

Effectiveness and longevity of fuel treatments in coniferous forests across California

Managers' Report: Los Padres National Forest

Prepared by

Nicole Vaillant, Fire Ecologist, nvaillant@fs.fed.us, USDA Forest Service, Western Wildland Environmental Threat Assessment Center

Erin Noonan-Wright, Fire Application Specialist, enoonan02@fs.fed.us, USDA Forest Service, Wildland Fire Management Research Development and Applications

Scott Dailey, Fire Ecologist, scottdailey@fs.fed.us, USDA Forest Service, Adaptive Management Services Enterprise Team

Carol Ewell, Fire Ecologist, cewell@fs.fed.us, USDA Forest Service, Adaptive Management Services Enterprise Team

Alicia Reiner, Fire Ecologist, alreiner@fs.fed.us, USDA Forest Service, Adaptive Management Services Enterprise Team

Kevin McCrummen, Biological Science Technician, kmccrummen@fs.fed.us, USDA Forest Service, Adaptive Management Services Enterprise Team



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*Integrating
science, technology
and fire management.*

Wildland Fire Management RD&A

Table of Contents

Background	2
Key Findings	3
Management Implications	4
Project Websites	4
Acknowledgements.....	4
Alamo (Project 19, Mt. Pinos Ranger District)	5
Project history	5
Project location map.....	6
Driving directions/GPS/plot layout	7
Paired pictures	8
Plot findings	9
Appendix A: Description of Supplied Files	13
Final report to the JFSP	13
FVS input database	13
Photo pairs	13
Plot maps	13
GIS shapefile.....	13
Appendix B: Sampling Protocol.....	14
Data collection protocol (inclusive of all plot layouts)	14
2001 detail plot specifics	16

Background

Longevity of fuel treatment effectiveness to alter potential fire behavior is a critical question for managers preparing plans for fuel hazard reduction, prescribed burning, fire management, forest thinning, and other land management activities. Results from this study will help to reduce uncertainty associated with plan prioritization and maintenance activities. From 2001 to 2006, permanent plots were established in areas planned for hazardous fuel reduction treatments across 14 National Forests in California. Treatments included prescribed fire and mechanical methods (i.e., thinning of various sizes and intensities followed by a surface fuel treatment). After treatment, plots were re-measured at various intervals up to 10 years post-treatment. Very few empirically based studies exist with data beyond the first couple of years past treatment, and none span the breadth of California's coniferous forests. With the data gathered, this research aimed to meet three main objectives:

Objective 1) *Determine the length of time that fuel treatments are effective at maintaining goals of reduced fire behavior, by*

- a) *measuring effects of treatments on canopy characteristics and surface fuel loads over time, and*
- b) *modeling potential fire behavior with custom fuel models.*

Objective 2) *Quantify the uncertainty associated with the use of standard and custom fuel models.*

Objective 3) *Assess prescribed fire effects on carbon stocks and validate modeled outputs.*

This managers' report is meant to compliment the final report to the Joint Fire Science Program and supply project specific information that is not included in the regional assessment. This report includes a summary of Key Findings and Management Implications from the final report, as well as, individual Forest-level information for each plot (i.e., project history, map, navigation directions, plot level findings, and plot protocol). For your use, we included a number of supplementary files with the digital version of this report. Included on the thumb drive are the following, also described in Appendix A:

- Final report to the JFSP
- FVS Input database for your Forest for all projects (database file)
- Photo pairs for the plots on your Forest (power point file)
- Plot maps for each project on your Forest (pdf file)
- GIS shapefile with the plots on your Forest

All datasets for the regional project were input into the FFI (Feat/FIREMON Integrated) tool (www.frames.gov/partner-sites/ffi/ffi-home/) for future use and comparisons. Please contact Nicole Vaillant (nvaillant@fs.fed.us) for more information on obtaining the FFI data or other questions.

Key Findings

Objective 1- Determine the length of time that fuel treatments are effective at maintaining goals of reduced fire behavior by measuring effects of treatments on canopy characteristics and surface fuel loads over time and modeling potential fire behavior with custom fuel models.

Results have shown initial reductions in surface fuels from fire treatments recover to pre-treatment levels by 10 yr post-treatment. Mechanical treatments continue to have variable effects on surface fuels. With the exception of mechanical treatments in red fir, both treatment types resulted in increased live understory vegetation by 8 yr post-treatment relative to pre-treatment. Mechanical treatment effects on stand structure remains fairly consistent through 8 yr post. Fire-induced delayed mortality contributes to slight decreases in canopy cover and canopy bulk density over time. For both treatment types, overall canopy base height decreases in later years due to in-growth of smaller trees, but it remains higher than pre-treatment. The changes in fuel loads and stand structure are reflected in fire behavior simulations via custom fuel modeling. Surface fire flame lengths were initially reduced as a result of prescribed fire, but by 10 yr post-treatment they exceeded the pre-treatment lengths. Though a low proportion of fire type, initial reductions in potential crown fire returned to pre-treatment levels by 8 yr post-treatment; passive crown fire remained reduced relative to pre-treatment for the duration. Mechanical treatments showed variable and minimal effects on surface fire flame length over time; however the incidence of active crown fire was nearly halved from this treatment for the duration.

Objective 2- Quantify the uncertainty associated with the use of standard and custom fuel models

The Fire and Fuels Extension to the Forest Vegetation Simulator (FFE-FVS) was used to model potential fire behavior for plots treated with prescribed fire to determine the differences in modeled fire behavior using standard and custom fuel models. In general predicted fire behavior from custom versus standard fuel models were similar with mean surface fire flame lengths slightly higher using standard fuel models for all time steps until the 8 yr post-treatment. Similarly, custom fuel models predicted a higher instance of surface fire than standard fuel models with the exception of 8 yr post-treatment.

Objective 3- Assess prescribed fire effects on carbon stocks and validate modeled outputs.

To better understand the impact of prescribed fire on carbon stocks, we estimated aboveground and belowground (roots) carbon stocks using field measurement in FFE-FVS, and simulated wildfire emissions, before treatment and up to 8 yr post-prescribed fire. Prescribed fire treatments reduced total stand carbon by 13%, with the largest reduction in the forest floor (litter and duff) pool and the smallest reduction in the live tree pool. Combined carbon recovery and reduced wildfire emissions allowed the initial carbon source from simulated wildfire emissions and treatment to become a sink by 8 yr post-treatment relative to pre-treatment if both were to burn in a wildfire. In a comparison of field-derived versus FFE-FVS simulated carbon stocks, the total stand, tree, and belowground live carbon pools are highly correlated. However, the variability within the other carbon pools compared was high (up to 212%).

Management Implications

- ✓ Need more long term monitoring.
- ✓ The ability of a fuel treatment to maintain effectiveness in reducing fire behavior and effects depends on the accumulation rates and distribution of fuels, which are used as metrics to judge treatment longevity. Surface and understory fuel loading trends help inform managers' initial treatment and maintenance timelines, priorities, and adaptive management prescriptions.
- ✓ Stand and canopy structure trends help inform both fuel and silviculture integrated objectives and prioritizations.
- ✓ Despite extensive variability between plots, overall trends for treatment-forest combinations exist.
- ✓ Changes to modeled surface fire after prescribed fire treatment included an initial decrease in surface flame lengths, then an increase starting around 5 yr post-treatment.
- ✓ Overall, modeled fire behavior in mechanical treatments showed that goals of reduced fire behavior were initially reached, and then began diminishing around 5 to 8 yr post-treatment, with some positive changes still apparent through 8 yr post-treatment.
- ✓ In general, predicted fire behavior from custom versus standard fuel models was similar.
- ✓ Prescribed fire treatments reduced total stand carbon by about 13%, and total stand carbon stocks returned to 97% of pre-treatment levels after 8 yr post-treatment.
- ✓ Although the total stand carbon differences between field-derived and simulated carbon stocks are minimal, the variability within different carbon was great.

Project Websites

Please visit our project website in the next few months to year as reports are finalized and publications become available at http://www.fs.fed.us/adaptivemanagement/pub_reports/JFS_vaiillant2.shtml.

The final report and many of our presentations and other deliverables will also be available via the Joint Fire Science Program website at

http://www.firescience.gov/JFSP_advanced_search_results_detail.cfm?jdbid=%24%26Z%2F8W%20%20%20%0A.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge funding for this research from the USFS Region 5 Fire Aviation and Management and Joint Fire Sciences program (JFS 09-01-1-01). This project would have never gotten off the ground without the passion and drive of Jo Ann Fites-Kaufman. We thank the countless number of field crew members over the past 12 years, especially T. Decker and K. McCrummen for serving as crew leads during the past 4 years. Thank you to all the fire and fuels specialists on all the National Forests in California for providing invaluable insight and information about their fuel treatments.

Alamo (Project 19, Mt. Pinos Ranger District)

Project history

The Alamo project had 3 plots established in summer 2002, using the 2001 detailed plot style. For details about the protocol used, please see “Appendix B: Sampling Protocol” at the end of the report. For this project, all plots were grouped into the prescribed fire treatment and the yellow pine forest type. Plots were sampled prior to treatment (P00), then 1 yr post (P01), and 2 yr post (P02) (Table 1).

For analysis at the regional level, plots from all projects were grouped into one of two treatment types (mechanical or prescribed fire), and one of three dominant forest types (yellow pine, red fir, or mixed conifer).

The Chuchupate RAWS was used for fire weather and fire behavior simulation modeling.

Table 1. Treatment visits completed by year for each of the plots in the project.

Plot	2002	2003	2004
1	P00	P01	P02
2	P00	P01	P02
3	P00	P01	P02

Treatment information

Prior treatment: The only known past disturbance in the project area includes a wildfire that occurred in the 1960's. There may have been a subsequent sanitation/salvage logging operation combined with the burn harvest that occurred in the project area as well.

During the project treatment: The Alamo project was implemented in winter 2002/2003, and treatment consisted of underburning only, without any pre-burn thinning. The Day Fire burned through the plots in 2006. Looking at fire progression GIS data from the Day Fire, it appears that the plots encountered the fire somewhere between 9/20 and 9/21/06. There has been no treatment in the area since the Day Fire.

Future treatment: None known.

Project location map
Alamo Fuel Treatment
Los Padres National Forest

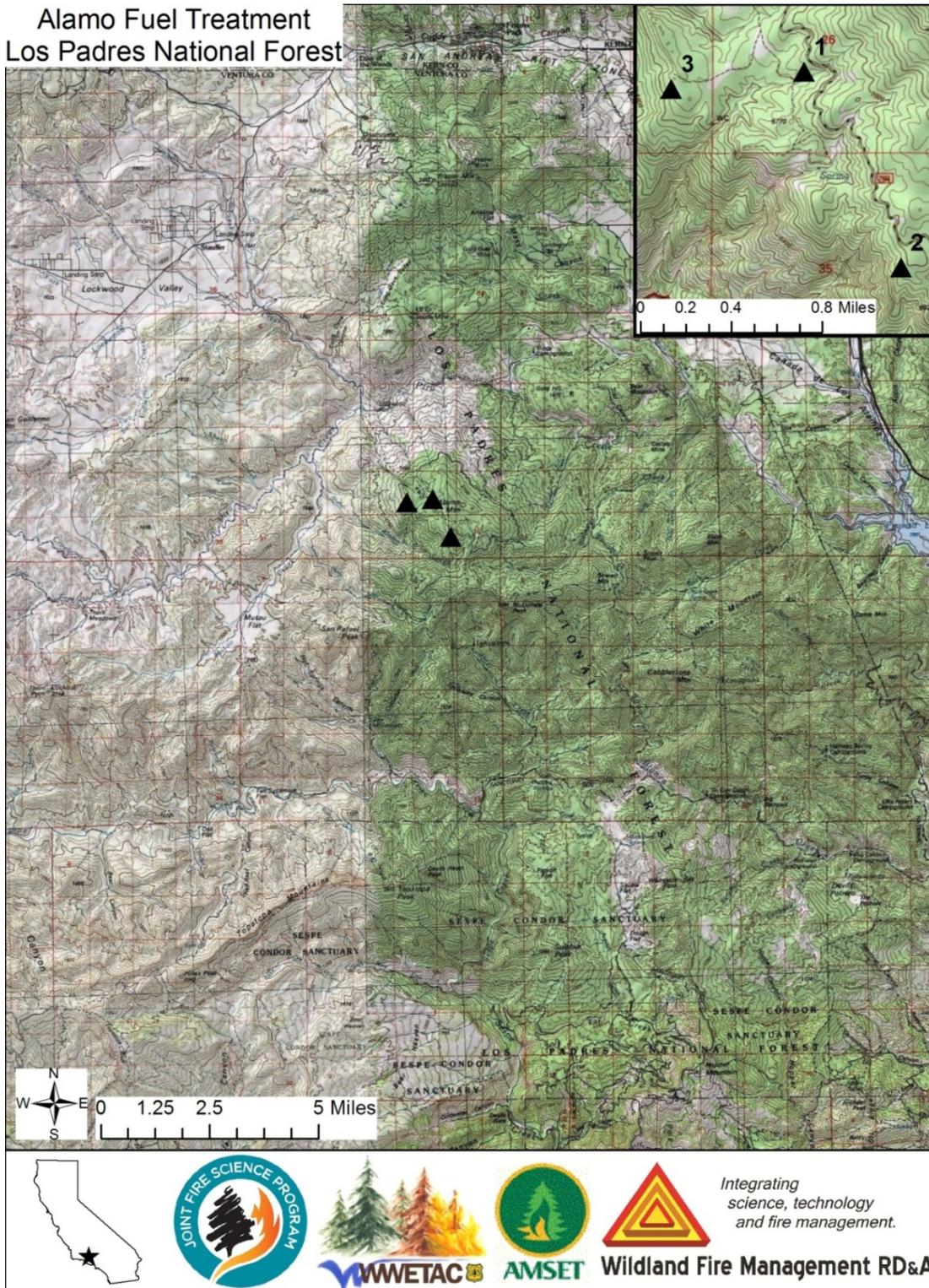


Figure 1. Location map for the Alamo fuel treatment project, showing general location of plots, and inset displaying increased detail of plot locations.

Driving directions/GPS/plot layout

Driving directions

Plot 1- From Dutchman Campground travel 0.8 miles southeast on Rd 7N01. The start tree is 6 m from the road about 4 m from a large (2 m by 1 m) rock.

Plot 2- From Dutchman Campground travel 2.1 miles on road 7N02. Start tree is on the south of the road off of a large curve in the road. The left hand/upslope side of the road was “severely burned” during the Day Fire.

Plot 3- From Dutchman Campground take jeep trail from the southeastern corner of the campground. At 0.2 miles veer right at fork. Continue to dead end/primitive campground at 0.7 miles. Start tree is in the southeastern portion of the primitive campground that looks like it has been used for target practice.

Table 2. Directions (distance and azimuth) for walking from the “start tree” to plot. The azimuth takes into account the local declination. Distance and azimuth are approximate as they were recorded by crews walking in from the start tree (usually tagged tree near road edge).

Plot	Start tree (DBH and species)	Azimuth °	Distance
1	45 cm Jeffrey pine	212	80 m
2	62 cm Jeffrey pine	220	160 m
3	89 cm Jeffrey pine	213	105 m

Table 3. GPS coordinates for each plot (decimal degrees, datum NAD 1983, projection NAD_1983_California_Teale_Albers).

Plot	Latitude	Longitude
1	34.668763	-118.972106
2	34.656211	-118.964787
3	34.667774	-118.982396

Table 4. Plot layout line azimuths (degrees). See Appendix A for plot diagrams. Where AB and CD are the main transects and F1, F2, F3, and F4 are the fuels transects.

Plot	Plot type	AB	CD	F1	F2	F3	F4
1	2001 detailed	230	140	2	92	184	273
2	2001 detailed	252	162	29	119	209	299
3	2001 detailed	240	152	20	114	197	290

Paired pictures

Below is an example of pictures paired or matched over the time steps the plots were visited. All of the paired pictures are available in the supplied power point file.

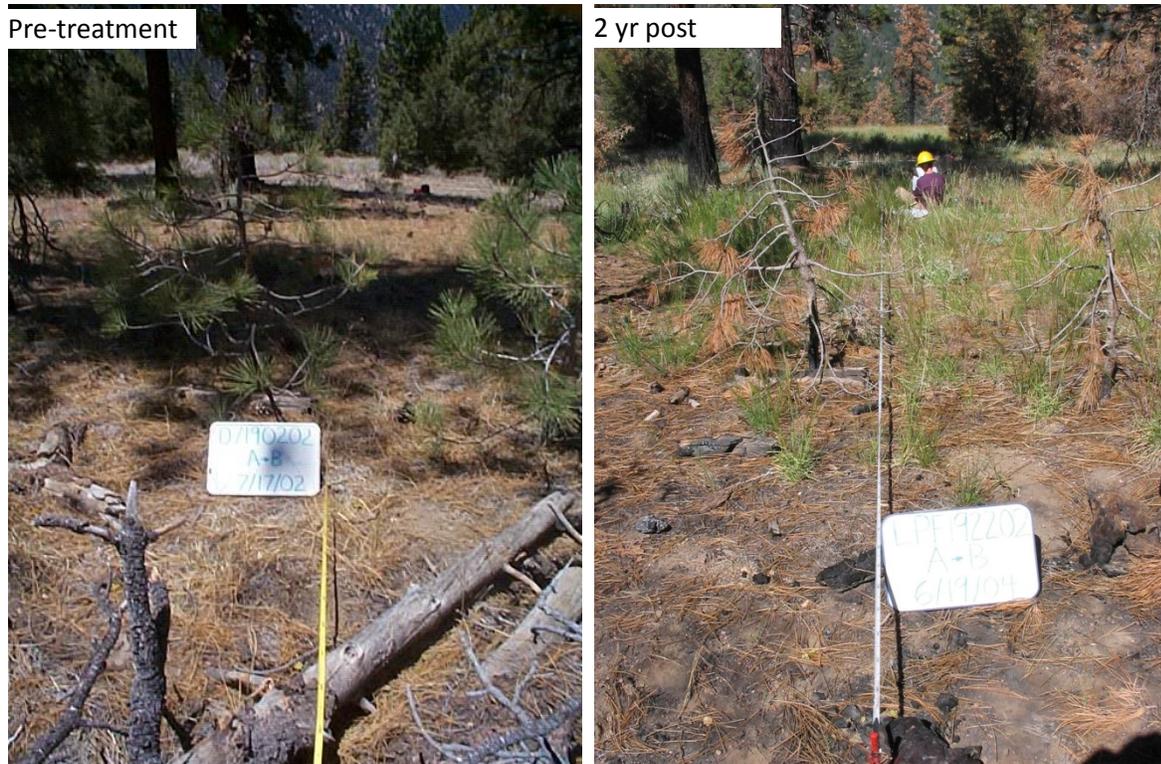


Figure 2. Example paired photos showing changes over the time steps for Plot 2, CD or main line from pre-treatment in 2002 and 2 yr post-treatment in 2004.

Plot findings

Below are graphs and data tables of key metrics from the data gathered in the field for each plot and time period within the project.

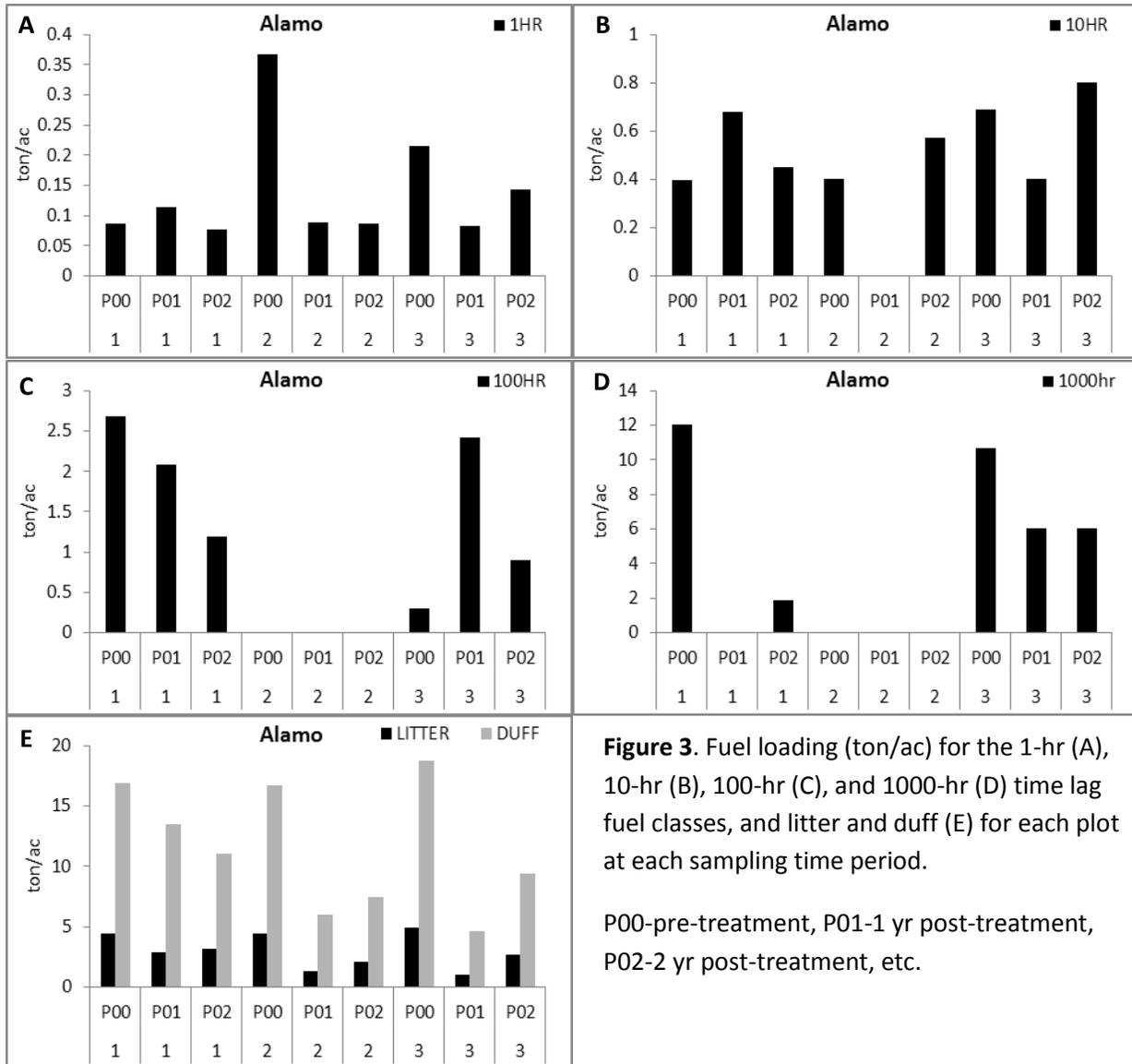


Figure 3. Fuel loading (ton/ac) for the 1-hr (A), 10-hr (B), 100-hr (C), and 1000-hr (D) time lag fuel classes, and litter and duff (E) for each plot at each sampling time period.

P00-pre-treatment, P01-1 yr post-treatment, P02-2 yr post-treatment, etc.

Table 5. Fuel loading (ton/ac) for the 1-hr, 10-hr, 100-hr, and 1000-hr time lag fuel classes, and litter and duff by time period for all the plots in the Alamo fuel treatment project.

Plot	Time period	1-hr	10-hr	100-hr	1000-hr	Litter	Duff
1	P00	0.09	0.4	2.7	12.1	4.4	16.9
1	P01	0.11	0.7	2.1	0.0	2.9	13.5
1	P02	0.08	0.5	1.2	1.9	3.2	11.1
2	P00	0.37	0.4	0.0	0.0	4.4	16.7
2	P01	0.09	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	6.0
2	P02	0.09	0.6	0.0	0.0	2.1	7.5
3	P00	0.22	0.7	0.3	10.7	4.9	18.7
3	P01	0.08	0.4	2.4	6.1	1.0	4.6
3	P02	0.14	0.8	0.9	6.1	2.7	9.4

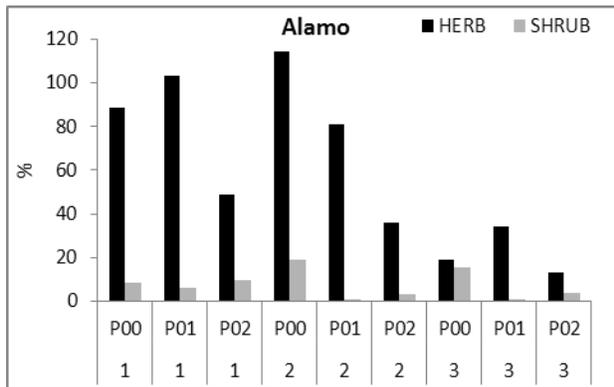


Figure 4. Average herbaceous plant and shrub cover for each plot at each sampling time period.

Table 6. Understory vegetation characteristics by time period for all the plots in the Alamo fuel treatment project.

Plot	Time period	Herbaceous cover (%)	Shrub cover (%)
1	P00	89	9
1	P01	103	6
1	P02	49	10
2	P00	114	19
2	P01	81	0
2	P02	36	3
3	P00	19	16
3	P01	34	1
3	P02	13	4

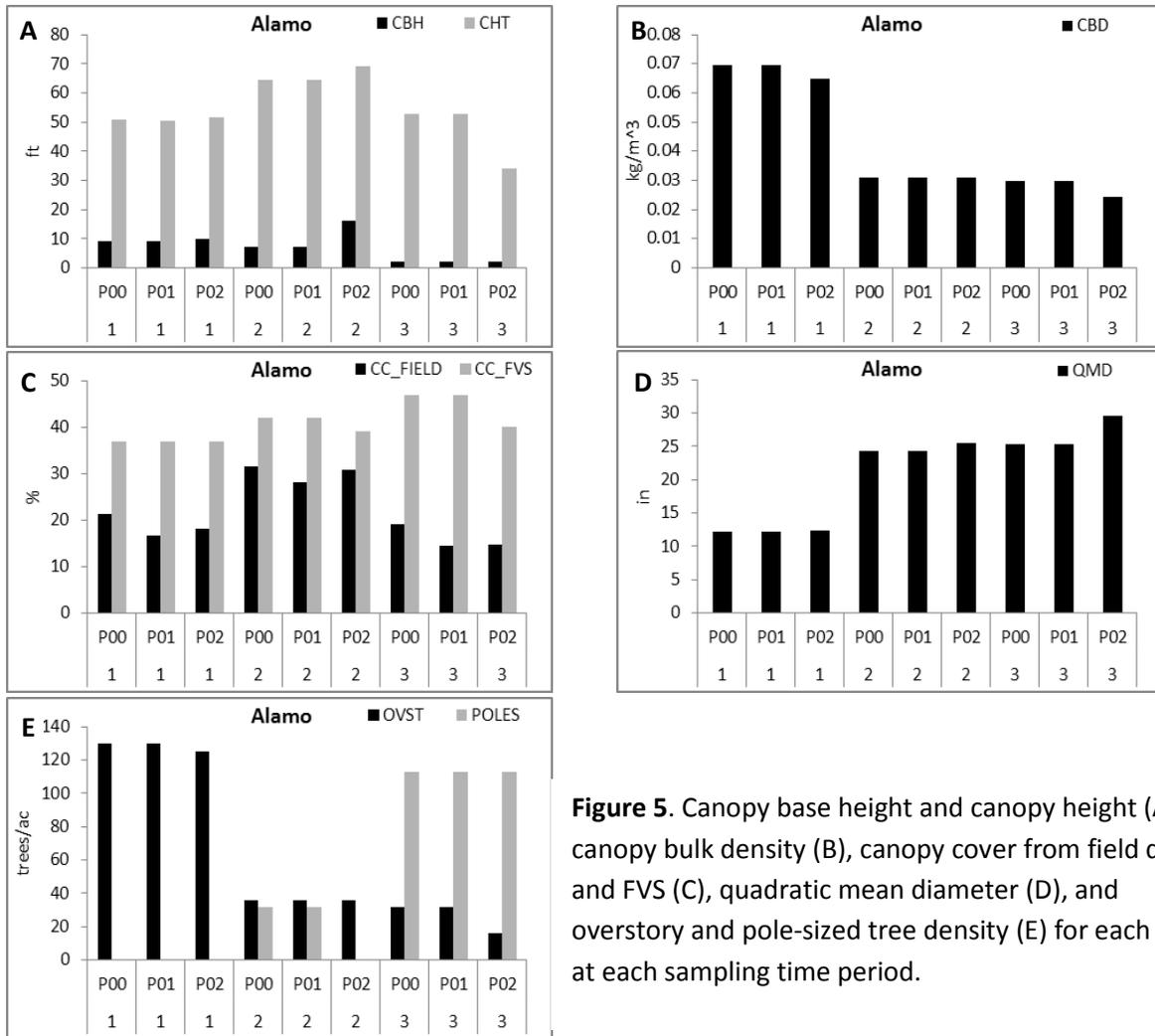


Figure 5. Canopy base height and canopy height (A), canopy bulk density (B), canopy cover from field data and FVS (C), quadratic mean diameter (D), and overstory and pole-sized tree density (E) for each plot at each sampling time period.

Table 7. Canopy characteristics by time period for all the plots in the Alamo fuel treatment Project.

Plot	Time period	Canopy cover (%) - field	Canopy cover (%) - FVS	Canopy height (ft)	Canopy base height (ft)	Canopy bulk density (kg/m ³)	Quadratic mean diameter (in)	Overstory (trees/ac)	Pole-sized (trees/ac)
1	P00	21	37	50.7	9.0	0.070	12.3	130	0
1	P01	17	37	50.6	9.0	0.070	12.3	130	0
1	P02	18	37	51.6	10.0	0.065	12.4	125	0
2	P00	32	42	64.3	7.0	0.031	24.3	36	32
2	P01	28	42	64.3	7.0	0.031	24.3	36	32
2	P02	31	39	69.2	16.0	0.031	25.6	36	0
3	P00	19	47	52.7	2.0	0.030	25.4	32	113
3	P01	15	47	52.7	2.0	0.030	25.4	32	113
3	P02	15	40	34.1	2.0	0.024	29.6	16	113

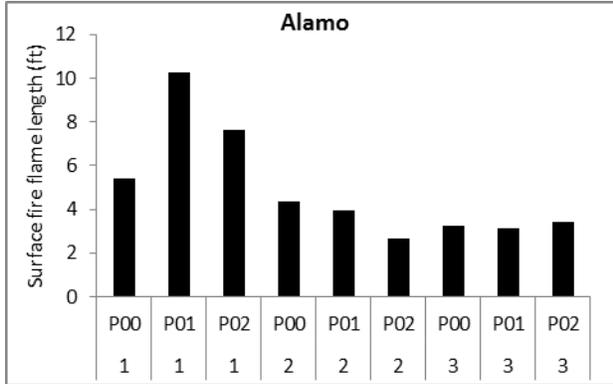


Figure 6. Surface fire flame length from custom fuel models using NEXUS for each plot at each sampling time period under 90th percentile fire weather conditions.

Table 8. Surface fire flame length (modeled in NEXUS with custom fuel models) and type of fire for 90th percentile fire weather conditions for all the plots in the Alamo fuel treatment project.

Plot	Time period	Surface fire flame length (ft)	Type of fire
1	P00	5.40	Passive crown
1	P01	10.26	Surface
1	P02	7.65	Surface
2	P00	4.36	Passive crown
2	P01	3.94	Surface
2	P02	2.66	Surface
3	P00	3.22	Passive crown
3	P01	3.10	Passive crown
3	P02	3.40	Passive crown

Appendix A: Description of Supplied Files

For your use we included a number of supplementary files with the digital version of this report (see the supplied thumb drive).

Final report to the JFSP

We included a digital version of the Final Report we submitted to the Joint Fire Science Program for the entire regional assessment.

FVS input database

For each Forest we included an FVS-ready database with all the plots from all the projects (*.mdb). The database includes two different StandInit and TreelNit tables depending on the plot types within the Forest; separate StandInit and TreelNit tables were created for the “detailed” plots and the “fuels” plots. We did this so one would not assume there was tree data available for all plots when it might not have been sampled. The fuel loading data was collected on all plots and is included by size class in both StandInit tables. For the detailed plots, the tree data collected is within the TreelNit table. For the fuels plots, a “dummy” tree list (a single white fir seedling) was created so the plots can be run through FVS, but caution should be used with these because of the lack of real tree data. If data was missing it is represented as a blank in the data tables.

Photo pairs

Most of the photos taken for each plot is included in the supplied Power Point file (*.pptx). Photos were taken along the main transect line(s) and fuel lines each time the plot was visited.

Plot maps

In addition to the imbedded maps in this report, we have supplied PDF versions of the project maps.

GIS shapefile

We supplied a GIS file with all the plots for the Forest.

Appendix B: Sampling Protocol

Data collection protocol (inclusive of all plot layouts)

Plot information naming example

1. Forest name: "Tahoe NF"
2. Forest ICS code: "TNF"
3. Project name: "Jaybird"
4. Project number: pre-determined for tracking purposes
5. Status: P00=pre-treatment, P01=1st year post, P02=2nd year post, etc.
6. Plot number: "1"
7. Surveyors: "last name, first initial"
8. Date: "5/8/09"
9. Notes: general notes about the area, treatment, anything that stands out

Shrub transect(s) (50 m)

Collect shrub information (for any shrubs that intersect the transect tape) along the length of the transect(s): transect, species, status (live/dead), shrub range in decimeters (dm, distance along transect, i.e. 0.6-0.9 m=3 dm), average height (cm).

Herbs (1x1 m quadrats)

Collect herbaceous species information for all plants rooted in the quadrat. Record the transect, frame, life form (fern, forb, grass, vine, other, unknown), status (live/dead), average height (cm), species (if you know it), and cover class (1=0-5%; 2= 6-25%; 3= 26-50%; 4=51-75%; 5=76-95%; 6=96-100%). Also please take general botany notes for the plot, such as species observed in the plot overall but not captured in the quadrats, and general observations about how much of the plot has weeds or herbaceous plant dominance.

Seedlings (<2.5 cm DBH)

Tally seedlings by species code, status (live/dead), and height class (15=1-15 cm; 30=16-30 cm; 60=31-60 cm; 100=61-100 cm; 200=101-200 cm; 300=201-300 cm, etc.).

Pole-sized trees (>2.5 to <15 cm DBH, and > 4.5 ft (1.37 m) tall)

Live poles: tag #, species, DBH (cm), status (live/dead), partial crown height (m), total tree height (m), canopy class (D=dominant, CD=codominant, I=intermediate, S=suppressed).

Dead poles: tag#, species, DBH (cm), status (live/dead), total tree height (m), decay class (1 newly dead thru 5 long dead).

Overstory trees (>15 cm DBH and > 4.5 ft (1.37 m) tall)

Live trees: tag #, species, DBH (cm), status (live/dead), partial crown height (m), total tree height (m), canopy class (D, CD, I, S).

Dead trees: tag#, species, DBH(cm), status (live/dead), total tree height (m), decay class (1 newly dead thru 5 long dead).

Canopy cover

Collect and record canopy cover, using the moosehorn (canopy sight tube) along the main transects (AB and/or CD) every 1m, starting at 1m and ending at 50m. The moosehorn should be held at the meter mark on the tape, standing on the side of the shrub transect opposite to the side where the herb quadrats are being placed. Count the number of hits or intersections, out of 25, where canopy overlaps the grid intersections.

Fuel loading

Each planar fuel transect is 50 ft in length and information is gathered to characterize surface and ground fuels and fuel bed depth.

Surface fuels (1, 10, 100, 1000-hr)

Record the project, plot, transect and tallies for small fuel classes (1, 10, 100-hr), and take notes on the **dominant trees or shrub species** contributing to the fuel load for each transect.

Tally: 1-hr (>0.25") from 0-6 ft, 10-hr (0.25-<1") from 0-6 ft, 100-hr (1-<3") from 0-12 ft.

Record the species, diameter (cm), and status (rotten/sound) for each 1000-hr (> 3') from 0-50 ft.

Ground fuels (litter/duff/chips)

Measure and record litter and duff depth (thickness) measurements to the nearest 1 cm (measure thickness of each layer, not depth from surface). Starting at 1 foot, take 10 readings, one every 5 ft on each transect: (1 ft, 5 ft, 10 ft... 45 ft). Duff begins where the litter layer organic materials have begun to decompose, and duff ends where the composition is greater than 50% mineral soil. If a sampling spot lands exactly on a log, rock, or other obstruction, take the reading immediately adjacent to the obstruction. If you hit bare soil, your reading will be 0.

If there was mastication/chipping completed, record the depth of the chipped materials as well.

Fuel bed depth

Measure and record the height of the **tallest** downed and dead woody fuel for ten 5 ft collection point intervals (0-5 ft, 5-10 ft, 10-15 ft, up to 45-50 ft) along the planar transect. Measure from the **base of the litter layer to the top of the fuel particle**; measure to the nearest whole cm. If you do not have any dead and downed fuels, your measure will be based on the maximum litter depth in that interval.

Photos

Avoid people and gear in the photos. Line up with the photos supplied from previous plot visits to the best of your ability. Use a photo board to document the photo location within the photos, matching the plot naming protocol example above. **Always take the photos in a portrait orientation (up and down) with the transect tape in the bottom middle of the image.** Photos were only taken from 0 to 50 ft for each fuels transect (labeled F1, F2, etc.), from C to D (and A to B if applicable) for the shrub transect, and one general picture of the plot (this one will not have an old photo to match).

2001 detail plot specifics

Shrub transects (50 m)

There are two perpendicular transects (AB and CD) for these plots. They **should** be contour and up/down slope, but they **might** be shifted.

Herb quadrats

There are 10 quadrats for these plots. They are located from 9-10 m, 19-20 m, 29-30 m, 39-40 m, and 49-50 m along the **left hand side** looking from 0 to 50 m for both the AB and CD transects.

Seedlings

This is a circular plot starting at the pole/seedling origin rebar (at 33.92m on transect CD) extending out and around 3.99 m in all directions.

Pole-sized trees

This is a circular plot starting at the pole/seedling origin rebar (at 33.92m on transect CD) extending out and around 8.92 m in all directions.

Overstory trees

This is a circular plot starting from the origin (at 25 m on transect CD) extending out and around 17.85 m in all directions.

Canopy cover

A total of 100 canopy cover readings will be measured. They will start at 1m and continue every meter until the ends of each transect (50 m). This is to be done along **both** transect AB and CD.

Fuel loading

There are four 50 ft fuel transects for this layout. They start at 7.15 m and 42.85 m along the AB and CD transects extending out at a 45° angle. See the diagram for number convention and general layout.

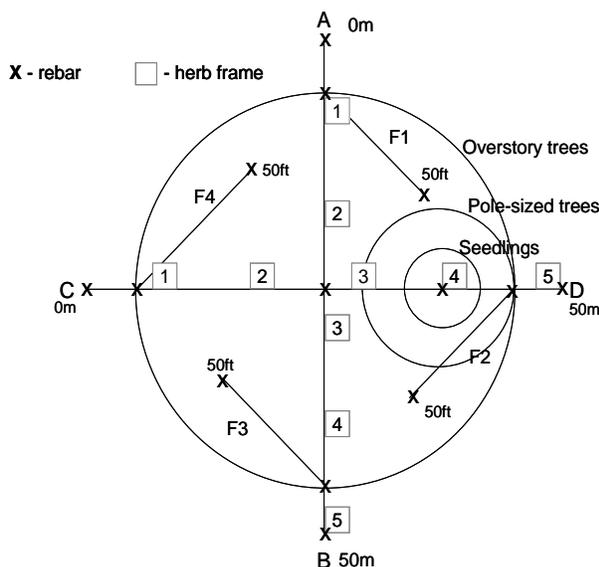


Figure 7. Plot layout diagram for the detailed plots installed in 2001 and 2002.