



Sugar Pine Project Integration Team meeting notes

Friday, February 6th 2009

Bass Lake District Rangers Office, North Fork, Ca.

In Attendance:

Keith Ballard – USFS
Mike Chapel – USFS Regional office
Tom Eliason – Sierra Club
Tom Effird – retired FS/resident
Mike Garcia – USFS
Jeannie Habben – watershed council
Mark Lemon – FS, Teresa Lowe – FS
Anne Lombardo – UCST PPT
Reid and Adele Marks – residents
Rick Messier – Mariposa Fire Safe Council
Kirby Molen – Sierra Forest Products
Dave Martin - USFS District Ranger

Jere Miller – Mariposa County Fire
Eric Oefler – USFS
Anae Otto – USFS
Kim Rodrigues – UCST PPT/facilitator
John Romena – Sierra Pacific Industries
Dave Smith – USFS
Janet Stanovich – Madera County
Denise Tolmie – USFS
Tom Wheeler – County Supervisor
Kevin Williams - USFS wildlife Biologist
Ryan Williams – CalFire

On the Webcast:

John Battles – UCST
Sue Britting – Sierra Forest Legacy
Jill Coppler – Sierra Star newspaper
Pamela Flick – Defenders of Wildlife
Kim Ingram – UCST
Marek Jakubowski – UCST

Jerry Jensen Leonard Kelly
Maggi Kelly – UCST
Susie Kocher – UCST
Darca Morgan – Sierra Forest Legacy
Adriana Sulak – UCST

U.S. Forest Service documents provided at the Sugar Pine meeting are available at <http://snamp.cnr.berkeley.edu/events>: These include:

- Summary of Alternatives for Sugar Pine Adaptive Management Project
- Fisher den site buffer map
- Tree group retention map identifying areas with 3 or more conifers larger than 30” dbh
- Sugar Pine plot data summary table
- Sugar Pine Summary estimates for Alternatives 2 and 4
- Project timeline

I. Introduction and overview:

Kim Rodrigues started the introductions around the room and served as facilitator for the meeting. She began by reviewing roles, relationships and responsibilities within the Sierra Nevada Adaptive Management Project (SNAMP). The US Forest Service (USFS) Sugar Pine project treatment is step three on the project's adaptive management diagram (Figure 1). Kim and the UC Science Team (UCST) participated in hosting the meeting in order to facilitate adaptive management (AM). The desired outcome of the meeting was to help the USFS clearly state management goals and objectives and hear back from stakeholders about the issues the USFS is considering in the project. Open sharing of information is critical to the ability to collaborate in an informed fashion on this project.

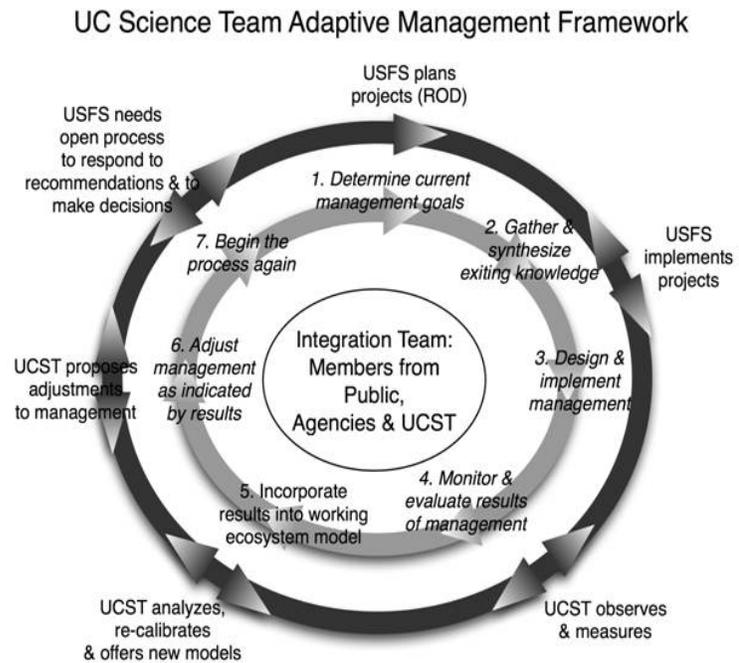


Figure 1. Role of the SNAMP Integration Team in facilitation of Adaptive Management

The meeting was also a follow up from the last Integration Team meeting/field trip on October 17th during which participants asked for:

- Clarification of the range of alternatives under consideration and supportive data used to develop each alternative,
- Data on current stand conditions and pre and post treatment comparisons of oaks, and large tree group retention areas,
- Clarification of the next steps and associated timelines to meet NEPA requirements and move towards treatment implementation schedule.
- Clarification of how new information been integrated into the proposed treatment alternatives.

II. Sugar Pine treatment alternatives: Dave Martin discussed the goals of the project:

- To manage for fire and fuels concerns in areas of Sugar Pine and Tenaya Lodge/ Fish Camp.
- To manage forest density to encourage healthier and more resilient forests in times of drought.
- To protect water and wildlife. There is focus on a single species of concern, however, there is a need to protect the biodiversity of animals which may have conflicting needs.

Treatments are being used to mimic some of the effects frequent, low intensity fire created in the past, i.e. open understory, fire resistant tree species, etc.

The Forest Service is concerned about the health of the forest which calls for removing some trees so the rest will be healthier. The existence of too many trees causes increased water, disease, and insect stress which further exacerbates the expected effects of climate change. The current alternatives for the project are (see details at <http://snamp.cnr.berkeley.edu/events>)

- #1 no action
- #2 thinning for both fuel and forest health concerns
- #3 same as #2 except within the fisher den site buffer, where only surface and ladder fuels will be treated
- #4 thinning for surface and ladder fuels only

Alternatives' Accommodation of Fisher: Habitat conservation guidelines have been observed including those from:

- The USFS Pacific Southwest Research station
- The Sierra National Forest Fisher Habitat Maintenance and Improvement Approach
- Conservation Biology Institute
- University of California Science Team
- And additional guidelines and protection measures developed by the Bass Lake Ranger District, Sierra National Forest

If a concern for any endangered, threatened or sensitive species develops during treatment, the USFS is able to stop the timber/service contract. Buffers will be established around all fisher dens found during the project. These are located based on flights by Rick Sweitzer from the UCST fisher team. A Limited Operating Period of March 1st – June 1st will be imposed to protect the fisher and her kits during the breeding season.

Use of vegetative data and models in project planning: The USFS has used some UCST forest plot data, however the UCST Lidar data is not yet available at the needed scale. The USFS is looking forward to using it in the future. Many polygons from the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships layer provided by Redwood Science Laboratory (RSL) and had to be corrected by using photo interpretation and the free color National Agricultural Imagery Program (one meter resolution) satellite imagery.

This data as well as temperature, fuel moisture, wind, slope will be used to analyze the effects of the alternatives. Models to be used for fire behavior analysis include Behave Plus and Forest Vegetation Simulator (FVS) which uses stand plot data. FVS has 13 different fuel models ranging from brush to timber. Analysts need to model many different kinds of fuels because the treatment area is not homogenous. Models allow the removal of vegetation to test the reduction in fire behavior. All the modeling will be done in the next two weeks.

Project Timing: The rest of February will be spent analyzing the four alternatives - no analysis has been completed yet. The Draft EIS should be out by the end of February. (This has been revised to May 15 2009). Then there will be a 45 day comment period. The Forest Supervisor, Ed Cole, will use the analysis completed by the USFS as well as comments received from

stakeholders to select which alternative or combination of alternatives best meets the purpose and need of the project. Once the Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision are released, there will be a 45 day period for appeals of the decision. Implementation will occur in mid June without appeal and September with appeal. (Note: This has been revised to Sept 09 to spring '10).

III. Discussion / Questions and Answers:

Question: How do current low timber prices affect project implementation?

Answer: Economics is not the main driver of this project. A greater market value for timber product could aid in financing some of the treatments proposed in this project, but because of the drop in market value, this project will be a service contract, whereby appropriated monies (public monies) will be used to complete treatments. Density reduction is desired for forest health, overcrowding and to lessen the intensity of fire behavior. Some areas have a forested basal area of over 480 square feet per acre. At that density as well as lesser over-crowded densities, trees will die from lack of nutrients, water, sunlight, insect attack, or diseases, or struggle in a suppressed state.

Question: What was the lumber industry's effect on the fisher?

Answer: Studies on the fisher only date back to 1980's and the intense period of lumbering ended in the 1930's. Therefore it is hard to know, although they obviously survived throughout the region during that period.

Question: Are any locations in Dave Smith's excel spreadsheet in fisher den buffers?

Answer: Installation of fisher den buffers affected operations in unit 4 and 3. Unit 4 is almost entirely within the proposed den buffer, while only a portion of unit 3 is.

Question: There is a pretty low "tree clump" density in the units that fall within the fisher den buffer compared to other units. Why is this?

Answer: The tree clump densities displayed in unit 4 only show the location of the pockets of larger trees being retained. There are a number of larger oaks present through the stand where cover has been retained to the dripline. Clumps of larger trees were retained where present. Unit 4 just has fewer clumps available for retention than other areas. In addition, there are clumps of larger trees within stream management zones and steeper ground that are being retained where equipment will not be operating. Data collected in unit 4 indicates that out of 14 plots taken, 8 had lighter stocking, 3 others were clumps of oaks that would be retained and only 3 had heavier stocking where increased thinning is needed to reach adequate basal area goals. The average tree size in this unit is 15 to 16 inches diameter at best height, smaller than in many of the other treatment units.

Question: Are you being selective on the species of tree to be removed with a diameter greater than 20 inches?

Answer: Yes, we are predominantly cutting out larger cedar and fir that meet the selection criteria—poorer crowns, less vigorous, etc. These species are shade tolerant and less resistant to fire, which is why their numbers are much higher than would normally be present in a natural fire regime.

Question: Alternative 4 thins out trees with up to a 12 inch diameter. Following a site review, does this meet the USFS fuel objective?

Answer: There would not be a specific diameter limit associated with Alternative 4. Because of high variability of stand structure within the project area a specific diameter is not designated in this alternative, but a description of the desired conditions needed to meet fire and fuels objectives i.e., average canopy base height, individual crown height, etc.

Question: Is insect damage a problem in treatment areas?

Answer: Not currently. Bark beetle is more prevalent in surrounding areas. However, given present drought conditions and anticipated continued moisture stress, insect damage is likely to become substantial in the future if stand densities are not reduced as proposed under the density management proposals. There is ample science to justify this concern.

Question: How does managing for the fisher impact other wildlife?

Answer: Cedars are being removed as they do not typically develop cavities for fisher dens and other wildlife or provide for food the way oaks would.

Question: Is prescribed burning in the plan?

Answer: Yes, the plan involves some burning, but not as much as would be desired because of permitting and personnel. Clearance from the air board to burn is hard to get and it takes a lot of personnel available on a moment's notice. Additionally, prescribed fire in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), especially near structures carries, more risk. The three year implementation timeline also limits options.

Question: How does the project accommodate predicted climate change? More older and larger trees are now dying according to recent studies publicized in the Sacramento and Fresno Bees. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-trees23-2009jan23,0,1390179.story>

Answer: Thinning as proposed in Alternative 2 best meets the density management needs to address this concern while maintaining canopy cover that is believed to be favored by fisher for denning habitat. Due to the high level of canopy retention being proposed for the fisher, retention densities under Alternative 2 are higher than those needed to best respond to some of the effects predicted with climate change.

IV. Wrap up and next steps: The meeting's goals were achieved in that the range of alternatives under consideration was presented and discussed, data on current stand conditions and pre and post treatment comparisons areas was presented along with information on the source of the data, and next steps and associated NEPA timelines to meet NEPA were presented. Participants said they appreciated having many from the USFS Interdisciplinary Team meeting in attendance so questions could be answered by the appropriate staff member.