

Trench ER Activities Report 2008

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The Rocky Mountain Trench Ecosystem Restoration Program (Trench ER Program) has had a busy 2008.

The Trench ER Program was formed as a coalition of 11 groups in 1998 to carry out the thinning and prescribed burning called for in the Kootenay-Boundary Land Use Plan. The groups meet as two committees, one to oversee the general direction of the program and one to plan and coordinate operations. The partners are:

- The Trench Society (Rocky Mountain Trench Natural Resources Society), a coalition of Wildsight, Rocky Mountain Naturalists, Southern Guide & Outfitters Association, Kootenay Livestock Association, Windermere District Farmers Institute, Cranbrook Archery Club, East Kootenay Wildlife Association, Waldo Stockbreeders Association and The Land Conservancy of BC (Kootenay Region)
- Forest Licensees (Tembec Industries, Galloway Lumber Co. Ltd. and BC Timber Sales)
- Fish & Wildlife Compensation Program (Columbia Basin)
- Parks Canada
- BC Parks
- Ministry of Environment
- Ministry of Agriculture and Lands
- Ministry of Forests and Range

Background

Over the past 10 years restoration activities have focused on removing excess trees from the landscape by logging, thinning and prescribed burning.

Since 1950 about 50% of the grasslands and open forests of the Rocky Mountain Trench have disappeared by new tree seedlings growing up under existing forest parklands or slowly encroaching into open grassy meadows. Recent fire ecology studies supported by the Trench ER Program show that for 400 years, the low-elevation Ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forests burned every 2 to 33 years. The majority of the fires were low or moderate severity fires where grass, shrubs and about 20% to 50% of the smaller trees burned. Since 1950 the low impact fires have been suppressed by the Ministry of Forests and Range fire suppression program.

The ecosystem restoration program returns the light severity fires to the Trench to revitalise the grass and shrubs. The grasslands are critical to elk, deer, bighorn sheep, cattle and about 287 species of plants, animals and insects. A lighter fuel load in the forests also helps fireproof communities and housing situated in the middle of Douglas-fir and Ponderosa pine forests. Restoration won't prevent fires but it does reduce their severity.

Current Activity

Four partners have had active field operations in 2008.

- The Fish & Wildlife Compensation Program (Columbia Basin) has committed over \$100,000 for prescriptions, burns and thinning projects throughout the Trench.
- The Habitat Conservation Trust Fund has contributed \$184,000 for projects in parks, on private conservation properties and Crown lands. Funds and projects are administered by the Ministry of Environment.
- The Ministry of Forests and Range contributed \$100,000 to the Trench Society to fund ongoing projects, monitoring and planning.
- The Ministry of Forests and Range has contributed \$290,000 for project work. The Rocky Mountain Forest District will be requesting more money from this account this September.

The achievements of the Trench ER Program are outlined in the following tables. The figures are for Crown land, but there have also been significant amounts of money spent on parks, conservation properties and high-elevation sites valuable to bighorn sheep. Of particular note:

- BC Parks Branch conducted two prescribed burns (40 ha and 30 ha in size) in Kikomun Park in April 2008.
- Kootenay National Park had a 1500-ha prescribed burn on Mitchell Ridge at the south end of the park.
- The Nature Conservancy of Canada treated 219 ha of their Kootenay Ranch property located on both sides of Highway 93/95 just south of Canal Flats. Funding was provided by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

ha = hectare

1 ha = 2.471 acres

Tables follow on next page ...

TABLE 1**2008-09 ER activities on Crown land in the Trench:**

| Treatment | Hectares Planned | Hectares Treated to Date | Costs | Comments |
|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Burns | 462 | 462 | \$108,000 | 4 spring broadcast burns completed, none planned for fall. |
| Logging | 2801 | 1100 | | NRFL logging will be completed by June on Airport and Beacon. North Waldo project just wrapping up. |
| Slashing | 541 | | \$280,000 | Follow-up to logging, slash and skid Airport, Clear Lake and Gina Lake pastures, East Columbia, hoping for more MOFR dollars in September to continue on project list. |
| Job Opportunities Program | 540 | | \$500,000 | A new program that puts unemployed forestry & sawmill workers back to work. Most work will be slashing/pile burning. |
| Pile Burning | 223 | | \$30,000 | Eager Hill and East Columbia to be completed over winter. |
| Planning | | | \$83,216 | Monitoring, archeological assessments, mapping. |
| Prescriptions/ Planning | 4000 | | | Three years of prescriptions completed in 2007 (21,032 under prescription currently). MOFR will write new or revamp old prescriptions on about 4000 ha in 2008. |
| Totals | 8567 ha | 1562 ha | \$1,001,216 | Ground treatments 4027 ha. |

TABLE 2**Fiscal results 2007-08:**

| Treatment | Hectares Planned | Hectares Treated | Costs | Comments |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Burns | 2300 | 187 | \$30,742.48 | Poor weather. |
| Logging | 2300 | 1480 | | Market collapse. |
| Slashing | | 789.9 | \$274,081.27 | Central Pasture and logging follow-up. Other projects needed logging. |
| Pile Burning | | 42.4 | \$1,062.38 | Completion of old projects. |
| Prescriptions/ Planning | | 15,884.3 | \$382,875 | Shift of priority due to weather and loss of logging. |
| Total | | 18,396 ha | \$688,764.13 | Ground treatments 251.7 ha |

Waldo North Project

Activities on the Waldo North pilot project are in their second and probably final year. The Trench Society has been running the entire program as a self-funded project, carrying out all the planning and thinning operations under a series of contracts.

This direct experience has pushed the Trench ER Program's knowledge on product marketing, and the logistics and economics of harvesting and thinning in one mechanical pass. Specifically, the project shows that the overall operation of thinning a stand is cheaper if all trees are removed by mechanical means in one pass rather than two mobilisations of machinery.

The project should wrap up by March 2009. It will have turned 1500 hectares of closed forest into open range and open forest. After harvest, the resulting forest has been found to be so clean of fuel, it should not require a prescribed burn for 5 to 10 years.

New Logging Quota

Two special harvesting quotas of timber volume in the ecosystem restoration area were set aside in 2003 by the provincial Chief Forester. In 2007 this quota was awarded as two non-renewable forest licenses (NRFLs) to Tembec Industries after the company won a competitive bid for the wood. To date Tembec has harvested 680 hectares of closed forests in two blocks near the old Kimberley airport. The blocks are completed and the last of the pulpwood is being removed. The Trench ER Program will finish off another 157 hectares of slashing in the area to make a larger, more logistically feasible block for a broadcast burn due in 2010.

The second quota has proven more difficult to harvest due to legal issues associated with land and timber issued to the Canadian National Railway in 1901. Tembec hopes to harvest two blocks in the Skookumchuck area in 2009.

The ecosystem restoration quota is about to be offered up again this fall under a separate license. With a shortage of pulpwood in the southern Interior there is interest in the smallwood volume that the Trench offers. The areas to be offered up for bid are still under discussion but 89,000 cubic metres will be offered in the Cranbrook/Elko area and 15,000 cubic metres for the Skookumchuck/Canal Flats area.

Job Opportunities Program

A new program has just been activated in the Trench and will be utilised to carry out ecosystem restoration projects. The Job Opportunities Program is intended to put unemployed forest and mill workers back to work carrying out forest health, fuel management, silviculture or ecosystem restoration projects. Last year the sawmill near Jaffray, run by Galloway Lumber Co. Ltd., was shut down. Galloway Lumber has been awarded a contract to put 12 of its mill workers back to work. The Ministry of Forests and Range and the Trench Society will be laying out projects for the crew to work on and Galloway Lumber will be supervising and administering the crew. The crew should start this fall and carry through until March 2009. They are slated to space another 540 hectares of land and burn debris piles on 92 more hectares.

A New Five-Year Plan

A major new factor in 2008 is that a five-year plan drafted by the Ecosystem Restoration Team Leader has been approved by the Rocky Mountain Forest District Manager. The plan integrates the existing project plans developed by all ecosystem restoration partners and lays out a common standard of stewardship and objectives for the program. The plan was reviewed by First Nations and stakeholders over winter and can be viewed on the Rocky Mountain Forest District website.

A comprehensive description of the ecosystem restoration program and fire-maintained ecosystems is available by downloading “Blueprint for Action 2006” at:

<http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/drm/erp/erp.htm>

The five-year plan and maps are available at:

<http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/drm/Downloads/Downloads.htm>