



February 7, 2008

## Fuels Reduction Project: A Lot of Little Things Done Well

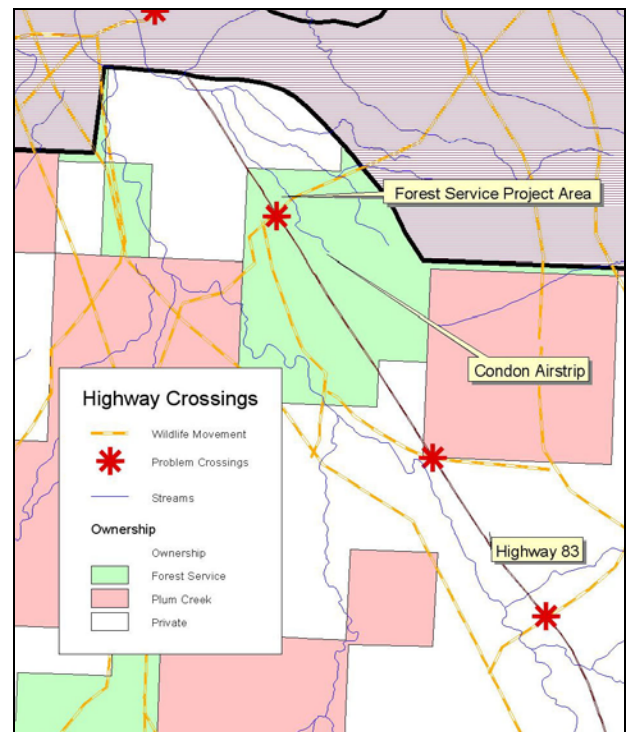
by TOM PARKER for the Seeley Swan Pathfinder

As I walked through the Forest Service’s Condon Fuels Project area north of the Condon airstrip I kept thinking about something Dobb Wilhelm once related, “Success at anything is rarely the product of one single ingredient but rather a lot of little things done well.” Rarely do I give much thought to anything important without reflecting upon past treasured conversations with some of the great mountain people I first got to know when I moved to the Swan Valley. Their experienced wisdom and unique insight into natural systems and human nature has great relevance in approaching today’s problems and trying to do the right thing, in the right place and time. In walking around the Condon Fuels project, I could feel some of their thoughts and energy coming through and everything I felt was positive.

The Condon Fuels reduction project is located in one of many “wildland-urban interface” areas in the Swan Valley. The Forest Service has prioritized these areas for fuels treatments with an eye toward an ecosystem based approach that also improves forest and watershed health and provides for community benefit. The objectives for these projects include reducing the chance of catastrophic wildfire and increasing the forest’s resilience to normal occurrences of fire, insects, disease, and weather. Many of the projects are also stewardship contracts, which deliver additional benefits. Money retained from

the sale of timber can be put into improving roads, decreasing sediment delivery to the streams, and improving fish passage at stream crossings.

Not immediately noticeable to the passing motorist on highway 83 is a subtle but important element of the Condon Fuels project that for a number of reasons I’ll call the “Condon connection.” Anyone who regularly drives on 83 knows that the area immediately north of the airfield and ball field is heavily used year round as a valley floor crossing by many species of wildlife. Deer are the most abundant, but elk, moose, bear, lion and several other species also regularly cross the highway here.



Map developed for the Upper Swan Valley Landscape Assessment showing an important wildlife crossing at the north end of the Condon airstrip.

Topography, vegetation, watershed features and human development all influence patterns of movement for different wildlife species. One of the primary reasons so many animals cross right here is that Elk and Glacier Creeks converge on the Swan

River floodplain just to the west of the highway in this vicinity. These, the largest drainage basins coming out of the central Mission Mountains, tend to funnel an abundance of wildlife into the area between the Condon Work Center and Charles Road. High numbers of wildlife-vehicle collisions occur along this stretch of the highway. There are also a fair degree of human-wildlife conflicts in the adjacent developed areas.

Substantial forethought was given to how the Condon Fuels project design could continue to maintain functional connectivity values for dependent species, reduce the likelihood of wildlife-human conflicts, and meet the fuels treatment objectives.

The outcome, I believe, demonstrates the best of all worlds. Sufficient breaks in fuel continuity have been achieved while a connected ribbon of diverse stand structure and species composition meanders from the ball field vicinity south and west into the river floodplain and away from the residential area. Forest cover has been thinned and feathered back from the highway with the thought that this might reduce the appeal for animals to linger near the highway. There is just enough cover to keep the connectivity in tact, but not so much to encourage animals to stay next to the highway for any length of time.

This patchy retention of understory and midstory conifers has much more benefit to forest stand and ecosystem health than just movement or linkage habitat. It is core habitat for some songbirds and smaller mammals who contribute greatly to valuable ecosystem services. And from what we have learned about historical fire patterns, it was not uncommon for fires to burn in this kind of patchy way in the ponderosa pine, larch and douglas fir cover types.

We have a lot of people to thank for contributing to the success and outcome of that part of the Condon Fuels project area. The logging contractors and their crews did a great job of protecting the residual forest stand by minimizing damage felling, bunching and skidding. The leave reflects

highly skilled, carefully done work. Forest Service personnel went the extra mile to interpret complex and overlapping considerations in a practical application of ecosystem management. And dedicated folks involved themselves through Swan Ecosystem Center, Northwest Connections, and other local organizations and gave guidance and input.

Our culture is substantially deficient in capturing and integrating historical knowledge into any thing we do. By melding local place-based knowledge with emerging science we can do a better job of stewarding our natural world. I can't help but believe if the experienced mountain people I'm thinking of were to review the outcomes of this logging project they would agree it was a success and "A lot of little things done well."

Future monitoring and observation by interested parties and valley residents will also contribute greatly to interpreting the response by various wildlife species to these well intended efforts and depending upon what we learn we can adjust or modify our rationale and future plans for integrating human needs and key wildlife connections.