Colorado National Forest Manages WFU in City Watershed

By Josh McDaniel
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The Grand Mesa National Forest in western Colorado has never had a fire like the Coal Creek Fire, a 1,485 acre blaze creeping up the slopes of the Grand Mesa near Kannah Creek. This is the first large fire on the forest to be managed as wildland fire use for resource benefit. Approaches to managing wildfire in the West are changing rapidly, and the Coal Creek Fire is an excellent example of how fire managers are shifting their views of fire as well as their strategies and tactics.

On the Coal Creek fire, fire managers are allowing the fire to burn through the dense fuels that have accumulated in the Kannah Creek drainage, the primary watershed for the city of Grand Junction, Colorado. The pinyon-juniper and oak forests above Kannah Creek have become increasingly thick and plans were already in place to conduct prescribed burns and thinning operations in the area over the next few years.

Connie Clementson, District Ranger for the Grand Valley Ranger District, said that the Coal Creek fire will accomplish a great deal of that work on its own, creating a burn mosaic pattern that will reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire moving through the area and “blowing out” the watershed.

Loren Paulson, a resource advisor for the Grand Mesa National Forest said, “In past hot and dry years we always worried about losing Kannah Creek to a big fire, but this year we had a wet winter and cool spring. That has actually created ideal burning conditions since the ground and vegetation are relatively moist—that will allow the area to burn without damaging the soil and root systems.”

But, just because fire managers are allowing the fire to burn does not mean it is not being actively managed. Bill Hahnenberg, the Incident Commander for the Rocky Mountain Fire Use Management Team—a national level unit charged with managing the fire, says that it is a common misperception that “fire use” means they are just sitting back and letting the fire burn. He says that in fact the crews are active protecting different “values” and “herding” the fire in the direction where it provides the most resource benefit.

The Craig Hotshots along with a Helitack crew have been hard at work cutting fireline and doing bucket drops on the edge of the fire near Kannah Creek. Fire managers want to maintain a buffer along the creek to further protect the watershed.

The Coal Creek Fire was a wildland fire use fire managed within the Grand Mesa National Forest.

The practice of allowing lightning-ignited fires to burn is not new, but it is a practice that for decades has been limited primarily to wilderness areas—places that are so remote the possibility of an “escape” is unlikely to affect communities. Fire use fires can also generate a lot of smoke for a long period of time since they are not aggressively suppressed. This can create problems for people living in proximity.

In the past few years, fire use has come out of the wilderness, and is increasingly being used to manage fires near communities. The reasons are many. Foremost is the fact that fires have become larger and more intense in recent years, and much of that growth can be directly connected with increasingly dense fuels that can carry the fires. Fire use helps land managers to reduce fuels and to create a burn mosaic on the landscape that can help slow down or stop large fires. The second reason is that firefighting has become expensive and is straining the budgets of the federal land management agencies as well as a number of states like California and Montana that have been hit hard by fires in recent years. Fire use fires cost an average of $300 to $500 per acre to manage while a wildfire that is categorized as a “suppression” fire can cost between of $600 and $1600 per acre.

Fire use is on the rise among the federal land management agencies. The National Interagency Fire reports that in 2007 there were 346 fire use fires across the country which burned over 430,000 acres. That is a big increase over the average of the past decade of a little over 187,000 acres per year. As more and more land management units integrate fire use into management plans, those numbers are likely to increase.

“We know the long-term benefits will pay off,” says Clementson. “People don’t like the smoke, but that is part of restoring the health of our forests. These forests evolved with fire and we are trying to get them back into their natural fire regime.”

In the past the Grand Mesa National Forest did not have authority manage a fire under fire use. There are a strict set of policy and decision-making guidelines that allow land managers to make the call to declare a fire a candidate for fire use. The first requirement is that the option has to be detailed in the forest management plan, with specific areas identified in which fire use can be considered. Until last year, when the Grand Mesa’s forest management plan was amended, the forest held a policy of full suppression on all fires.

Tim Foley, the Zone Fire Management Officer for the BLM, the Forest Service, and Colorado National Monument in the Grand Valley, says that he is glad to have the option of managing fires on the Grand Mesa for fire use. Foley will manage the Coal Creek Fire once Bill Hahnenberg’s team rotates off the fire. “We’ll manage the fire until Mother Nature puts it out,” he says. “As a taxpayer I am not offended by that.”

Foley says that he expects that monsoonal rains will likely “put the fire to bed” in the next couple of weeks.

“Fire use doesn’t make sense everywhere, but it does in places like Kannah Creek,” he adds. “That is extremely rugged terrain and it is an area that would actually benefit from fire. So why spend the money and put people at risk when you don’t have to?”

That is a question that is likely to become more and more relevant in coming years as land managers attempt to balance forest health needs, community protection, and competing land management goals.

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