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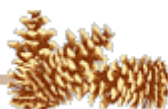
TREE FARM BULLETIN

Elk Versus Aspen Rancho Del Oso Pardo (RDOP) Tree Farm Fighting the Battle

Driving over the pass on highway 64 to Chama in fog, low clouds, rain, snow and graupels, we were wondering what our field day would be like at the Rancho del Oso Pardo tree farm. There were numerous large patches of snow along the highway from a recent snowstorm. Chama had received fairly good snowfall this winter; below average but acceptable. Our past experience with field days has always been beautiful weather. Our trepidation turned out to be unfounded. Although some snow fell during our tour and it was crisp, it was a great day.

RDOP is a corporately owned 16,593 acre ranch which straddles the New Mexico and Colorado border (described in the April 2015 Tree Farm Bulletin) with the New Mexico tree farm portion at 5,522 acres. Aaron Jones ranch manager, and Gary Harris, consulting forester, have been hard at work for the past 14 years trying to make the tree farm productive. With the collapse of the conifer timber market in northern New Mexico, Aaron and Gary emphasized harvesting and attempting to regenerate quaking aspen. This has proven to be a challenge because elk love aspen, especially new growth. Over 400 acres have been patch cut thus far with the stems mostly sold to a company that makes excelsior products. Starting in 2001 with small patch cuts of about one acre they found that unless protected, the aspen will not regenerate. Learning as they go, Aaron and Gary have used every method imaginable to keep the elk out of the five to 15 acre regeneration patches. They initially tried brush fences, photo included, but found that the elk could figure out how to climb the fence, or the fences break down too fast. That option proved to be expensive to install and maintain, running around \$300+ per enclosed acre. They used solar powered electric fencing but that did not deter the elk and created a maintenance nightmare. The latest option is to install a wire fence on tree stumps cut to eight feet in height around the cut perimeter costing around one-half that of a brush fence. Although, more effective and less costly, the method of utilizing field fence is more labor intensive.

One 10 acre patch surrounded by a brush fence regenerated beautifully with stems reaching over seven feet tall. The patch was so thick that Aaron and Gary decided to see if they could allow some elk into the patch by cutting a couple of corridors through the brush fence never thinking the elk could destroy all those stems. As I said, they are learning as they go along. When we visited the patch, it was virtually destroyed with mostly dead



stems from the elk browsing or antler rubbing. Another patch we visited on the Colorado side demonstrated how location of the regeneration patch matters. This patch was not too far from a highway and on an upslope. Aspen were growing quite well both inside and outside the fence area. Also grasses were not browsed to the ground. Other patches near to areas with public access also were less disturbed.

A report written for the RDOP Corporation on *Aspen Harvesting History* provides the following recommendations:

- *Initial assumption that aspen stems @ 1" diameter (caliper) and 10' - 15' in height would be relatively safe from elk damage, has been too optimistic in some circumstances and led to prematurely abandoning fence maintenance and burning fences. Current thinking is to protect aspen until it has a stem diameter of 2" and a height of 20'+. Therefore aspen cuts need to be protected for probably 10 years which requires wire fencing and refining best methodology for its use.*
- *Increase the average size of patchcuts to 20 plus acres/cut to reduce potential for excessive elk damage. Try and do large multiple cuts in a small geographic area.*
- *Experiment with some broadcast burning of old failed cuts to see if aspen sprouting can be stimulated.*
- *Accelerate commercial aspen harvest when possible to capture value as ranch aspen is moving fairly fast from commercial to non-commercial status.*

In addition to aspen regeneration in the absence of a conifer timber market Aaron and Gary realized that the most important thing they could do was to improve defensible space to help mitigate wildfire and to protect the Chama watershed from the after effects of a wildfire. They had hand crews thinning and stacking dead and down materials on approximately 20 acres along about a 2 plus mile section of an existing road to act as a fuel break in 2014. Plans are to burn these piles in winter. Also thinning work planned on another 48 acres in 2015.

FROM THE CHAIRMAN: I have thoroughly enjoyed all field days I have attended over the past seven years, and have always learned something from them. I learned so much more on this field day about brush fences, aspen regeneration, and elk habits and destructiveness. We even had more tree farmers attend than foresters! You missed a great field day. Please plan on attending our Tree Farmer of the Year field day this fall. Details will be in a subsequent bulletin. Also, please try to attend our Tree Farm Committee meetings on 08/12/15 and 12/09/15.

