

'No Boundaries' forestry brings landowners, government together

By SHOLEH PATRICK
NINR Correspondent

Something exciting is happening in the woods.

Forget politics and bureaucracy. Never mind property lines and turf wars. Fire knows no such boundaries, and thanks to the growing success of a concept called shared stewardship, neither do people — at least when it comes to fire mitigation.

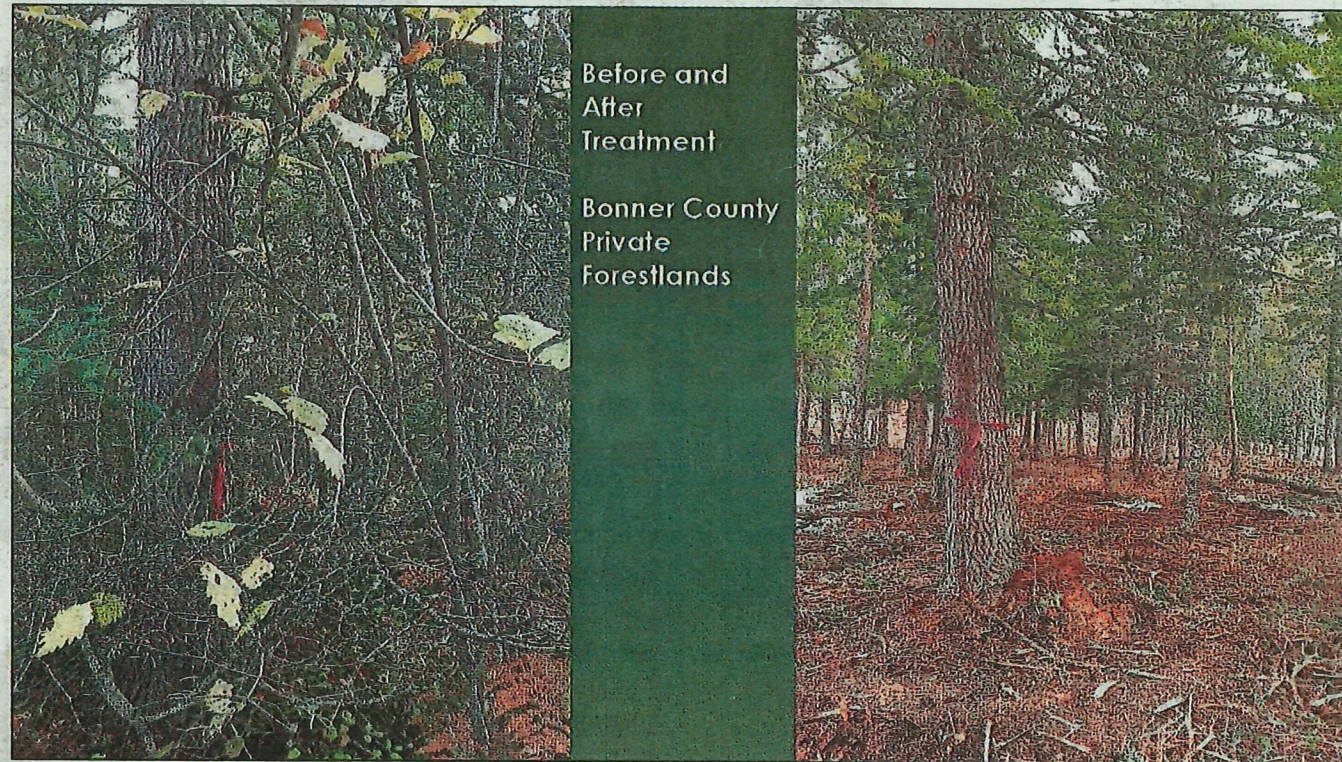
The aptly named, multi-agency "No Boundaries" program, in the spirit of similar programs such as the Idaho Department of Lands Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and Bonner County's BonFire program, essentially brings federal, state, Tribal, county, and private parties together to coordinate on-the-ground efforts to make forests healthier and more fire-resistant. Who owns that land is less the point than what needs to be done.

That's not to say ownership is irrelevant — all work is by consent and owners remain decision-makers. But coordination makes all the difference.

"Over the years, we definitely have seen a change," said Ken Homik, Private Forestry Supervisor with Idaho Department of Lands. "The shared stewardship program put a name to something we'd done, but it brought everyone together and helped us strategize to get more work done."

More than half of Idaho's land is public, mostly forests owned by the state or federal government. That makes it a beautiful place to recreate, but also a big draw for fire. In years past, when one entity treated land but the adjacent, differently-owned forest was left untreated, disease and fire could too easily spread. Coordinating efforts across boundaries makes work and fire mitigation far more successful and beneficial to all.

"GNA was kind of the first step in cross-boundary and shared stewardship to expand and increase acres on federal land for cross-boundary work," said North Idaho Shared Stewardship Coordinator Jeff Lau, a 50-50 shared employee of the U.S. Forest Service and IDL.



Before and After Treatment

Bonner County Private Forestlands

"No Boundaries Forestry" powerpoint by Ara Andrea and Jon Songster, IDL

A thinning project in Bonner County under the No Boundaries shared stewardship program shows a significant reduction in fire fuels.



Lau

"And No Boundaries does that with private and industrial parties."

A former forester with the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service on the Palouse and Nez Perce Clearwater National Forests, Lau

helped set up GNA and is now based in Coeur d'Alene.

The two programs share history, and often come together in the "no boundary" spirit. In 2018, Idaho Governor Butch Otter, governor-elect Brad Little, IDL and the U.S. Forest Service signed an agreement with an umbrella strategy for treating contiguous lands for fire mitigation. That set the goals, but not the fine details.

"We already had the GNA program with four different national forests and timber sales to mitigate wildfire risk. So we started building relationships to establish



Andrea

working groups to extend footprints of work in the national forests into private and other land." — Ara Andrea, IDL's statewide Shared Stewardship Coordinator

In fiscal years 2021 and 2022, \$450,000 in annual funding for Shared Stewardship was approved by the Idaho Legislature, emphasizing the value of proactive forest management in this era of extreme wildfire.

That includes shared efforts and resources among agencies, including Lau's position as what Andrea described as the "orchestra leader," as well as regular meetings and outreach. The GNA program quickly became self-sustaining, with proceeds from sales exceeding costs (see graphic).

Other players include USFS district rangers, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service

(NRCS), and Bonner County's BonFire program which combines county and federal money to fund treatments such as cutting and grinding potential fire fuels (e.g., thinning overgrown stands, diseased trees), as well as private contractors and crews.

The University of Idaho's Extension Forestry program helps get the word out and offers free or low-cost short courses to educate individual landowners. Even some of the on-the-ground work is no- or reduced-cost for landowners, depending on the program involved.

"With county programs it's often along roads or near bridges, targeting where it makes sense for fire breaks," Homik said. "Whereas the NRCS programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP, are geared more toward precommercial thinning, taking thousands of trees per acre to hundreds per acre, for example."

Building a Self-Sustaining Program

NATIONAL FOREST	ANNUAL PROGRAM COST	FY21 SALE REVENUE	CURRENT CASH BALANCE	SALE REVENUE TO DATE
Idaho Panhandle	\$475,000	\$536,426	\$3,684,558	\$4,493,626
Nez-Clear	\$325,000	\$332,112	\$1,437,388	\$3,283,173
Payette	\$250,000	\$0	\$396,097	\$396,097
Boise	\$250,000	\$536,426	\$323,896	\$783,632
TOTAL	\$1,300,000	\$1,404,964	\$5,841,939	\$8,796,533

FY21 Personnel Expenses = \$1.1 M, FY21 Operating Expenses excluding contracted restoration services = \$120k

This chart shows timber sales revenues exceeding costs of the state's Good Neighbor Authority program.

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"This is hard work," Andrea said. "We have a lot of new owners, because what used to be a 200-acre tree farm is now 20, 10-acre parcels. "So instead of outreach to one landowner we now have so many."

But the team has found most of them welcoming, and willing.

"In North Idaho people are really welcoming. We were expecting a 30 percent response, but we've had anywhere from 65 to 95 percent positive response to our outreach."

— Jeff Lau

"This community is really interested in assistance programs

and what they can do themselves. It's been extremely successful up here," Lau said.

Those who've experienced a bad fire season, whether here or elsewhere in the west, have been relatively eager. But others still don't see the connection between active management and fire risk.

"Some with no experience with wildfire say 'no, it's green and fine, so I don't want to cut a tree,'" Andrea said.

Generally however, response has been positive. The Scattered Lands project area covers about 175,000 acres in southwest Bonner County, from the Kootenai/Bonner County line north to the Pend Oreille River. Nearly 80% is privately owned (industrial and family forestland). So far around 8,000 acres are being treated under

the No Boundaries program, with another 15,000 acres scheduled over the next few years.

A newer project area lies in Kootenai County, with 165,000 acres starting from Fourth of July pass and reaching across Hayden. The outreach phase rolled out in March.

"We've homed in, primarily focused on the southeast side of the Hayden Lake area," Lau said. "Some of this work has already been implemented; if you've seen smoke on Canfield Mountain or the slash piles at English point, that's part of this. In a way these demonstrated what's being done and have interested landowners."

Once a target area is identified, Lau said the team interacts with landowners, both individually and as a community to talk about

No Boundaries Forestry: Shared stewardship metrics in North Idaho

- More than 2,900 acres in the Panhandle National Forests (IPNF) harvested, thinned or received fuels-reduction treatments; 500 acres administered by IDL's GNA foresters
- More than 7,000 acres harvested or treated on state endowment lands in the Pend Oreille Lake Supervisory Area
- On non-industrial private lands in Bonner County, over 170 acres treated through the county's BonFire program, using IDL fire-mitigation grant funds, with an additional 71 acres slated for NRCS-EQIP funding assistance in 2022. Since 2017 more than 800 acres of family forests in Bonner Co. were treated using EQIP funds ([Nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/id/programs/financial/eqip](https://nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/id/programs/financial/eqip))

treatment potentials. Community meetings are held to share information about available resources, and responsive owners may help interest neighbors as word spreads. Forestry specialists and contract consultants then evaluate participating properties to identify needs, and the team connects landowners with the appropriate agency or program, such as BonFire, NRCS or IDL.

Lau said most of the treatment is "non-merchantable;" the goal is not to make money, but to increase forest health and resiliency. He said most of it is handwork (people on foot with chainsaws) and mastication (essentially a giant

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mulcher that chews up small-diameter and submerchantable trees). Mastication results in fewer clipped piles, which are often left too long and fuel wildfire.

If landowners want to sell some trees, the No Boundaries team can provide referrals to loggers or mills. Others like to keep the chipped wood for landscaping. All the consultations by government agencies are free, and many if not most referred programs involve potential cost-sharing and financial assistance.

While things have been going well overall, it's not without

challenges. As with just about every other industry recently, labor can be a problem.

"We've had some bottlenecks," Andrea said. "We don't have the staff within IDL to take on all ... the work. We rely on subgrantees to take our funds; they contract the loggers, operators, get access and so on. We have a shortage of subgrantees who can take our money and put it on the ground."

That's especially true with loggers and haulers.

"We've been working with Associated Logging Contractors and others because logging companies are the ones likely to have the baseline equipment that can be converted," Andrea said. "It'll take money and investment, so they're reluctant.

"Over time as we get this into the mainstream of how landowners think, this will become part of the norm, like setting up homeowner's insurance. This will be part of what you do, and it'll make a big difference."

ARA ANDREA

"(But) some of these grant funds are sustainable for at least 10 years, so that's the message we are trying to get out to them: To say, 'yes, you're safe making this investment — the work will be there.'"

"Hopefully the bottleneck will highlight the need and opportunity to grow," Lau added.

Overall, Andrea said the goal of No Boundaries is simple: To maximize effective treatment on contiguous acres in areas of the state which are high risk for wildfire.

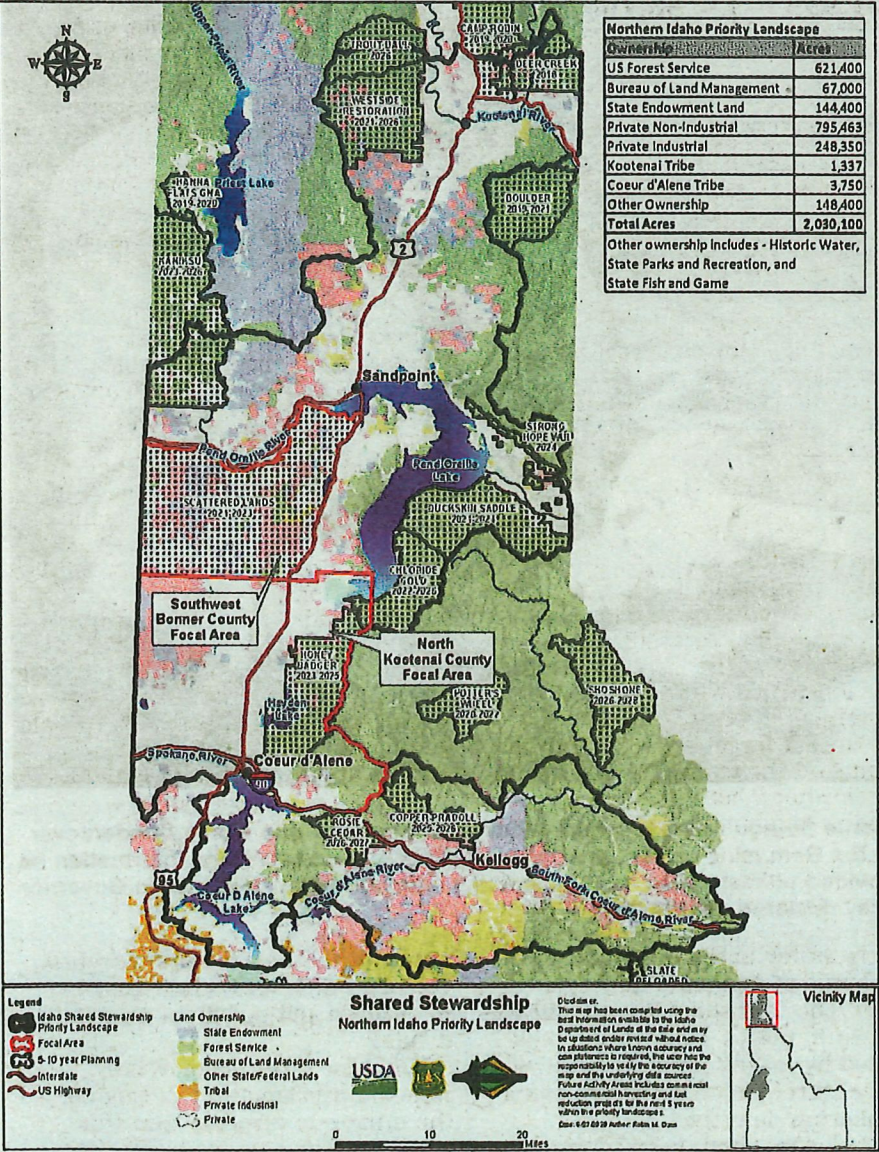
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landowners think, this will become part of the norm, like setting up homeowner's insurance. This will be part of what you do, and it'll make a big difference." — Ara Andrea

"It's changing the paradigm of private landowners who own forested land," Lau said. "With land management you're never done, so it's got to become a way of continually doing business with your land."

Working together, that's a lot more effective.

For more information contact Idaho Department of Lands at 208-769-1525.



"No Boundaries Forestry" powerpoint by Ara Andrea and Jon Songster, IDL

The Northern Idaho Priority Landscape focal areas are part of the No Boundaries program, a shared stewardship of cooperative efforts between state, federal, tribal, county and private forestland owners to manage and promote healthier, more resilient and fire-resistant forests.

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