

Group gets grant to inventory whitebark pine

By The Associated Press - 06/01/05

MISSOULA (AP) — A Swan Valley group has received a \$15,000 grant to assess and map the existence of whitebark pine in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, and hopes the results will be used to help forest managers make decisions on policies for controlled burning.

Whitebark pines often grow at high altitudes because they need sun and do not grow as well if crowded by other trees and shrubs. However, a century of wildfire suppression has allowed forest undergrowth to become overgrown, shading the pines, which produce a fatty, high-protein pine nut that is the preferred food of grizzly bears.

The pines also have been threatened by blister rust, a fungus. In Glacier National Park, some 85 percent of whitebark pine trees are infected and dying, and many no longer produce seeds.

Interest in the whitebark pine was minimal because it is not a commercial tree.

“Now, it looks like that might be changing a little bit,” said Melanie Parker, executive director of Northwest Connections. The Swan Valley group recently received the grant from the National Forest Foundation, a nonprofit partner of the U.S. Forest Service.

“It’s a happy day for us,” Parker said, “because this has really been the great overlooked, underfunded restoration challenge.”

The survey will be conducted this summer in the wilderness west of Condon, she said.

“There is simply no historical understanding of whitebark pine in the Mission Mountains Wilderness,” she said. “Nothing.”

The trees, Parker said, are more than just a tremendous food source for a wide variety of species. They also capture considerable high-elevation snow in their canopy, and their disappearance can affect runoff and streamflows.

Identifying where the trees are and how they fare should help national forest managers better craft land-use policies, including those for prescribed burning, Parker said.