

# CASE STUDY: REDUCING HAZARDOUS FUELS FOR JOSEPHINE COUNTY'S SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATION

*Draft – October 2006*

## Project Overview

The 2002 Biscuit Fire, which occurred largely within Josephine County, burned close to 500,000 acres and resulted in over \$150 million in suppression costs, as well as long-term economic impacts. Lessons learned from the Biscuit Fire and high wildfire risk led to the development and adoption of the Josephine County Integrated Fire Plan in November 2004. The plan is inclusive of a broad range of efforts related to fuels reduction, emergency management, and education.

One such effort, initiated by the Oregon Department of Forestry in 2002, provides property owners up to \$330 for creating defensible space around their home. This incentive, however, does not always reimburse landowners the full cost of creating defensible space on an acre of land, which can range from \$600 to \$1200 depending on land conditions. The program has been highly successful in increasing the number of homeowners taking action to reduce wildfire risk. However, partners involved with the fire plan recognized that low-income and physically or mentally disabled individuals who cannot do the work themselves and hire a contractor face greater obstacles in protecting their homes from wildfire.

In 2005, Josephine County received two separate Title II grants from the Rogue River/Siskiyou National Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, Medford District Resource Advisory Councils to perform fuels reduction projects for the County's citizens with special needs. The county contracted with the Illinois Valley Community Development Organization to administer the grant and partner with local social service and community organizations, identify eligible residents, and contract and perform fuels reduction.

As of August 2006, this grant is still being implemented. However, with 24 participating households, there are many lessons that have been learned through this process and successes to report. This case study describes the challenges, accomplishments, and next steps related to assisting citizens with special needs reduce their risk to wildfire. Upon completion of the grant, the case study will be updated to reflect the final numbers of participants, acres treated, and other relevant lessons learned.



Site A in Selma, Oregon – before treatment. Photo courtesy of the Job Council



Site A in Selma, Oregon – after treatment. Photo courtesy of the Job Council

## Methodology

Resource Innovations developed this case study of the Title II grants to document the goals and objectives in providing assistance with fuels reduction to Josephine County's special needs population. The study is particularly interested in the benefits, challenges, and impacts of engaging the special needs population in fire protection activities. Resource Innovations conducted interviews with representatives from local government, state and federal forestry and fire agencies, social service and community development organizations, and a local contractor. Resource Innovations conducted these interviews to identify how the project met intended grant project objectives, obstacles, and successes. The document concludes with recommendations for future collaborative efforts to help special needs populations who are at risk to wildfire and other natural disasters.

## Background

In November 2004, the Board of County Commissioners formally adopted the Josephine County Integrated Fire Plan (JCIFP). This collaborative effort of citizens, fire districts, county staff, and agency representatives has resulted in many projects related to fuels reduction, fire prevention education campaigns, and other fire-related programs. The JCIFP also provides important assistance for taking local action by developing community-specific fire plans and participating in countywide activities for wildfire prevention and protection.

Josephine County's climate, topography, and vegetation put the area at considerable risk for wildfires. The high incidence of wildfire in southwestern Oregon poses serious risks to local residents. The threats may be even greater for those with special needs and low-income levels. Outside of Josephine County, special needs citizens have been traditionally overlooked by emergency management planning and response efforts. The impacts to low-income, elderly, disabled, and minority populations in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama during Hurricane Katrina underscore this issue.

Josephine County is home to a large number of people with special needs, including, but not limited to, the elderly, physically and mentally disabled, and those with low-income. Josephine County's Special Needs Committee estimates that 10% of the county's population is classified as special need, the majority of whom are 65 years and older. According to the 2000 Census, over 2,400 families live below the poverty level. The county is also diversifying in terms of its population demographics. Latinos now make up over 4% of Josephine County's population.



Site B in Selma, Oregon – before treatment. Photo courtesy of the Job Council



Site B in Selma, Oregon – after treatment. Photo courtesy of the Job Council

Those who do not speak English as a primary language, as well as undocumented individuals, also comprise a growing portion of residents.

To better serve the special needs population, the JCIFP includes a special needs assessment, as well as a list of local social service agencies and the populations they serve. This assessment provided a series of recommendations, including an action to assist the special needs population to reduce hazardous fuels around their homes.

In 2004, Josephine County applied for Title II funds from the Rogue River-Siskiyou National

<b>Project Partners</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Josephine County</li><li>▪ Illinois Valley Community Development Organization (IVCDO)</li><li>▪ Rogue Valley Council of Governments Senior Disability Services Division (RVCOG)</li><li>▪ Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF)</li><li>▪ Bureau of Land Management, Medford District (BLM)</li><li>▪ The Job Council</li><li>▪ Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest</li></ul>

Forest and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Medford District Resource Advisory Councils. Josephine County received the grants and contracted with the Illinois Valley Community Development Organization (IVCDO) to administer the grants. The grant sought to create a total of 138 acres of defensible space for landowners with special needs. In 2005, the Forest Service awarded the county \$62,620 to perform fuels reduction work, and the BLM awarded the county \$90,049. Josephine County contracted with the Illinois Valley Community

Development Organization (IVCDO) to implement the grant. Project implementation began in 2006 and is slated for completion in 2007.

## **Project Goals and Objectives**

Josephine County requested grant funds to implement fuels reduction projects on private lands where there are residents with special needs living in areas at high-risk to wildfire. The project met objectives within the JCIFP in a number of ways. The grant provides critical assistance to low-income and elderly and disabled citizens that lack the means to do the fuels work themselves and hire a contractor to assist them. Other benefits extend beyond just citizens with special needs. Fuels reduction will also help protect the surrounding community from wildfire risk by removing heavy vegetation. Additionally, defensible space creates safer areas to protect properties and firefighters. Fuels reduction projects can also result in increased opportunities for local workers and contractors.

## **Eligibility Criteria**

This project brought together agencies and organizations from several sectors. Fire districts, social service agencies, local government officials, the BLM, Forest Service, and private contractors collaborated to carry out fuels reduction work for homeowners with special needs. Many of these organizations are partners in the JCIFP (or became partners through this grant). People eligible for the grant project had to meet four specific criteria as described below.

### ***Communities at Risk***

The first criterion for eligibility related to being in area at high risk to wildfire. The Josephine County Integrated Fire Plan included a comprehensive risk assessment that uses layers on risk, hazard, values, protection capability, and structural vulnerability. This assessment provides a relative rating of the highest risk areas in the county.



Site C in Selma, Oregon – before treatment. Photo courtesy of the Job Council

### ***Close to Federal Land***

The grant stipulated that work must be done on homes close to federal land, which covers nearly 70% of the county. Josephine County GIS provided maps and addresses for all homes in high-risk wildfire areas near federal land in the county.



Site C in Selma, Oregon – after treatment. Photo courtesy of the Job Council

### ***Low-income, and Elderly or Disabled***

Josephine County commissioners specified that the grant should provide assistance to low-income and elderly or disabled citizens who could not physically do the fuels reduction work themselves and afford to hire a contractor. To participate in the project, homeowners had to be elderly or disabled and be at 200% or less of the federal poverty level.

### ***Homeowners***

To be eligible for project participation, all individuals had to own their homes. While many low-income and elderly and disabled citizens are often renters, the way the grant was written required that only homeowners could participate.

## **Identifying Special Needs Participants**

The use of classified data regarding citizens with special needs limited the partners' ability to identify potential participants. The IVCDO, Rogue Valley Council of Government's (RVCOG) Senior Disability Services Division, and other social service agencies worked together to identify eligible special needs participants living in the county. GIS analysis determined that most properties in Josephine County are located in high-risk wildfire areas. The IVCDO began the outreach process by advertising the project through social service agencies, flyers, and an

advertisement in a local newspaper. Interested property owners were asked to call IVCDO and submit their names and addresses to be placed on a list of potential project participants.

After the IVCDO received the names and addresses of interested parties, they sent the list back to RVCOG. A staff member with RVCOG checked whether or not participants met the low-income and elderly or disabled criteria. The staff member then notified the IVCDO about which people were eligible according to the project's income and disability criteria. If an interested party could not produce verification about working with a social service agency, the IVCDO used tax return and county assessor records to check income level and whether the party owned his/her property. IVCDO staff confirmed with special needs property owners that they were still interested in the fuels reduction program before scheduling contracting staff or other site assessors to come to their properties.

## **Site Assessment and Fuels Reduction**

Once the IVCDO had a list of eligible participants, a team of interagency officials conducted site assessments to determine if the property itself needed fuels reduction work and passed National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) assessments, if required. The Forest Service and BLM handled the site assessment differently.

The BLM required all projects adjacent to BLM land and using BLM funds to have a NEPA assessment. According to the BLM<sup>1</sup>, NEPA requires federal agencies to:

1. Become aware of the environmental ramifications of their proposed actions;
2. Fully disclose to the public proposed federal actions and provide a mechanism for public input to federal decision-making; and
3. Prepare environmental impact statements for every major action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment.

The BLM played an active role in determining which properties were eligible for fuels reduction by conducting the NEPA assessments. The BLM surveyed for threatened and endangered species, as well as cultural resources to make sure that federal grant money would not result in negative environmental impacts. These surveys required the expertise of botanists, a cultural resources specialist, a fisheries biologist, a wildlife biologist, a soil scientist, and foresters. NEPA analysis did not disqualify any properties from project participation.

Since the IVCDO will make decisions regarding which projects to work on using Forest Service grant money, the Forest Service did not require NEPA assessments to determine environmental impacts of fuels reduction work. The IVCDO, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), the Job Council, and a few local contractors will likely conduct site assessments for projects using Forest Service funds.

The IVCDO continued coordination for the fuels project and brought various partners together to complete the work. It is important to note that the project is still in a relatively early stage of implementation. Thus far, ODF wrote the prescription for treating many of the properties. However, ODF tends to get busier around fire season, thus limiting its ability to participate in the project. Local contractors, IVCDO staff, and the Job Council, an organization based in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.blm.gov/nhp/Commercial/SolidMineral/3809/deis/glossary.html>

southwest Oregon, also wrote site prescriptions. The Job Council, which provides local youths the opportunity to gain job experience and build professional skills, completed a large portion of the fuels reduction work.

Other local contractors also received contracts to perform fuels reduction work. Their access to a brush chipper, dump truck, and ability to conduct controlled burning was necessary for reducing hazardous fuels.

## **Initial Project Outcomes**

This project helps reduce the risks faced by special needs citizens by creating defensible space and increasing their safety. The benefits extend beyond helping those with special needs, by also improving community safety and awareness about wildfire issues. According to the IVCDO, 24 households have been declared eligible for hazardous fuels reduction throughout Josephine County. As of July 2006, the Job Council completed work for 15 households, with about two to three acres of land treated per property. A significant amount of work remains yet to be done with the remaining project funds.

## **Focus on Special Needs**

Due to the additional barriers that special needs citizens face, this collaborative project represents a dramatic shift in how emergency management responders view and work with this population. Without this project, many special needs property owners would not be able to conduct hazardous fuels reduction. Along with creating defensible space around their homes, those with special needs can now feel safer when there is a risk of wildfire. One official added, *“The work improved the ability for special needs people to make it through wildfire without the catastrophic risk of losing properties or their lives. It was great to look at social and fuels reduction aspects come together in this unique project.”*

The property owners were generally receptive to having government officials and other parties come on to their land and complete fuels reduction work. The level of reception varied on a case-by-case basis, perhaps because property owners participated in the grant for different reasons. One local government employee noted that it would be interesting to know why people participated in the project. A few landowners indicated that they felt the work was taking too long. Most of the participants were grateful for otherwise expensive fuels reduction work. *“Some [participants] invited us into their homes, gave us treats and other gifts, and wrote us letters [of appreciation].”*

## **A Landowner Thank-You**

*"I had the pleasure of having work [done] on my property. I live on the top of a very steep hill and the terrain is difficult. They were the best workers! They did an excellent job clearing all of the brush and ladder fuels around my cabin. They were at all times respectful and courteous. I feel much safer from the threat of wildfire now that the work is completed. I can't thank them enough."*

## **Increased Knowledge about Where Citizens with Special Needs Live**

An important outcome of this collaborative effort is the increased knowledge about where special needs citizens live. The RVCOG developed a Special Needs Disaster Registry in 2003, which provides emergency responders with a listing of where people with special needs live and how best to assist them in a disaster. Special needs property owners gain a stronger understanding of fire behavior, evacuation, and how to create defensible space.

## **Increased Fuels Reduction**

The JCIFP calls for landscape scale fuels reduction across public and private lands throughout the county. The benefits of reducing hazardous fuels through this project extend beyond the properties of those with special needs. Fuels reduction allows wildfires to be managed more easily and improves the safety of all Josephine County citizens. Property owners with defensible space also reduce wildfire risk for their neighbors. Some neighbors who saw contracting work done requested information about its importance and how it is completed. If the public becomes more familiar and continues to be educated about wildfire and emergency management issues, the risk posed by such events is reduced. As more defensible space is created, the safety of fire fighters also increases.

## **Economic Development**

The economic gains of this project reported by people interviewed for this case study varied, with "workforce employment" provided as the most frequent response. This project provided employment for local contractors and the Job Council. Other economic benefits were less measurable, such as supporting local convenience stores (for items such as food, fuel, etc.) and contracting supply and equipment stores.

The Job Council performed a lot of the work, giving kids and young adults an opportunity to earn money. Some of these youths come from disadvantaged and at-risk backgrounds. In the long-run, people interviewed for this case study indicated that the community benefits from the Job Council's ability to produce "*an experienced pool of employees through the provision of local jobs.*" Furthermore, "*The kids develop experiences and skills that help them figure out interests and educate them about career choices. In addition to direction, the kids earn money.*"

One of the interviewees, a former Job Council member, reinforced the importance of this group. He added, "*The Job Council pays generous wages, trains future workers, gives kids experience for future jobs, and gets them off the streets.*" Recent success stories of the Job Council include

a worker who earned his GED and entered the professional forestry field as a firefighter with Grayback, a local fire and forestry contractor. Another youth received a job with Josephine County parks doing controlled burns in Selma.

## **Project Challenges**

Partners involved with the grant encountered several challenges. A few people indicated that the primary obstacle was the amount of time the project took. The number of partners involved in the project, as well as the many steps involved in identifying and contacting eligible participants, conducting NEPA assessments, and scheduling the mitigation work, resulted in a delay for when fuels reduction activities could occur. The need to protect the confidentiality of special needs citizens is a major reason that contacting eligible property owners took so long.

## **Working with Special Needs Citizens**

Working with the special needs population presented several challenges for the project partners. The sensitive nature of the project makes it difficult for some people to accept free services or allow government and unfamiliar people access to their land.

Due to confidentiality issues (see HIPAA section below), social service agencies became a critical link between the special needs population and project partners. The greatest challenge expressed by social service agencies is that people with special needs do not always own their homes, which limits their participation in the project. Social service agencies also indicated that it is not easy to identify every person in the county with special needs and then determine if s/he is eligible to participate.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) creates national standards to protect individuals' medical records and other personal health information by setting boundaries on the use and release of health records.

HIPAA legislation makes sharing information about special needs citizens difficult to overcome because social service agencies are required to protect names of clients with disabilities. This prevented other governmental officials from directly accessing special needs property owners.

The difficulty of reaching out to the special needs property owners presented a significant challenge. The project partners wanted to allocate Title II money for fuels reduction work as quickly as possible. Without the list of eligible special needs property owners, however, staff had to wait before it could begin conducting site and NEPA assessments. After connecting with interested property owners, organizations had to determine if people actually lived in forested areas and needed hazardous fuels reduction. Explaining the steps needed for project participation required education about the grant process and the parties who would be involved in fuels reduction work.



## NEPA

Project partners had to wait for site assessments and agreements with contractors to be completed so they could begin the fuels reduction activities. Federal NEPA regulations required the BLM to conduct several different assessments on eligible properties before the mitigation work occurred. Since the projects were located throughout Josephine County, it took a lot of time for specialists to travel between projects and conduct the 24 assessments. Yet without these assessments, the properties could not have been treated to reduce hazardous fuels.

## Awareness

Since the 2002 Biscuit Fire, public awareness about the importance of fuels reduction has continued to grow. However, there is still a lot of work to be done in educating Josephine County residents about the need for thinning hazardous fuels and creating defensible space. Barriers to fully engaging citizens with special needs in this project included the fact that some special needs citizens are distrustful of the government. Others are hesitant to admit having low-income status.

Social service agencies do not specialize in wildfire mitigation issues. Advertising the issue of fuels reduction adds to the amount of work they have to do with limited funds and time. A solution must be created to leverage resources between partners so that traditional social service agencies are not exclusively given responsibility of promoting such projects.

Several agencies mentioned the challenge of attaining information for property owners about defensible space and the process involved to create it. Ideally, there would be funding for a coordinator to gather information from property owners and then educate them about the importance of hazardous fuels reduction. This person could also serve as a liaison between property owners and the various agencies involved in the project. Yet, creating such a position to perform outreach and education efforts would limit the funds available to people with special needs.

## Maintenance

One interviewee expressed concern about what will happen to the treated properties in the future. There is no current program to ensure that the properties will receive treatment in the future. In many areas, fuels reduction activities must occur on a regular basis. Grasses, which burn very hot, must be cut down as needed. Trees, such as madrones and oaks, will continue to sprout up after they have been cut down, thus requiring recurring yearly maintenance.

## Collaborative Partnerships

**“The existing network’s strength lies in the people’s incredible support of goals and emergencies.”**

Project partners overcame a series of obstacles to achieve their goals. The interviews revealed a number of existing strengths in the collaborative partnership. The partners now have greater familiarity with each other and people *“know what others are doing and what partners’ missions and goals are.”* Another person interviewed added, *“Without this network, these groups*

would not interact on a regular basis and exchange information. The face-to-face meeting time is valuable.”

Many of the project partners meet monthly to discuss the Josephine County Integrated Fire Plan. When asked about increasing the level of collaboration in the future, the people interviewed generally supported the idea. One individual stated, *“Key players must continue meeting and get to know each other well. In emergency situations, they are immediately familiar with each other. This saves time to protect people and resources. People become more comfortable and familiar with each other. They bring resources into the network to share. For example, money from one agency can be prioritized to go along with other projects to create larger projects.”* Another person added, *“Collaboration was great. It could be expanded to talk about other pressing issues within the community.”*

**“The process went really well. All the involved parties were motivated to make the project a success. This project is a poster child for collaboration.”**

Increasing the level of involvement from partner agencies was the only major suggestion to improve this network. A few respondents mentioned *“obtaining greater involvement from social service agencies”* to improve collaborative efforts.

## **Future Opportunities**

This project overcame many barriers to successfully meet its goal of reducing hazardous fuels and community wildfire risk. Unfortunately, the case study participants do not expect Title II funds to be available for similar projects in the future. Beyond funding, however, there are other opportunities that could strengthen this program.

Without external grant funding, enacting this type of program to help those with special needs is difficult. Interviewees stated that the possibility of receiving federal funds leaves hope that this program may continue. Some potential funding sources include the National Fire Plan, Western States Fire Manager’s Grants, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Department of Health and Human Services. However, another project partner stated, *“There probably will not be available funds at the federal level. A private funding source would have to step up,”* adding that he is *“not overly optimistic about the prospect of attaining a similar grant.”*

The Oregon Department of Forestry recently submitted two different grants to reduce hazardous fuels for property owners with special needs. One grant, to the National Fire Plan, has been tentatively awarded and will provide assistance to special needs citizens in Jackson and Josephine Counties. A second grant for Title II funds in Jackson County was not awarded.

While grant funding may be unavailable, it is still important to build upon the project and continue to improve the network of interagency relationships. If this program carries on,

**“There needs to be a continuous effort to show that people need help reducing hazardous fuels, engaging community groups, and changing the local culture to embrace these ideas.”**

respondents offered a number of suggestions to strengthen project goals and objectives. Involvement in this program required special needs citizens to *own* their property. Renters were ineligible to participate and many people with low-income and/or disabilities do not own their homes. One project partner expressed concern for low-income renters and their limited access to hazardous fuels reduction. This person

recommended extending the program to renters, “*perhaps by interacting with owners of rental properties to offer discounted fuels reduction activity costs.*” An alternative solution could provide education and outreach to rental property owners to teach them about the importance of reducing hazardous fuels on their properties.

Another person suggested reducing hazardous fuels beyond the special needs properties to include their neighbors and extending the amount of defensible space. Tying the fuels reduction work to the “*landscape level*” can help “*create a continuous scope of defensible space around the land of people with special needs.*” People interviewed for this case study discussed other options that could be used to engage more landowners and reduce hazardous fuels. The first idea proposed dropping the low-income requirement to make the program flexible for meeting needs of those without the strict income criteria. That option, however, may not be economically feasible due to existing funding constraints. A second alternative involves assigning stewards to talk with project neighbors to educate them about the importance of fuels reduction, how to clear the land by themselves, and identify local resources that can provide assistance for this work.

## **Recommendations**

1. ***Connect project participants with the RVCOG special needs disaster registry***—There is no existing mechanism to ensure that people who participated in this project receive a registration form for the disaster registry. A possible solution involves going back to all initial households and signing up special needs landowners for this database.
2. ***Locate new revenue streams***—Title II money may not be available for funding future projects. Project partners can work together (and through the JCIFP education and outreach and fuels reduction committees) to identify and apply for grant funding that will continue to support fuels reduction for special needs citizens.
3. ***Extend protection of special needs population***—While this project has already enrolled 24 property owners and will likely sign up more, it overlooked some members of this population. If funding is secured for future fuels reduction projects, partners should attempt to engage owners of rental properties to create defensible space for their tenants.
4. ***Increase awareness about the need for fuels reduction projects***—Raising awareness about wildfire risk and risk-reduction strategies among social service agencies can result in better collaboration and connections to the special needs population. Increasing outreach efforts for future projects is also important. Outreach efforts should be designed to reach all eligible participants. These efforts may include an increase in media advertising and outreach to more social service agencies.
5. ***Continue to strengthen relationships with project partners***—Everyone interviewed for this project indicated that there was very strong collaboration. By participating in the JCIFP and similar ventures in the future, partners can continue to share resources and improve their level of collaboration.
6. ***Extend defensible space beyond special needs properties***—Reducing hazardous fuels on the properties of people with special needs increases their safety. Educating and engaging neighbors about how to reduce fuels and extend the number of acres of defensible space will

have even greater benefits by protecting citizens, fire fighters, and minimizing overall wildfire risks.

7. **Conduct follow-up interviews with landowners**—Landowners most likely participated in this project for a variety of reasons. Listening to their experiences, including about how they learned of this program, perceived strengths and limitations, and suggestions for improvement, may prove highly beneficial for future efforts to assist people with special needs.

**For more information:**

**Josephine County**

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