**Site Visit to the Last Chance Fuel Break Near Forest Meadows**

**& McKays Tree Mortality Salvage, 14-Apr-16**

ACCG Planning Group Minutes

Pat McGreevy, John Hofmann & Gwen Starrett

**Last Chance Site Visit**

**Background**

The Darby Fire burned the project area in 2001. Some handwork was done in 2006. Utica annually clears some of the brush on the lower side of its canal. They maintain 27 miles of ditch line.

Land use is residential developments on the wide ridge above the NF Stanislaus Canyon.

Fire Hazard

1. Discuss the location of the project in relation to areas of moderate, high, or very high fire hazard severity zone as identified by the latest Fire and Resource Assessment Program maps. Fire hazard severity zone maps by county can be accessed at: <http://www.fire.ca.gov/fire_prevention/fire_prevention_wildland_zones_maps.php>
2. Describe the geographic proximity of the project to structures at risk from wildfire in the SRA.

There was some question about historical vegetation. Some said it was a mixture of oak and pine, others that it was about what is present today. Grazing stopped sometime between 1930 and 1950. Grazing is generally limited to 35% to 40% slopes, but this depends on the herd.

**Purpose**

To protect the communities on the northern rim of the North Fork Stanislaus Canyon and infrastructure including the Utica Ditch and high voltage power lines.

**Needs**

* Reduce fire hazard
* Protect the Utica Ditch
* Wildlife corridor
* Livestock grazing
* Recreation (trail)

**Fuel Break Description**

The FB is mapped in the power point presentation entitled ‘LastChanceFB.pdf’. It will be a 433 acres polygon and measure 3.2 miles long and a width that varies from 85 feet to 4,457 feet. The elevation descends from 3,320 feet at Candy Rock Quarry on the east to 2,920 feet on the west. While the slopes inside the FB are <35%, some areas bordering the uphill side of the Utica Ditch are steeper. The slopes increase dramatically downslope towards the river.

Current vegetation is a mosaic of many shrubs including manzanita, Ceanothus species, and chemise; foothill pine, and oak… (See images in ‘LastChanceFB.pdf’)

**Construction**

Tracked masticator leaving shreds on the surface to a depth of 3 inches.

Hand crews along the steep buffer above the canal to cut and stack brush in 4x4 piles for burning.

**Discussion**

Forest Service proposed to stay back from the flume to provide a buffer. Utica prefers the brush be removed down to the flume. They can deal with brush that falls in the flume during mastication. Utica is not concerned about sediment from treatment.

We also discussed removing the brush near the flume by excavator and planting grass. Some were concerned that the grass seed would not grow, or that it was not natural to the area. Utica said there was a patch of grass around the corner that was seeded several years ago and the seed has kept the brush from re-growing. We suggested the Forest Service consider grass seeding near the flume as an option to reduce future maintenance costs. The Forest Service staff thought there would be several concerns with removing shrub to promote grass species. Ripping the soil to remove shrubs would be intensive work and tends to stimulate other invasive weed species. In addition, the Forest Service is careful not to plant species that are not native to a specific geographic location and habitat. There are currently no nurseries with grass seeds or seedlings appropriate for this project. No decision was made regarding the option of introducing grass species, other than not to rule out any options at this time.

Provide water to wildlife and livestock to keep them out of the Utica Ditch. Install rainwater collectors that fill cisterns and pump it to troughs using solar energy.

**Maintenance Options** (Get reference and design from Dawn Coultrap, Range Management, USFS, (209)532-3671 ext 201, decoultrap@fs.fed.us)

* Leave chips on the surface to suppress brush regeneration and minimize erosion.
* Remove returning brush by mastication/hand crews every 3-5 years.
* Prescribed burning at five to ten-year cycle is not an option due to the homes along the rim.

Targeted livestock grazing (Taylor 2006) is probably the best option. Preferred grazing would be goats because of the slopes and goats would eat more of the brush. Cattle graze on grass and herbs and are not effective when the goal is to reduce the growth of woody brush species. Operators put up temporary electrical fencing to confine livestock in a small area that is browsed heavily. Guard dogs are needed to protect livestock. We discussed whether there were any small livestock operators in the area that would be willing to provide herds of goats and sheep. Gwen is following up with UCCE staff to see if they have a list of operators. How do livestock cross the Utica Ditch to graze both sides? Do we need fencing to exclude livestock from the ditch?

Dawn Coultrap, STF Rangeland Management Specialist, followed with this email:

**REGARDING WILDLIFE**- Rainmaker makes a few different wildlife-friendly guzzlers – you can design your own configuration. Their catalog can give you some ideas (<http://rainmakerwildlife.com/>).

###### Underground water storage cisterns are available from local suppliers (General Plumbing in Sonora, Spence Feed, or Loomis in Jackson might be able to order). You can take a water storage tank and bury it (or not). As long as the trough or guzzler is a little bit downhill from the tank, you can use gravity to deliver the water from the tank to the trough or guzzler. (<http://www.rainharvestingsupplies.com/poly-tanks/>)

###### We would want a trough that is bat-friendly, if possible (8 feet long, minimum, for swoop distance). We also always install wildlife escape ramps on new troughs – but not guzzlers as these typically have built-in ramps.

**REGARDING LIVESTOCK GRAZING-** Depending on what the objectives are and the class of livestock we choose, we may not need bridges over the ditch. If it is goats, they set up electric fences to keep the goats on one side or the other and away from the ditch, if desired.

Whether we need to exclude livestock from the ditch – not a forest service question, but someone with Utica could better answer whether they have concerns about impacts to water quality associated with grazing near the ditch.

Gwen followed with this email:

I agree with John that a mid-slope fuel break on a shrubby south facing slope is problematic.  I don’t think there are easy solutions however.  I haven’t seen the historic photographs, but even if this was slightly more wooded with oaks and foothill pines, the majority of that slope has converted to shrubland.   And deviating from an established shrub field is very difficult, particularly with our warming climate.  There was some good black oak regeneration, so the mastication and chipping followed by maintenance might help release those oaks and we could get a better overstory and less understory.

I am willing to put my support behind the fuel break in part because it seems like the Calaveras Ranger District is willing to try some options that other districts will not – including the target grazing maintenance.  We will learn from that whether we have options other than herbicides.   As you probably gleaned from my comments in the field, I am not in favor of bringing in grass species for points noted in the write up.

**References**

McGreevy, Pat, 2018. LastChanceFB.pdf

Taylor Jr, Charles A. "Targeted grazing to manage fire risk." *Targeted grazing: A natural approach to vegetation management and landscape enhancement* (2006): 107-112. <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/rx-grazing/Handbook/Chapter_12_Targeted_Grazing.pdf>

**McKays Site Visit**

**Background**

The McKays area was last logged in the 1940’s. About 400mbf was salvage logged after the Darby Fire.

**Proposal**

The Forest Service proposes to harvest all beetle-killed trees deemed hazardous on ~12 acres. Trees that show signs of dying from beetle infestation will also be taken out. The work will be done under the Tree Mortality Response Plan that will cover the entire Ranger District and is the result of a Congressional hearing. The priorities for tree removal include land adjacent to communities; land near habitable structures and campgrounds; and land near trails and roads.

To request tree removal on Forest Service land near private property, the land owner needs to complete a form available on the Stanislaus National Forest [website](http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/stanislaus/home/?cid=FSEPRD497167). Harvesting will be expedited under a CE. It will use the same marking guidelines as the Ramsey Fire salvage. It will not use Cornerstone funding, but can be used as a match

**Discussion**

The Forest Service noted that due to the tree density and elevation, this area will have tree mortality if any area in the district has tree mortality. We discussed the potential to thin the area during the salvage to get ahead of the bugs. Forest Service acknowledge thinning would be a good prevention, but it would need to be thinned about every 10 years and would require more than the CE which would delay the project.