

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Inside Fire Management

News from 2009





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Cover photo: A smoke column rises from the Little Black Fire which burned in the summer of 2009 on the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge in northeast Alaska. Chase Marshall, USFWS



Thinning Benefits Eagles

Beginning in July, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gave one of the largest summer roosting areas for bald eagles occurring east of the Mississippi River some much needed attention in the form of thinning to boost habitat quality and to lessen the risk of losing the eagle roost to wildfire. The affected area is forested and lies within the James River National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia.

The Service acquired the land in 1991 after it had been managed for decades for commercial timber production. Since the area was last replanted, loblolly pine seedlings have densely regenerated, creating intense competition among the trees limiting growth and the overall health of the timber. This has resulted in compromised habitat for bald eagles. Historically, over 100 eagles have been observed roosting on the 4,200-acre refuge at one time. The concentration of vegetation also

Pulp wood piles, pole timber, and chip logs surround a Tiger Cat knuckle boom loader during thinning work at James River National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia. Gerald Vickers, USFWS



left the area vulnerable to wildfire. Unplanned fire in the timber would likely spread quickly and result in expensive suppression efforts with the potential for severe fire effects to the site.

Service employees with specialized training and experience in forestry undertook the task of planning a project to commercially thin 450 acres of the refuge and to introduce prescribed burning to maintain an open understory. The plan was designed to meet both fire management and biological objectives while minimizing ground disturbance and impacts to cultural resources in the area.

Following years of planning, the first step of the long-term project, which will ultimately restore and maintain ecological health of over 2,000 acres of forests at James River, began with thinning operations this summer with the wood being used for a variety of products such as pine saw logs, pine and hardwood pulp and chips, and pine pilings. The area will next be prescribed burned to remove all of the remaining debris. After the project is completed, a reduction in

fire risk and a healthy stand of trees suitable for nesting and roosting will result.

In addition to eagles, songbirds, raptors and many other feathered creatures make their home in the upland hardwood forests, along the river and creeks, and near the tidal waters which make up the refuge.

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