topography. The initial objective in 2009 was to complete the 120 acre goal in the grant agreement, so the first 'Prospectus' was for 59 acres to augment the 63 acres completed in the previous fall. Since bidding was taking place during the early recession, there were numerous bidders and competitive prices throughout 2009 and 2010.

The Hazardous Fuels Reduction for the overall CA FSC project followed this sequence (following the 63 acres accomplished by the landowner and the HOA/CSD in 2008):

Gold Mountain (South) Mastication

| Prospectus Date | # Acres in Prospectus | # bids | # Awarded Acres | Contract Date | Contractors/Amounts |
|-----------------|-----------------------|--------|-----------------|---------------|----------------------|
| 4/23/09 | 59 | 7 | 31 | 6/30/09 | Winningham/\$16,027 |
| | | | 28 | 6/9/09 | High Sierra/\$12,320 |
| 8/1/09 | 50 | 4 | 50 | 10/27/09 | Firestorm/ \$26,000 |
| 3/9/10 | 15 | 3 | 15 | 5/14/10 | Winningham/\$8,145 |
| Total | | | 124 | | \$ 62,492 |

Permitting

The primary permit for the mastication work was issued by Cal Fire under their “Forest Fire prevention Exemption” (# 2-08EX-690-PLU). Local CDF foresters reviewed the projects as they evolved and approved their implementation.

Financial

CAFSC provided PCFSC with grant funds of \$86,750 (National Fire Plan). Total expenditures attributable to the project are at \$115,387.36. Matching funds were planned for \$28,917 and actually were at \$ 28, 637.36

| Source of Funds | Amount | Match expenditures | Use | Period |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Gold Mountain HOA and CSD | \$ 26,100.00 | 26,100.00 | Reimburse landowner for chips hauled to Loyalton | 7/1/08-12/31/08 |
| PC FSC Title III | 1,430.00 | 1,430.00 | Forester planning | 1/1/09-3/31/09 |
| CA FSC Primary grant | 86,750.00 | | All LTO and other expenses | 10/1/08-6/10/10 |
| PC FSC add'l funds | 1,107.36 | 1,107.36 | Closeout expenses | 4/1/10-10/31/10 |
| Total | \$ 115,387.36 | 28,637.36 | | |

Follow Up to Project

Wildfire safety and related activities at Gold Mountain are lead by their Fire Safe Committee which is a joint committee of the HOA and CSD. The FSC is proactive in promoting defensible space, and strategic fuel reduction activities on private property within the community. An annual curbside chipping program has been in place for since 2003 which allows property owners to safely get rid of excess fuels removed from their properties. The FSC also plans and executes HFR projects within community common areas. The FSC participates in the Plumas FSC and is planning application to Firewise Communities.