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NRCS invests \$705K this year to reduce wildfire threat along East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains

Additional funding available in 2016, apply by Jan. 15

LA GRANDE, Ore. – (December 3, 2015) – Private landowners in Baker and Union counties are reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire on their forests, thanks to \$705,243 in financial assistance this year from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and technical support from the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF).

During fiscal year 2015, NRCS entered into 16 contracts with landowners in Baker and Union counties to perform fuels reduction treatments (such as pre-commercial thinning) on 1,687 acres of private forestlands.

Additional funding is available through 2016. Interested landowners should submit applications to their local USDA Service Center in Baker or Union County by Jan. 15 to be eligible for the next round of funding. An additional application cut-off date is also set for April 15.



Pictured: Left – A view of dense, overcrowded forestland on Dave Mellinger's property in Union County, Oregon before pre-commercial thinning. Right – A view of an opened up forest on Mellinger's property after contractors performed pre-commercial thinning using a slashbuster.

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NRCS is providing the funding as part of the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project. This is a three-to-five year forest restoration project that aims to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire in high-risk areas on public and private lands in the Baker and La Grande watersheds. The project targets fuels reduction along more than 20 miles of shared boundary between private lands, state lands, and federal lands in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

“This was a successful year for private landowners to get conservation on-the-ground in the East Face project area,” said Jay Gibbs, NRCS basin team leader for the John Day/Umatilla and Snake River basins. “This year’s record wildfire season in Eastern Oregon highlights the importance of proactive wildfire risk reduction on state, federal and private forest lands. The East Face project is an exemplary model for the ‘all hands, all lands’ approach. Together with the Oregon Department of Forestry, the Forest Service, and other partners, we are promoting a fire-resilient landscape across public and private lands.”

NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to private landowners through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – a voluntary conservation program in the Farm Bill that reimburses landowners for a portion of the cost to implement conservation practices on private lands. ODF foresters work with landowners to provide additional technical assistance and support.

“The main purpose of thinning is to reduce wildfire risk,” says Jana Peterson, ODF field forester. “By thinning the trees, it makes space between the crowns and the stems so the fire has less fuel to carry it. So if there is a fire, we can get in there and put it out easier because we’re not battling 20 foot high flames. Instead, we would be dealing with 1 or 2 foot high flames.”

Forest health is also a significant benefit to pre-commercial thinning.

“It’s well worth getting involved in this thinning project,” said Union County landowner Dave Mellinger. Mellinger entered into a three year contract with NRCS to thin 119 acres of his forestland through the East Face project. “If the trees are too close together, they won’t get any size to them. Now that we have thinned the forest, the trees that are left will get bigger and healthier.”



Landowner Dave Mellinger is one of 52 woodland owners in Baker and Union counties who signed up for a pre-commercial thinning contract with NRCS.

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NRCS through the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project. Last year (2014) was the first year private landowners began work on the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project. That year, NRCS funded \$1.4 million in contracts with landowners in Baker and Union counties to perform essential timber thinning practices. Contracts totaled 17 in Baker County and 16 in Union County, with conservation work spanning 3,076 acres. So far, more than 4,700 acres of private forestlands are either currently undergoing fuel reduction activities or have had fuel reduction work completed.

To sign up or for more information about funding eligibility, contact the USDA Service Center in La Grande: (541) 963-4178 or Baker City: (541) 523-7121 or visit the NRCS Oregon website at: www.or.nrcs.usda.gov.

About the East Face Partnership

The East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains project is funded by the Joint Chief’s Landscape Initiative—a collaboration between the chiefs of two USDA agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Forest Service. The project aims to accomplish goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy (CWS) by reducing the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire through forest fuels reduction, restoring and maintaining landscapes, and improving fire response.

The East Face project combines the skills and expertise of the NRCS, the Forest Service, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These agencies are working together to proactively address wildfire issues in the East Face project area with an “All Hands, All Lands” approach—spanning both public and private lands. The project targets fuels reduction treatments on more than 46,000 acres in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; 1,224 acres of BLM land; 4,000 acres of ODFW land; as well as adjacent private lands.

The long-term goal is to minimize potential impacts from wildfire on private residences, natural resources, and public infrastructure, while also improving overall forest health.

The East Face project will reduce the impacts of wildfire to the watersheds supplying the irrigation needs of local farmers, and create areas of reduced fuel loadings near the municipal water supplies for La Grande and Baker City. It will also protect key habitat for federally-threatened bull trout, steelhead, and Chinook salmon.

NRCS’ role in the partnership is to provide funding and manage contracts for eligible landowners to implement conservation practices on private lands; while ODF provides technical assistance to private landowners to support the development of forest management plans.

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The Forest Service completed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) in October 2015, which provides several alternatives to treat the federal lands within the East Face project area. A final EA is slated for release in early 2016. Work on federal lands may begin as early as summer 2016. For more information about the EA, visit the East Face project website at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/EastFace.

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