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Best practices for Dude Ranch fire mitigation strategies

Contract with a consulting forestry or rangeland management professionals to complete a comprehensive inventory of the ranch ecosystem and draft a forest management/rangeland management plan or Forest Stewardship Plan.

From the plan, develop prescriptions that yield fire behavior modification by manipulating current or existing fuel models with respect to flame height and rate of spread within the various fuel models of the ranch. Keep away from bromides such as “thin-from-below.” The forests of your ranch are natural capital for the many ecosystem services and amenities that comprise and make your ranch. Professionally developed silvicultural prescriptions can ensure both fire mitigation and long-term forest sustainability. A “thin-from-below” prescription is not sustainable over time.

It is unlikely that the adjacent Federal Land Management Agencies (LMAs) would have any existing plans for their jurisdiction adjacent to most, if not all ranches. So, it will be important for ranch ownership to assert the ripeness of action based upon the site-specific ranch forest management plan. In other words, the ranch should be “driving-the-train.” Make certain to include the district director for the Member of Congress when approaching the adjacent LMA. I would recommend the same with state government representation, though in more rural states it would likely be the member of the assembly. Also include the state agency district forester in your approach to the adjacent LMA. More than likely the state district forester would have to approve the forest management plan for your ranch.

Engaging and collaborating with Federal and State Agencies (Forest Service, BLM, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service are the civilian LMAs, also Department of Defense) for fire mitigation on contiguous public lands

Federal LMA(s) are likely to appreciate private land proactiveness and would have to act decisively when presented with a proposal, especially if that proposal is also known to the

Member of Congress. It would be most helpful to the ranch, if the Member's staff was personally briefed and a tour of the ranch completed before approaching the Federal LMA.

Some Federal LMA(s) – Forest Service and BLM have cross jurisdictional authorities to allow them to work on private land. Those authorities are found in the Wyden Amendment (WA) and the Good Neighbor Act (GNA). However, I would recommend caution in using these Acts on your land without professional forester/rangeland management involvement, leadership and representation. The reason is that Federal LMA(s) are not vested in the interest of the private ranch owner. In the case of GNA, it is the State Forester's role to assist in the management of private land, but not necessarily represent the landowner. That is where your consultant is worth the fee. The other LMA(s) including DOD lack statutory authority to perform work on private land. In the case of the National Park Service, they most probably know more about your ranch than you do because of their frequent and surreptitious "reconnaissance surveys" performed on adjacent lands to expand their dominion over people and their property. It is strongly recommended that all cooperation with the federal LMA(s) and DOD be documented in a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with the specifics detailed in the agreement.

Finding the money to do the work

Funding for non-industrial private forest (NIPF) lands can come from various sources and can be competitive within a state or a region. Most, if not all funding requires a forest/rangeland management plan be completed prior to applying for funding. One exception though is EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) funding administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which will pay the ranch owner, provided that the forest of the ranch is classified as NIPF, an incentive to prepare the plan. The NRCS EQIP is a type of cost/share formula which requires the landowner to pay some of the costs related to forest and rangeland management. NRCS is the private ranch owners broadest and most reliable funding source. Other sources of funding may come from the Forest Service under the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) if there are any funds available. The Department of the Interior LMA(s), except for the BLM are not statutorial authorized to assist private property owners.

For plan implementation, EQIP will fund a variety of practices to achieve the plan's desired future condition on a cost/share basis. Where there are vibrant timber/forest products markets, the receipts from the sale of stumpage may be invested in the forest management/mitigation efforts.

A word of caution when entering into cooperative agreements with the federal LMA(s) is that your ranch prescriptions may have to endure analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the associated surveys for wildlife, botany, cultural/historic resources, Tribal consultation and the remaining myriad of alphabet soup federal analysis. Therefore, it is imperative that your plan be prepared by your consultant, so that you won't have to endure the federal analysis paralysis while trying to manage your ranch.