

Three Successful Fuels Mitigation Projects Avert Catastrophes

by Leann Fox, Communications and Prevention Coordinator
Utah Division of Forestry, Fire & State Lands

Hill Top Fire

On August 6, 2018, the Hill Top wildfire started near Milburn, Utah, in Sanpete County, just three weeks after the Crooked Creek Fire had been suppressed in the same area. Hundreds of homes were immediately threatened and mandatory evacuations were quickly put in place.

Years before this fire, fire managers had recognized the probability of a fire starting in the area and the numerous risks. Consequently, in the spring of 2015, they implemented a 603-acre fuels treatment project located on the east bench in Sanpete County south of Black Hawk Estates Subdivision.

The Hill Top Fire spread in all directions due to high temperatures and erratic winds. When the fire advanced south, it aggressively hit the fuels treatment area that was intended to slow its progress and give firefighters an advantage. The treated area undoubtedly decreased the fire's intensity. Because of the previously implemented fuels reduction project, the fire only grew to 1,861 acres and was 100% contained in five days.

The impact and loss from this fire was significantly different from the Wood Hollow Fire of 2012 in the same area, which prompted the fuels reduction efforts in Sanpete County. The Wood Hollow Fire grew to 47,387 acres and resulted in 160 structures destroyed, 52 of which were homes.

Through Utah's Catfire funding, fire managers were able to treat hazardous fuels, protect communities, and prevent catastrophic wildfires like the Wood Hollow Fire. This specific project is only phase one of three across the east bench of Sanpete County. The project will cover 755 acres by 2019.

Middle Canyon Fire

On July 26, 2018, a wildfire started around 9:00 p.m. in Middle Canyon, east of the city of Tooele. The community has a population of 34,628. Residential homes and campers in the Middle Canyon campgrounds were imminently threatened. Local resources quickly responded, and the decision was made to order



Middle Canyon: pre-treatment

a Type 3 Incident Management Team (IMT). The fire blazed through everything in its path; however, as it burned down canyon, its progress was significantly slowed by a fuels mitigation project initiated only six weeks prior.

"It was fortunate that we started the project in the area threatened by the Middle Canyon Fire," said Dan Walton, Tooele County fire warden. "The crew had put in the fuel break and the



photograph by Adam Hyder

It would have been a very different outcome had the continuous fuels been there to carry the fire closer.

In the six weeks prior to the Middle Canyon Fire, Utah Division of Forestry, Fire & State Lands Wasatch Front Area had a fire engine crew spend twelve days removing the overgrown fuels on both sides of the Middle Canyon Road. One of their objectives was to create an effective fuel break designed for minimal visual impact. A shaded fuel break is constructed by reducing the density of vegetation and removing low fuels to slow a fire. The break in fuels then enables firefighters to get close enough to build direct containment lines.

“Because we had removed the continuous ladder fuels, the ground fuels were fairly sparse,” said Walton. “The down slope, down canyon winds were fairly strong that night and we were glad we had a barrier to stop the spread of the primarily wind-driven fire.”

As a result of the fuel break, the fire only grew to 171 acres. It would have been a very different outcome had the continuous fuels been there to carry the fire closer to the city of Tooele.

The project is in the early stages. When completed, it will be a 4.5-mile barrier 40 feet wide on each side of the Middle Canyon Road. The project is funded by Tooele County.

West Valley Fire

On June 27, 2018, a wildfire started around 3:00 p.m. in the Pine Valley Mountains north of St. George. Homes, rangeland, water systems, and access bridges were threatened. The fire eventually grew to 11,771 acres, costing \$477,037.33 in suppression efforts.

Earlier that same day, a state partnership between Utah Division of Forestry, Fire & State Lands and the Dixie National Forest, through Catfire funding, began its work on a fuels reduction project, just miles from the origin of the West Valley Fire.

The work continued as fire blazed through acres of land. Once the fire advanced down canyon, heading north, the decision was made by fire managers to use the newly established fuel break to conduct a burnout operation. The operation was successful and resulted in a change of direction for fire progression, significantly limiting the fire’s ability to cause structural damage.

Because of the planned and implemented fuels reduction project, firefighters were able to gain an advantage over the fire and increase fire protection for the nearby structures and natural resources. Without the fuel break, interagency teamwork, and firefighters’ efforts, the result of the West Valley Fire would have been drastically different.



Middle Canyon: post-treatment

line tied directly into a rock scree. As the fire attempted to burn down and out of the mouth of the canyon it was stopped by the rock scree and was unable to burn through the fuel break.”

Walton said the Middle Canyon vegetation had not been maintained and the fuels were thick. The risk of a wildfire starting and then spotting across the canyon was high. He identified the risk and initiated the project in June of 2018.