

V. INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

A. Vegetation Management in Fire Management

Attainment of the fuels reduction goals of the Lassen – Modoc Unit Fire Plan will require on-the-ground effort. The use of CDF and CCC crews, and equipment will likely be necessary in many areas where stakeholders do not have the finances or resources to do an effective job individually or as a group. The Vegetation Management program (VMP) is currently the primary vehicle by which CDF resources may be used on privately owned lands. In place since 1981, the program has been an effective fuels reduction / rangeland improvement tool. Because of increasing competition for smoke allotments, CDF's use of fire to reduce fuel load is in jeopardy and because of this, chipping will likely become the primary disposal method in the future.

VMP is a cost-share program; the State's share of a project's cost may range from zero to ninety percent. This is based on a public benefits formula --the greater the benefit to the public, the greater the share of the cost of the project CDF may assume. Fuels reduction projects in critical areas within the Unit as identified in this plan have a high public to private benefits ratio therefore the unit's efforts should be concentrated in these areas. For example, the project in the Janesville area that will reduce fuels around the community has a high public/private benefit and lower landowner participation is then justified. Conversely, projects that are essentially range improvement burns that are not near population concentrations will require a higher degree of landowner effort and proportional costs.

This is not to say that rangeland burning is of minor importance. Through this century, range improvement burns have been vital in managing wildland fuels on a landscape basis. However, increasing population in the rural areas has brought constraints such as smoke management and liability concerns. Such constraints have made the LE-7, range improvement project less attractive and has put VMP projects in higher demand with managers from the timber industry and ranchers.

The unit has experienced a sharp decline in VMP projects due to a series of factors including a non-existent burn window in the fall of 2003 and 2004 and a lack of available resources in the spring of 2004. In addition, the Scarface projects neared completion of the original planned 20,000 acres with 18,383 acres completed when the ownership changed from Beaty and Associates to Sierra Pacific Industries and word from Sacramento that the extensive herbicide use as prep work for a burn is not covered under the current Chaparral Management Program EIR. The loss of the new VMP Program EIR in a court challenge forced the unit to reconsider several planned projects allowing only a few to go the Negative Declaration route. Another factor was the retirement of two of the three Resource Management foresters resulting in the VMP Coordinator handling the Resource Management programs for the entire unit.

FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN 2005

Lassen – Modoc Unit

The unit has hired a new VMP Coordinator in August of 2005 and the unit is now fully staffed. Unit emphasis will now be placed on community fire protection projects as well as some wildlife habitat improvement projects. Plans are also being developed to implement the revised VMP Program EIR on rangeland improvement projects as well as under burning of numerous eastside pine stands that have been biomassed over the last 10 years.

Battalion 1

South Knob Ranch N-041 LMU & N-043 LMU:

The first project of 975 acres expired 11/23/03 with no acres treated due to a lack of a burn window; however, the landowner put in about 3 miles of fire breaks and removed about 10 acres of junipers. The second project was a joint effort with the BLM but it was withdrawn because of the VMP Program EIR court case. The BLM did treat about 300 acres of their ownership.

Honey Lake Ranch N-045 LMU:

This 900 acre project is a wildlife habitat improvement project that went through the Negative Declaration route. The goal is to reduce matted vegetation to improve nesting and feeding habitat for migratory waterfowl. Approximately 80 acres was treated in March of 2003 with no treatment in 2004 due to lack of preparation by the landowner. This project will expire on 11/1/05 but a renewal is anticipated.

Battalion 2

Almanor Basin CDZ #1b, N-047 LMU:

This 270 acre project was designed as a maintenance tool for an existing community fuelbreak on SPI lands north of the community of Chester. The original fuelbreak was completed in 1999. No maintenance done and the project expired 8/1/05.

Battalion 3

Tionesta #2 N-046 LMU:

This 61 acre project was a 400 foot wide by 1 mile long shaded fuelbreak project along the south property lines of the small community of Tionesta. The hand work and pile burning was completed 2/5/03 and the project was left open for a possible under burn which did not occur. This project expired 4/15/05; however, it will be the base of a joint Beaty and USFS fuel reduction project on Timber Mountain immediately to the south.

FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN 2005

Lassen – Modoc Unit

Webb Circle N-042 LMU:

This 1,320 acre project was part of the Scarface Project where brush was pre-treated with herbicide and then the area was to be broadcast burned the following year. The owner, SPI, then will plant to pine. The unit completed the planned firebreaks and in 11/6/03 burned the 91 acres of piles. The broadcast burn was canceled twice because of the lack of a burn window and the owner decided to rip through the brush in 2004 and plant in 2005. This project expired 6/20/05.

Ash Creek Wildlife Area (DFG):

This 3,180 acre wildlife habitat improvement project is split between the counties of Modoc and Lassen requiring two Negative Declarations. These have been developed but not submitted pending approval of the new DFG manager, which should occur during October 2005. The project consists of burning the 3,000 acre tulle swamp at the west end of the 7,000 acre DFG wildlife area. The town of Adin is east of the project and may be impacted by smoke. The swamp has not been burned since the 1960's and the community strongly supports this project.

The Scarface Projects: to treat 25,000 acres in SRA. The objective is fire hazard reduction followed by reforestation efforts by the landowner. This Eastside Pine vegetation type was burned in 1977 with a total of 82,000 acres consumed, 43,000 acres of which were private timberlands originally managed by W. M. Beaty & Associates, now currently managed by Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI).

18,383 acres of brush and heavy fire debris have been treated under 14 VMP projects. All previous projects have been reforested to pine with approximately 1,000 acres allowed to re-sprout for wildlife habitat.

Battalion 4

Currently no projects are planned. This battalion is primarily sagebrush steppe with eastside pine stands. Juniper encroachment is a major concern of all of the federal and private land managers. It is expected that once the new VMP Program EIR is approved, there will be considerable interest in the VMP program.