

Mescalero Apache Tribe & Lincoln National Forest

The Mescalero Apache Tribe and the Lincoln National Forest are located in south central New Mexico in the Sacramento and Capitan Mountain region. The Mescalero Apache reservation is approximately 720 square miles and is located adjacent to the Lincoln National Forest, which covers some 1.1 million acres and is the birthplace of the original Smokey Bear. The elevation ranges from 4,000-ft in the high plateau Chihuahuan desert to over 12,000-ft sub-alpine forest. The majority of forests are dominated by ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, spruce, aspen, white oak, pinon, and juniper.

The Mescalero Apache-Lincoln National Forest region was chosen for the Joint Fire Science Program assessment because of its risk of high severity wildfires that threatens local tourist communities, the unique efforts of the Village of Ruidoso to reduce fire risks, and because of the critical role of the Mescalero Apache Indian Tribe in local biomass utilization efforts. The Tribe now numbering more than 4,000 members operates various outdoor recreation enterprises, a resort and casino, and Mescalero Forest Products. Mescalero Forest Products is the only operational saw mill in the region with primary operations in Mescalero, NM and another mill that is currently closed in Alamogordo, NM to the south. Tribal forests are managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs with assistance from the Tribal Forestry Division in vegetation management and manning fire crews, which provides important employment opportunities for tribal members.

The Village of Ruidoso is a particularly active partner in hazardous fuel reduction efforts. Building on a history of working with the Smokey Bear Ranger District of the Lincoln National Forest, the Village of Ruidoso has been instrumental in developing wildfire protection plans, prioritizing fuels treatments, and implementing zoning ordinances to create defensible space. These actions and past fire events are a constant reminder of the fire risk, which has been characterized by the State of New Mexico and the USDA Forest Service as one of the highest at-risk communities in the country. Subsequent biomass utilization efforts, which may help to reduce fuels reduction costs and lead to more acres treated, have taken on a sense of urgency among local residents.

Joining the Village of Ruidoso, the Tribe and the Lincoln National Forest in their fuels reduction efforts is the Capitan District of New Mexico State Forestry. The Capitan District provides technical assistance to landowners and has wildland fire suppression responsibilities for approximately 8.6 million acres of private, non-federal and non-municipal lands. With funding from the National Fire Plan, the Capitan District seeks to reduce fuels on several thousand acres of forest annually and have been instrumental in working with local communities and the Lincoln National Forest to promote and provide assistance to biomass utilization enterprises.

Like much of the Southwest, the challenges of biomass utilization are linked to the remote location of forests relative to markets and a diminished industry capacity. Also a challenge is the density of fuels in the wildland-urban interface and the dispersed nature of development. Steep terrain and a mixed ownership make gaining access difficult or cost prohibitive for many projects. Mescalero Forest Products is in proximity to many project sites but their material is mostly procured from tribal lands. The closure of the Alamogordo mill has severely hampered projects on non-tribal lands including forest health treatments on the Sacramento Ranger District outside of Cloudcroft, NM. Sherry Barrow Strategies, which produces high-value horse bedding and shavings, is one of the few other outlets for trees harvested on non-tribal lands. The sense of urgency posed by these challenges has led to a significant amount of biomass to be disposed of in the woods that could be utilized. In response, particular actions and strategies to increase biomass utilization in the area include:



➤ The Village of Ruidoso has implemented zoning ordinances aimed at reducing hazardous fuels on private property. Village Ordinance #2006-04 assess a property tax for excessive hazardous fuels and encourages thinning forests and underbrush, keeping firewood back away from homes, and implementing fire-safe zones. Parcels are reevaluated every five years and when appropriate actions have been taken and fuels have been removed to the curb or roadside, the assessed fee is reduced. The revenue generated is used to pay for the pickup and removal of biomass, which is then transported to a local business, Sierra Contracting, for remanufacturing into landscape mulch. Because of the low value of the material, the Village pays the contractor to take the material, which provides an incentive for them to expand their business and invest in additional utilization capability.



➤ A Stewardship contract has been implemented by the Mescalero Apache Tribe in coordination with the Lincoln National Forest on the Sacramento Ranger District. The contract, which is a result of the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004, is aimed at reducing wildfire risk along stretches of the forest boundary by coordinating access and projects on both ownerships. Plans are being developed to create a similar agreement southwest of the Village of Ruidoso to treat hazardous fuels in a high priority zone, which to date have been difficult to access. It is hoped that these agreements will increase the consistency of supply.



➤ The Mescalero Apache Tribe has completed a series of studies to assess the feasibility of biomass-to-energy technologies including an assessment of biomass availability, transportation distances, and potential market outlets for solid wood and biomass products. A key feature was an evaluation of tactics to keep the Mescalero saw mill and open, to reopen the Alamogordo mill, and to create long term living-wage jobs for tribal members.

➤ The Greater Ruidoso Area Wildland-Urban Interface Working Group is a key partnership of local community, agency, tribal, and industry stakeholders working together to prioritize and implement hazardous fuels reduction projects. The partnership helped to create a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, which helps to bring ideas together and to strategize ways to increase biomass utilization. They have also been at the forefront soliciting business investment.

The importance of tourism to the area and the unique features of the surrounding landscape have brought a diversity of stakeholders together to champion broad support to reduce hazardous fuels on surrounding federal, state and tribal lands. The Village of Ruidoso example illustrates the role that local efforts can play and continued endeavors to assist businesses such as Sherry Barrow Strategies and Mescalero Forest Products will be critical to the future of biomass utilization in the region.

For more information, contact:

Dennis Becker, University of Minnesota
Department of Forest Resources
drbecker@umn.edu; (612) 624-7286

Lincoln National Forest
1101 New York Ave, Alamogordo, NM 88310
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/lincoln/>

Other researcher members include:

Dalia Abbas, University of Minnesota
Kathleen Halvorsen, Michigan Technological University
Cassandra Moseley, University of Oregon
Pamela Jakes, USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station
Sarah McCaffrey, USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station

Mescalero Apache Tribe
P.O. Box 227, Mescalero, NM 88340
<http://www.mescaleroapache.com/>

<http://www.forestguild.org/biomass/>

