FOOTHILLS OBSERVER

Volume 5, Issue 2 *A forest stewardship and wildfire mitigation newsletter for the rural landowner, provided by Fremont County Firewise* *Summer 2006*

Low Rainfall Could Mean Fire

It is here already, Fire Season. The winter is long gone and spring seemed to zip by with nothing more than a sprinkle. Now we have summer bearing down on us and we have a scary outlook looming in the near future.

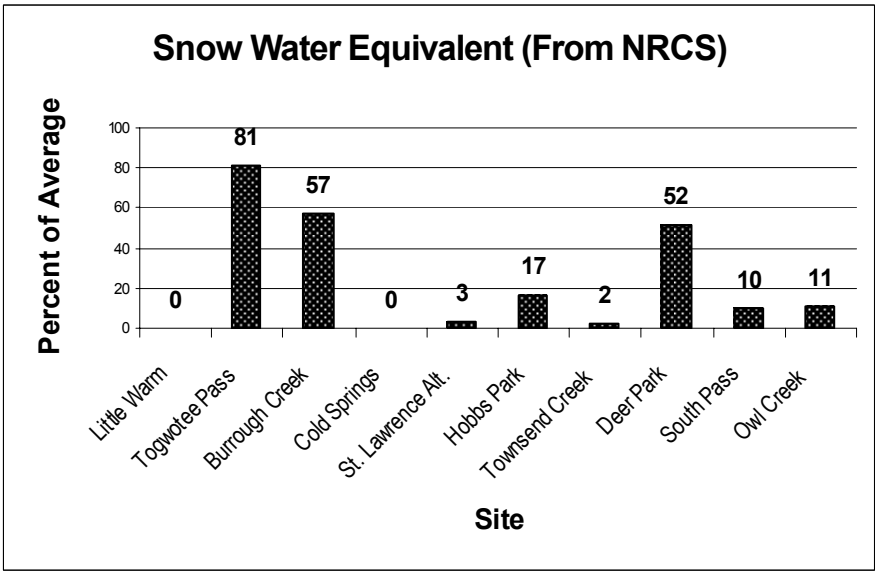
According to the National Weather Service, measured April precipitation last year totaled 26.20 inches (this is the combined measured rainfall from across the Wind River Basin). The results are in for this past April and the results are hair-raising. The total precipitation measured across the basin this past April was a dismal 3.80 inches!

The snowpack levels are not doing much better. According to the NRCS SNOTEL records, the average snow water equivalent (SWE) in the Wind River Basin is 23.30%. This is a percent of average, so you can see that we are well below the expected amount of moisture. The measurements ranged from a high of only 81% at Togwotee to 0% at Little Warm and Cold Springs. This lack of snow along with the lack of precipitation across the basin is going to lead to problems.

The fine fuels are already dried out, they react to any change in humidity very quickly, generally in a matter of minutes to hours. The problem is the larger fuels. Old tree trunks and branches that have littered the forest floor are now dried out as well. These larger fuels react to any changes in humidity very slowly, generally we are looking at weeks for the fuel to catch up to any humidity change. With the lack of moisture in the area now, all of these large fuels are very dry.

This is nothing new, as we all know, Wyoming is a dry state and we rarely get relative humidity levels that are anywhere near lower elevation states. The problem is the spring did not give us any moisture to get these large fuels through the thunderstorm season. We are going to be getting afternoon thunderstorms and if the lightning is striking in the forests, we could be in for a real mess.

So what do we do now? That is the hard question. All we can do is to try and keep the human caused fire starts to a minimum. This includes runaway campfires, discarded cigarettes, and over-heated catalytic converters driving in the dry grass. We can also prepare our homes for fires. Defensible space is a word that you should be getting tired of hearing, but it is a necessity if your home is located in the woods or in any wildland setting.



This chart shows the SWE readings from across the region. The SWE is a measurement of the amount of water in the snowpack. All the results are shown as a percentage of the average

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Sagebrush can be Treated

Sagebrush thrives on dry, harsh sites.

"The masticating head acts like a lawn mower cutting the sagebrush into chips that can be left on site to decompose"

Wyoming's sage brush seems to grow just about anywhere. And it grows tall. This sage brush also burns extremely hot during fires and can have amazingly high flame lengths. It is also a stubborn and hearty plant that seems impossible to remove.

One of the best ways to rid your property of this volatile plant is to burn it. Prescribed fire is a great tool to lower the density of the sage brush on your property. Not only does it kill the sagebrush itself, but it also disposes of the remaining fuel without having to haul it off site. This comes with a price though. Just ask the USFS and the people of Homestead Park what the risks are from a prescribed fire on a sagebrush covered hillside.

One safe option is mechanized removal or cutting of the sagebrush. This can be done in numerous ways. The first of which would be to cut the individual plants down using a chain saw or some other sort of cutting device. The slash that is accumulated would then need to be disposed of either by burning or by removing it from the site. This method is slow and labor intensive.

A preferred option would be to have a contractor use a small skid steer or similar machine with a masticating head cutting device. These machines are very mobile and can operate on most sagebrush landscapes. The masticating head acts like a lawn mower cutting the sagebrush into chips that can be left on site to decompose. This method is fast and relatively cheap when compared to the other methods. Another added benefit of this is that because the machinery is relatively lightweight and often run on tracks, they create minimal disturbance to the underlying soil. This helps lower the potential that invasive species will take over the site.

Sagebrush does have a lot of benefits including, but not limited to, wildlife hiding cover, big game food source, and it keeps the ecosystem in a steady state. Because it is the climax species, once it becomes established it is very seldom out-competed by any other species of plants. This is good because the invasive species generally cannot take over the area, but it also limits the ability of native grasses to succeed.

Due to the low moisture, if your property contains sagebrush, you may want to look into doing some mechanical treatments to lower the fire danger. Not only does sagebrush removal lower the fire danger, but it also greatly improves the grasses and forbs on most properties. To find a contractor and to see if Firewise can pay for some of the costs, please call 307-857-3030 to set up an assessment.

Skid Steer with brush mowing attachment.

Ross Named BLM Lander Field Manager

From www.wy.blm.gov

Bob Ross has been selected as the new field manager for the Bureau of Land Management's office in Lander. He will assume the helm of the BLM Lander Field Office at the end of May.

"We are very fortunate to have Bob Ross become the new Lander Field Manager. He brings a wealth of experience and knowledge in resource management and has great people skills. Bob has proven to be an excellent leader throughout his 25 year long BLM career in Wyoming, and I consider it fortunate that he is taking the helm in Lander where his skills will be put to good use," said Bob Bennett, BLM Wyoming state director.

Ross will lead the Lander Field Office after serving as Field Manager in the Newcastle Field Office since September 2004.

"I am honored to join the Lander Field Office," said Ross. "I'm looking forward to administering the wide variety of public lands and resources in central Wyoming. As soon as possible, I want to get to know and work with the staff and the members of the public who use and enjoy these lands."

After graduating from the University of Maryland with a bachelor's degree in geology, Ross worked as a geologist for the U.S. Bureau of Mines in Pittsburgh, Penn. Ross came to Wyoming in 1981 and started his BLM career in Cody as a geologist. He served in positions in Cody and Worland in land use planning, then served as the assistant field manager for minerals and lands in Worland for three years. Before moving to Newcastle, Ross served for six months as the acting field manager in Worland.

Ross, and his wife, Janine, have three sons.

Lander Fuel Breaks in Progress

The fuel breaks are designed to keep the entire river bottom from burning like it did in Fort Washakie in 2005.

The citizens of Lander can breath a small sigh of relief. The major river bottom fire season is over.

Generally speaking, the river bottoms are at the highest risks in the early spring and the late fall. These are when these areas have lots of fuels on the ground and the trees are no longer green.

As soon as the green-up occurs in the spring and when the snow flies in the winter, the fire danger drops.

The citizens can also thank some of the landowners that have property along the river as well as the city officials. Several of the landowners are allowing the Wyoming State Forestry Division and Fremont County Firewise to implement fuel breaks on their property. These fuel breaks are designed to help the entire community and could prove vital in stopping a large scale river bottom fire.

Along with the private landowners, the city has taken the initiative to clean up their properties as well. The WSFD has been working with the city to clean up McManus park and has already completed a fuel break along the paved trail through the park.

The next fuel break is ready to be implemented along Mortimore Lane south of Lander. This will give firefighters and citizens three fuel breaks between city park and Mortimore Lane.

FREMONT COUNTY FIREWISE

Wildfire Safety Through Prevention & Education

Fremont County Firewise
305 South Smith Road
Riverton, WY 82501

WERE ON THE WEB!

WWW.FREMONTCOUNTYFIREWISE.COM

Water Tanks Installed Soon

The long awaited water tank project in Union Pass will be completed soon. If all goes well the tanks should be in the ground and functioning by the first week in July.

Contrary to popular belief, the hole that is sitting behind the Dubois Rural Fire District's Union Pass substation has not been abandoned. The hole has intentionally been left open and empty over the winter. The bed of the hole is comprised of fractured shale and it was allowed to set over winter in hopes that the collected moisture would help settle the shale and prevent future problems.

In the next few weeks, Archer Construction will begin compacting the bedding even further and preparing the bedding with gravel. The gravel will serve many purposes. It will act as a barrier from the sharp points of shale to prevent punctures and it also acts like a leveling agent and allows the tanks to sit comfortably without shifting. Initially the project was to use larger road-base style gravel instead of the preferred pea size gravel due to the increased cost, but Albright Sand and Gravel came forward and donated the pea gravel at the road base cost.

After the tanks are installed and tested to be working properly, the land where they will sit will officially be donated to the Dubois Rural Fire District from the current landowner. Without the multiple donations (the tanks were also donated) this project would probably never have had happened. When they are installed, it will serve as a quick access point for water for any responding engines and will serve the entire Union Pass area.

Currently all that is seen is the empty hole near the Dubois Fire substation on Union Pass.