SUN PEAK FIRE NEWS

April 12, 2023

Sun Peak Wildfire Mitigation Efforts

by Sun Peak "Fire Safety Committee"

With three feet of snow in our yards, it is difficult to think about wildfire mitigation. However, the Sun Peak Fire Safety Committee has continued to work and has conducted two meetings so far in 2023. Below is a report on our activities:

As a result of Phase I of the fire mitigation work completed in 2022, there are about 800 piles (approximately100 tons) requiring disposal. While the record levels of snow this winter have been wonderful for skiers, unfortunately, it has hampered our pile disposal plans. We will attempt to dispose of as many piles as weather conditions allow during the Spring and Fall windows. In addition, we will take the necessary efforts to chip up to 50 piles that are adjacent to homeowners' properties along the narrow Southern Fuel Break where access and gradients can accommodate chipping machinery even though this will increase the overall cost. However, the majority of the piles will need to be burned.

In an effort to minimize any adverse effects resulting from pile disposal, the following steps will be taken (subject to finalization by the HOA Board):

Implement more precise standards for the contractor to follow before commencing pile burning and to cease burning (if possible) if conditions deteriorate. This shall include a requirement that pile burning will only be done if a "clearing index" is at 400 or above.

Improve communications to better inform Sun Peak homeowners of expected fire mitigation efforts and pile disposal activities, and endeavor to also advise when The Enclave expects to pile burn. Toward that end the following steps will be taken:

a. An article to be written and published in local news sources such as Park Record, Town Lift, KPCW, etc.
b. Install informative signs along trails adjacent to Sun Peak open space regarding pile burning.
c. Distribute door hangers to homes expected to be affected by intended pile burning: Advanced notice and impending notice.
d. Email homeowners the day prior to when pile burning is expected to occur.
e. Hold a community educational open house at the Sun Peak club house during the first day of pile burning along SR 224 (date yet to be determined).
f. Install illuminated signs along SR 224 when pile burning along SR 224.

Implement the following requirements for pile burning on private property:

a. **Pile burning on private property is not authorized!** However, a variance may be requested to the board for approval. Such request to be submitted in writing to the HOA manager.

b. A variance will only be considered for properties that are greater than one
c. acre and where the burning piles are greater than 150 feet from any neighboring house.
d. Prior to submitting a request for a variance the homeowner must obtain
e. approval from their neighbors.
f. A homeowner receiving a variance agrees to the following process:
    1. Burning can only be done by a contractor that specializes in prescribed burning and has appropriate liability coverage, and is subject to HOA approval.
    2. Homeowner/contractor to advise HOA Manager of dates for approved pile burning.
    3. Homeowner/contractor to distribute door hangers to homes expected to be affected by intended pile burning: Advanced notice and impending notice.
    4. Pile burning to be conducted only when the Clearing Index is at 500 or above and any applicable Utah Division of Air Quality guidelines are met.

The pile burning on private property has a requirement for a higher clearing index than that for the open space due to the fact these piles may be in closer proximity to homes than pile burning on open space.

As far as Phase II of the planned wildfire mitigation work is concerned, the committee intends to hold a community open house to discuss this project during the month of May. The creation of additional fire breaks and fuels reduction efforts will depend on our ability, and timing, to dispose the existing piles from Phase I.

Below is an article written by J. Bradley Washa that was recently published in the Salt Lake Tribune. Brad acts as a consultant to the Sun Peak HOA with regard to wildfire mitigation efforts.

J. Bradley Washa: All things are connected with Fire

Salt Lake Tribune, 10 Mar 2023, J. Bradley Washa | Special to The Tribune

I was first introduced to the concept of “All things are connected” at Mayville Public School’s Sixth Grade Environmental Education Camp through Ken Lonnquist, an environmental singer/songwriter. Mayville is in Wisconsin, home of Aldo Leopold and his “Land Ethic” of simply caring about people, about land and about strengthening the connections between them.

As we hear concerns of forest health and wildfire risk, detrimental effects of prescribed fire smoke, climate change impacts, including a two-decade long drought with the Great Salt Lake and Colorado River drying up, and proposals of forest thinning to help return historic water levels, the concept “all things are connected” could not have a greater meaning.

As concerns are being expressed, there is a significant amount of wildland fire misinformation being spread. Some of this misinformation is in the form of personal opinion portrayed as science, internet sites that support a certain cause or comparisons to other parts of the United States and world.

For the Wasatch Mountains, a missing connection is the exclusion of wildland fire on the landscape and the historical role played in our fire-dependent ecosystems, where fire is a natural part of the environment.

Within the ancestral homelands of the Shoshone, Paiute, Goshutes and Ute Tribes, the original stewards of this land, anthropogenic burning was part of this stewardship. The Powell Expedition map of Utah Territory showed the presence of fire from both human and natural ignitions. John Wesley Powell and other early explorers' journal entries further documented smoke covering our mountain valleys.

With a reduction of fire, the ecological impacts can be observed, and our mixed-severity fire regimes altered. Our forests are becoming overstocked with trees, as fire has not naturally thinned them out and, when fire does occur, it has stand destroying effects. More trees also result in less available water and nutrients, which reduces growth and trees are unable to defend against disease and insect infestations. These forest health concerns are evident with the thousands of dead trees along the Wasatch enhanced further by a changing climate.

As a substitute to fire, mitigation projects also known as fuel treatments are an option in areas where forest health concerns exist. This is particularly true around communities in the area known as the Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI) where the wildlands meet with human development. These treatments are not "logging in disguise" or "denuding of our forests." Northern Utah has a limited market for timber and there is little value to bug-killed trees.

Creating resilient forests able to withstand fire and other disturbance and more representative of historic conditions may open the canopy, but reducing the canopy density diminishes the probability of a crown fire becoming established. Once fire is established as a crown fire, there are limited opportunities to suppress the fire and spotting potential increases.

A widely used and cost-effective fuel treatment to accomplish forest health goals is the practice of thinning, piling and burning of the piles. There has been some concern expressed for the health effects of smoke from these prescribed burns. When comparing smoke from wildfire vs. prescribed fire, under the same conditions:

> **There is no control of production and transport of emissions with wildfires, Wildfire smoke is two to 18 times that of prescribed fire, and Less planning and operational strategies are available with wildfires to minimize smoke.**

As Dennis Haddow, a retired smoke management specialist from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service states, "From an air quality perspective, the number one reason we treat fuels is to protect the public from the extremely high concentrations of fine particulates associated with wildfire."

While thinning forests will probably not provide enough water to fill the Great Salt Lake, there are numerous examples of vegetation treatments across the state supported by the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative returning watershed function to the landscape. Springs, seeps and streams that only flowed seasonally can be observed returning to perennial flows following treatments. Efforts need to be taken to increase water availability throughout the West, along with water conservation efforts by all.

Many people further question the effectiveness of fuel treatments in reducing the impact of wildfires. During my tenure with the Bureau of Land Management in Utah, 371 wildfires were reported as starting within or burning into fuel treatments. Data supports treatments worked to reduce fire behavior and made management by firefighters safer and easier while protecting communities and landscapes.

Understanding fire history and managing wildland fire and fire surrogates based upon scientific principles in a holistic approach is important in considering how “all things are connected.” As the pace and scale of fuel treatments are expanded, opportunities for treatments will increase, addressing our forest health issues and threats from wildfire.

The downstream effects of these colloquial based efforts in managing wildlands can be realized while supporting the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy vision: “To safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a nation, to live with wildland fire.”

J. Bradley Washa retired last year as the state fuels specialist with the Bureau of Land Management in Utah after a 33-year career in federal wildland fire management. He has a bachelor’s degree in natural resource management from the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point and a master’s degree in wildland fire science from Colorado State University.