



# HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

GROVE CREEK SUBDIVISION  
TETON COUNTY, IDAHO

A small hazardous fuels reduction project was conducted in the Grove Creek Subdivision near Victor, Idaho to demonstrate techniques for improving structure defensibility and survivability in the face of wildland fire. The project was funded by the Bureau of Land Management and the High Country Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D) in conjunction with Northwest Management, Inc. and participating landowners.

# GROVE CREEK SUBDIVISION FINAL REPORT

## HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

### PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

The Teton County Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan (FMP) identifies the Grove Creek subdivision as a high risk and high priority area for mitigation primarily due to hazardous fuel conditions, high risk of fire occurrence, poor access, and high structure density. The purpose of conducting a demonstration project within this subdivision was to provide an example of the aesthetic outcomes possible with hazardous fuels reduction projects as well as to increase residents' knowledge of the potential wildland fire risks in the area and proactive mitigation techniques they can apply on their own.

The Grove Creek subdivision is located approximately 4 miles west of Victor in Teton County, Idaho. There are approximately 35 privately-owned, forested parcels lying on a gentle, east aspect slope facing the Teton River Valley. The Caribou-Targhee National Forest and the Big Hole Mountains abut the subdivision along its western border.

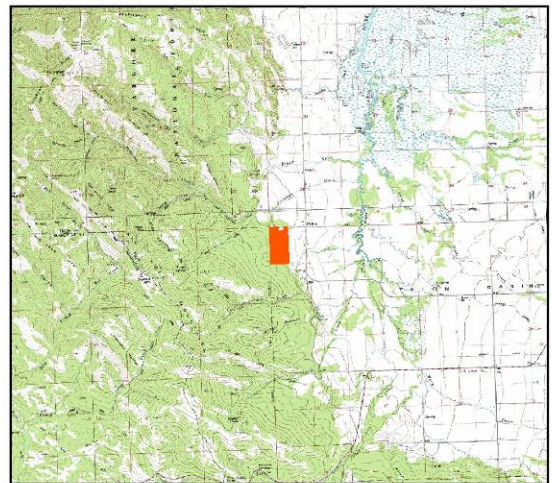
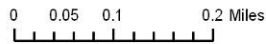
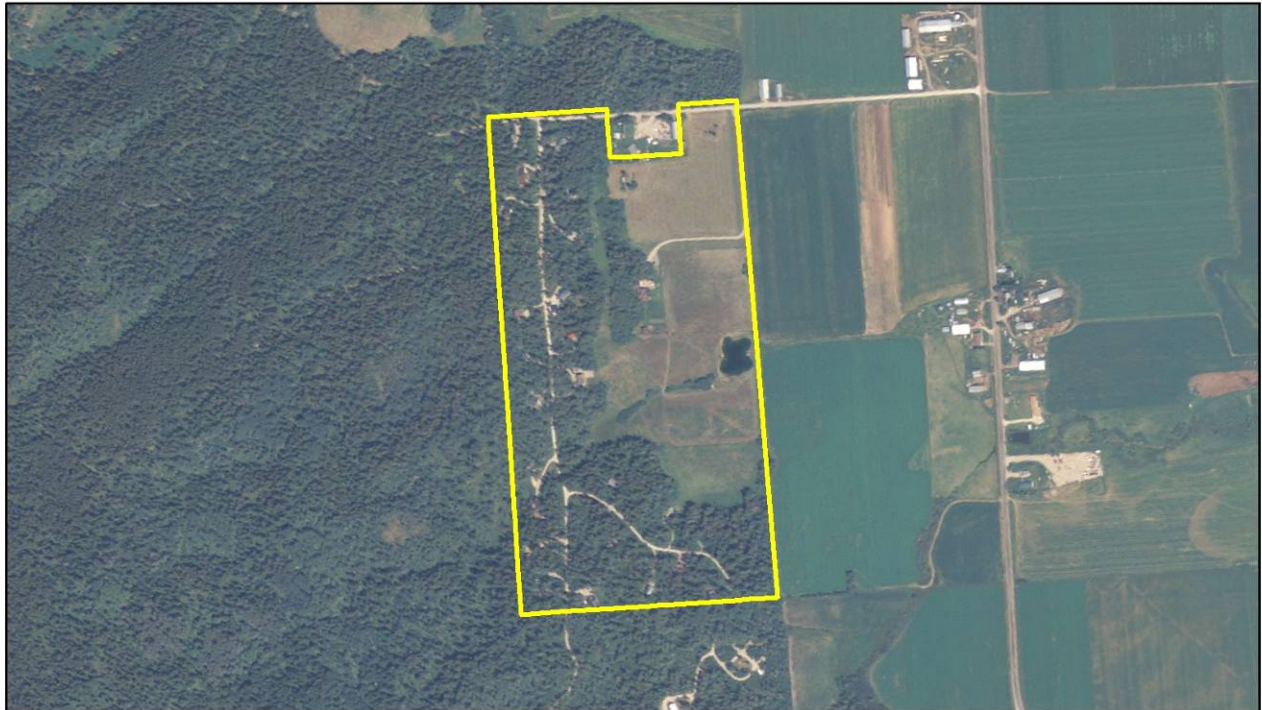
The predominant vegetative fuels present on this site include seasonal grasses, Rocky Mountain maple, mountain ash, quaking aspen, Douglas-fir, subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, and lodgepole pine. A small draw is present in the central portion of the subdivision and the western edge of the development is more densely vegetated with coniferous trees including pockets of dead and dying timber.

*"Several (residents)  
have expressed  
interest in having their  
property  
evaluated/thinned in  
the future."*

*-- Homeowner's  
Association President*



# Grove Creek Subdivision Area



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## Issues of Concern

The primary issues of concern for wildland fire resistance and defensibility in the Grove Creek subdivision include the density and structure of forest fuels, limited access and water availability, overall forest health, and the lack of defensible space around homes and outbuildings.

The complexity of the fuel structure within and surrounding the subdivision is conducive to crown fires. The overstory consists of mature subalpine fir, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, and aspen. The aspen are declining due to conifer encroachment and the lodgepole pine are dying as a result of the beetle infestation. There is a large amount of coniferous regeneration in the understory creating multiple age classes and a continuous fuel complex from the ground to the overstory.

There is only one main access road into the subdivision, which dead-ends at the last home site. The travel surface of this road, as well as nearly all of the private driveways, is crowded by dense forest-type fuels on both sides. It is unlikely that the access road could be used as a control point for fire suppression in the event of a fire.

Heavy fuels also surround most of the structures. A fire originating from a structure could easily spread to the surrounding forest putting nearly all of the residents at risk.



## SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

The original project prescription for the proposed properties included the removal of brush, small diameter coniferous and aspen regeneration in the understory, and pruning within approximately 30 feet of the primary structure on each property as well as along the driveway. Dead or dying and trees considered to be a hazard due to close proximity to the house were also proposed for removal.

During the course of the project planning and layout, it was found that the subdivision's Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CCRs), originally written in the early 1970s, prohibited the removal of any living trees for purposes other than necessary for site development (such as aesthetic concerns or fire danger) unless approved by the Homeowner's Association's Architectural Review Board (ARB). Several residents questioned the supremacy of the CCRs over individual property rights in this particular case as well as the definition of a "live tree"; thus, an official interpretation of the CCRs was requested from the ARB's attorney. The attorney validated all aspects of the CCRs leaving the ARB fully vested with the power to enforce the CCRs as they are currently written. Participating homeowners felt that protection of life and property from wildland fire should warrant the ARB's approval for removal of hazardous fuels; therefore, trees marked for removal were flagged and the written prescriptions for each property were submitted to the ARB for review.

Unfortunately, the ARB was unable to come to an agreement relative to the removal of live trees, including those diseased, bug infested, dying, or deemed hazardous for other reasons, as requested by

the participating property owners. Thus, variances to the CCRs for hazardous fuels reduction and fire mitigation were denied.

The final scope of the project included the removal of completely dead trees, pruning, and brush cutting on 4 partial parcels. Participants were required to sign a 10 year maintenance agreement for the work completed with funding from the High Country RC&D. One of the conditions of the project was that participating landowners contribute at least a 25% match soft or cash match. All of the participants exceeded the match requirement by completing about 75% of the brush cutting and thinning on their respective properties. They also piled most of their slash near the road to make it easier to access. Once they had completed their portion of the work, a local contractor was hired to finish the brush cutting, and pruning, and removal of dead and/or downed hazard trees. The contractor then chipped all of the slash material and hauled it away.



### Project Funding and Costs

This demonstration project is one task in a broader effort by the Bureau of Land Management and the High Country RC&D to provide wildland fire education opportunities to the public, assist county wildfire working groups with planning and implementation of wildfire mitigation projects, and generally help lessen the wildland fire risks throughout Fremont, Teton, Bonneville, Clark, Jefferson, Madison, Butte, Custer, and Lemhi Counties. Initially, \$12,000 was allocated for soliciting landowners' participation in the project, completing individual property evaluations and prescriptions, establishing property boundaries and marking leave/take vegetation, contracting a local tree service to complete the work, and writing the final report. Due to the project's limitations on the removal of live hazard trees and the significant contributions of the participating landowners, the total cost of the project was approximately \$9,500. About 1/3 of this cost was spent on the ground. The administrative costs for this demonstration project were higher than anticipated as a result of the additional time spent working with the Homeowner's Association Architectural Review Board, revising individual property prescriptions to meet the CCR regulations, and resolving other conflicts with the implementation of the project.

Because of the existing CCRs as well as opposition to the project from some area landowners, it took nearly 2 months of almost daily contact with various property owners to design the project, get a group of adjacent landowners to participate, and agree on what could and could not be removed. This phase of the process began over a year after initial contact was made with the subdivision at their annual homeowner's association meeting in the summer of 2009. Once the scope of the project was determined, implementation took about 12 hours plus the individual homeowners' match contribution, which averaged 5-10 hours each.

### OUTCOMES

Although the project participants were not successful in gaining a variance from the Architectural Review Board to remove any live hazard trees, they were able to work within the CCRs to effectively reduce the wildland fire risk around their properties. The removal of brush and down woody debris as



well as pruning to separate surface fuels from the canopy went a long way towards reducing the risk of crown fires and lessening the potential intensity of a fire within the direct vicinity of structures.

Additionally, the participating homeowners were happy with the aesthetic outcome of the project as it was demonstrated that wildfire risk can be reduced while retaining privacy and the character of the subdivision. Some property owners that originally chose not to participate in the demonstration project for various reasons have expressed interest in completing similar work.

Overall the project was successful. Property owners in the Grove Creek subdivision now have a living example of “firesafe” techniques they can use to reduce risks on their own properties. While this type of project will remain controversial within the subdivision, it did provide the opportunity and impetus for neighbors to talk to one another about wildland fire issues and continue efforts that move the area towards becoming more resistant and resilient to the impacts of wildland fires.



*Before*



*After*

**Acknowledgements:**

The High Country RC&D would like to thank the Bureau of Land Management Communities at Risk program for providing the funding to complete the Grove Creek Demonstration Project. We would also like to personally thank Mark Elliott, Grove Creek Homeowner’s Association President, for working with the RC&D and Northwest Management, Inc. to offer this opportunity to residents of the subdivision. Mr. Elliott was the key to moving this project from the planning stages to final implementation and, in fact, completed a great deal to the subdivision’s matching contribution. The RC&D would also like to recognize and thank the Blairs, the Elliots, Mr. Lyckman, and the Fryxells for participating in the demonstration project and Travis Eva, owner of Trees R Us Tree Service, Inc., for completing the work.

**Partners:**

