Field Data Collection Protocol For Evaluating Forest Restoration and Fire Mitigation Management Effectiveness

2017 Mothership Plot Protocol
CFRI-1708

Sampling Objective:
This protocol is designed by the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) to collect comprehensive data for changes in non-spatial forest structure and composition, fuels and fire potential using the Fuels Characteristic Classification System (within the Fuel and Fire Tools analysis package), and plant species abundance and diversity as a result of management actions in forests and shrublands of Colorado.

Sampling Design and Intensity Recommendations:
The most accurate and straightforward method for quantifying changes in vegetation structure, abundance, and diversity as a result of management actions is to measure at the same location before and after treatment. A more robust study design will include measurements in similar nearby habitats that do not experience management to serve as controls. Establishing control sites is often critical to determine longer term ecological change and effectiveness, but less essential for monitoring short term management outcomes. When conducting pre-post comparisons, permanently marked plot locations are highly desirable and greatly increase ease of finding plot locations and comparability of multiple measurements over time. Sample plots located randomly throughout the area of interest provides a robust study design and is generally, but not always, recommended over a gridded plot system.

How many plots do you need? Appropriate sampling intensity will depend on monitoring objectives and level of confidence needed in results. If you are gathering information to determine standard fuel model for fire behavior modeling, only a few plots of much less intensity than described here may be needed. However, if you want to determine management effectiveness and differences in fire hazard over a large area before and after treatment, much more intensive sampling is required. Exactly how many samples (plots) you need for a reliable answer depends on local site variability, which cannot be predicted remotely. This protocol is very thorough, but also very labor and time intensive and requires a skilled botanist. Typically CFRI recommends about 6 of these effectiveness plots per forest stand. However, for more accurate estimate of fuels and forest density, we often combine 6 of these intensive plots with 10+ additional less intensive rapid assessment plots (“CFRI Simple Plot”, not described here) to add accuracy for fuels and forest density estimates in an efficient manner. Typically a crew of 3 trained individuals completes this sampling combination of 6 intensive effectiveness plots and 10+ additional rapid assessment plots within the managed area in 4-ish full days including travel time. Measuring untreated control sites typically doubles sampling effort if the same sampling intensity is used.
Underlying Methods and Data

Where did we come up with all this stuff? This protocol relies heavily on the experience of CFRI staff in conducting our combined decades of forest and fire ecology monitoring and research. It is designed to use standard protocols where appropriate so that data is comparable to large monitoring and research efforts in Colorado and throughout the Rocky Mountains. We rely heavily on the Fire Effects Monitoring and Inventory System protocols (FIREMON https://www.frames.gov/partner-sites/firemon/firemon-home/) to remain comparable with national datasets. Much of the sampling protocol was also modified by CFRI staff to facilitate use of the Fuel and Fire Tools modeling platform, which we find useful in evaluating treatment effectiveness and communicating changes in fire potential.

This protocol is referred to as the Mothership because it combines elements of three protocols commonly used in Colorado:

1. USFS Common Stand Exam.
2. Colorado Front Range Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative Understory Plant monitoring protocol.
3. CFRI Wildfire Risk Reduction Grant Program fuels inventory.

Data collected using the Mothership protocol is intended to be comparable with each of these three monitoring methods.

Plot Layout

1. Randomly locate the plot center within the sample area. Use GIS/GPS technology if available, or a random number table with numbers 0-359 can be used to choose a random direction and then a random distance to walk.
   a. If a randomly generated GPS point falls in an area that is not a suitable sample area (e.g. on a road, riparian, treatment boundary, etc.), use the random number table to choose a direction and distance to move the point to a suitable area. If a suitable area cannot be found, use another random point generated in a GIS.
2. From plot center, establish 8 transects in the cardinal (0°, 90°, 180°, 270°) and ordinal directions (45°, 135°, 225°, 315°) using a declinated compass (set north to positive 9 degrees for Colorado – 9 degrees to the east). You will use 4 X 100-ft tapes to establish these. To ease calculations, center the 40-ft mark of all 4 tapes over the plot center and extend the tape out to 80-ft. Clip tapes together with a binder clip to ensure they stay in place. Be sure the 0 foot mark is on the south end of the north-south transect (the reel should be on the north end of the transect). Colored tape will be marking the plot center and transect ends, as well as the understory plant and fuels measurement areas on each 100-ft tape. Note that this protocol can be implemented with 50-ft tapes, but care must be taken to ensure measurements happen at the correct locations. This protocol is written under the assumption that 100-ft tapes are used, with the 40 foot marks centered over the plot center.
   a. If 100-ft transect tapes are not marked with colored tape, add a small strip of colored tape around the transect tape at 2.8-ft, 9.5-ft, 34-ft, 40-ft (center), 46-ft, 70.5-ft, and 77.2-ft. Use a different color to mark the 15-ft and 62-ft locations on a designated north-south tape to denote 1m² sample frame locations.
   b. Before proceeding, be sure that the edge of the plot is at least 100 feet from a treatment boundary.
3. Each of the three 1m² Sample frames are placed to the left (west) of the north-south transect as depicted in Figure 1. The frames should be located adjacent to the 15 – 18 foot mark on the tape (25 feet south of the center), at the plot center (40 – 43 foot marks), and adjacent to the 62 – 65 foot marks (22 feet north or center, refer to Figure 1). To avoid trampling vegetation and woody fuels, walk on the right side of the transect as much as possible.

![Diagram of the CFRI Forest Restoration and Fire Mitigation Effectiveness Assessment sample plot.](image)

**Plot Center**

1. **Location**
   a. Using a GPS unit, record the location (UTM’s) and elevation at the center point. Use the NAD83 map datum for recording all points.

Figure 1. Diagram of the CFRI Forest Restoration and Fire Mitigation Effectiveness Assessment sample plot.
1. To locate plots post-treatment, leave three monuments (using a nail and washer painted yellow, silver “CFRI Long-term Monitoring Plot” tag (be sure to mark North, East, or Center and the date on the silver tag with a pen)). Leave the three monuments at the plot center, and at 37.2-ft along both the North and East transects.

2. Wrap a small piece of pink flagging around the top of each nail. If flagging is missing in post-treatment years, re-flag nails.
   b. Using a **declinated** compass, record the hill-slope azimuth in degrees (0-359) within the 1/10th acre plot.
   c. Using a clinometer, record the slope to the nearest percent within the 1/10th acre plot.
      Take slope measurements from plot center both downhill and uphill, and then record the average slope of the two measurements.
   d. Take note of any signs of past disturbances (e.g. fire, insect outbreaks, stumps from logging, animal signs/grazing, human disturbance, etc.) and record the start and end time of data collection for each plot.

2. Photos
   a. Standing at the plot center, take 4 photos. Record camera ID and photo file numbers on the datasheet. Fill out a white board with the plot name and date. Photos should be framed such that the white board is visible/legible when viewed on a computer screen (not camera viewfinder), and minimizing visible people in the photo. Photos will be used to describe fuel conditions, plant growth, and to help locate plots post treatment. The photo sequence is:
      1. Along the north transect, holding the camera eye level pointed towards the ground and capturing 0-10ft on the transect, including the 1m² sampling frame. Rather than stand at the plot center, the photographer should take enough steps back in order to capture the plot center in the photo.
      2. Holding the camera over plot center, along the north transect at eye level.
      3. Holding the camera over plot center, along the north transect looking towards the upper tree canopy.
      4. Holding the camera over plot center, along the south transect at eye level.

3. Tree Overstory
   a. Record the basal area prism or angle gauge size and units. Choose a basal area factor prism based on expected tree numbers after harvest in order to capture 6-10 trees post treatment. When working in Ponderosa pine habitats, we always recommend a 10 BAF prism. If the site has been previously sampled, use the same prism size that was used in previous visits regardless of current tree density.
   b. Standing at the plot center, use a basal area prism or angle gauge to record the basal area of the variable radius plot for all live and dead tree’s taller than 4.5 ft with a diameter at breast height (DBH) ≥ 5.0 inches. Hold the basal area prism at any convenient distance from the eye, directly over the plot center. The prism should be held vertically (rounded edge on top) and at a right angle to the line of sight (number indicating the basal area factor on the left side). If a tree is a ‘hit’ and included in the basal area count, mark that tree for further measurement by placing a pin flag at its base. **Tip:** As you mark trees for measurement, alternate the color of pin flags – makes it easier to remember tree order when measuring heights. Record trees in sequence starting at the north.
transect moving in a clockwise direction. For longer term tree-specific measures, use metal tree tags to give each tree a unique identification.

a. For each hit tree included in the basal area count, record:
   1. Tree species.
   2. Status: Live or dead.
   3. Diameter at breast height (to nearest 0.1 in).
   4. Tree height (to the nearest ft).
   5. Lowest height to continuous live foliage vegetation (e.g. crown base height (CBH)) for all live trees and class 1a snags (to the nearest ft). This measure is should be the lowest continuous vegetation (needles, branches, etc.) not including the main stem (tree trunk), and not where the lowest branch converges with the trunk.

b. For standing dead trees taller than DBH (snags) that are included in basal area count, also record decay class on a scale of 1-3.
   1. Decay class 1a with needles = recently dead trees, top intact, needles/foliage and fine branches present. NOTE: Record CBH for trees with needles.
   2. Decay class 1b without needles = recently dead trees, top intact, fine branches present.
   3. Decay class 2 = snags have coarse branches and bark present, but fine branches and foliage have fallen off.
   4. Decay class 3 = snags are rotten, bark not present. Very few if any branches remain.

4. Tree Saplings and Seedlings (1/100th Acre Plot, 11.78 ft radius)
   Often variable radius plots measured with a prism or angle gauge are not very effective at capturing smaller trees, or trees with multi-stem branching patterns (e.g. Juniper). However, forest restoration and fuel reduction treatments frequently specifically target removing these small trees to reduce ladder fuels and crown fire potential. We recommend a fixed radius plot to capture this tree layer.

   a. Tree Saplings taller than 4.5 ft, but <5 inch DBH within the 1/100th acre subplot:
      1. Tree species.
      2. Live or dead.
      3. Diameter at breast height by size class.
         1. Class 1: 0.1-2.4 in.
         2. Class 2: 2.5-4.9 in.
      4. Tree height (to the nearest ft).
      5. Lowest height of continuous live vegetation (e.g. crown base height or CBH) for all live trees and class 1a snags (to the nearest ft). This measure is should be the lowest continuous vegetation (needles, branches, etc.) not including the main stem (tree trunk), and not where the lowest branch converges with the trunk.
      6. Decay class (1a, 1b, 2, 3) if dead.

   b. If the number of sapling trees is excessive, an ocular estimate of tree height and CBH for all sapling trees by species and diameter class is typically quicker and sufficient for most monitoring objectives rather than measuring the height of every single sapling.

   c. Tree Seedlings (less than 4.5 ft tall within the 1/100th acre subplot):
      1. Record the species and number of individuals in each height class.
         1. Height Classes: 1 = 0”-4”; 2 = 4.1”-18”; 3 = 18.1”-30”; 4 = 30.1”-54”.
d. Note: Typically large shrubs, such as Gambel Oak, are not counted as trees and their abundance is measured using the line-point intercept method on the transects. Where Gambel Oak takes on more of a large single stem tree growth form, especially in southwestern Colorado, it may be appropriate to measure tall shrubs as a tree.

**1m² Sample Frame**
In each of the three 1m² sampling frames located at 15-18ft, 40-43ft, and 62-65ft along the north-south transect, measure the following:

1. **Fine Woody Fuels**
   a. Using the Photoload technique, estimate fuel loading for 1 hr, 10 hr, and 100 hr fuels in tons/acre within the 1m² sample frame. The photos on pages 15-17 are intended as guides and not absolute choices. Estimate as close to the picture as possible or chose an intermediate loading between pictures if appropriate. A go-no-go fuels gauge can be used to help classify fuels in the frame.
      1. 1 hr fuels (0 to 0.24 inch diameter)
      2. 10 hr fuels (0.25 to 0.99 inch diameter)
      3. 100 hr fuels (1.00 to 2.99 inches diameter)
   a. Double sampling is recommended, but not required, in order to increase the accuracy of fuels measurements. This involves performing the photoload estimates then collecting all woody material in the 1m² sample frame in paper bag with plot, date, initials of photoload estimator, “1hr, 10hr, or 100hr”, and the Sample Frame location (15ft, 40ft, or 62ft). When performing double sampling, use one separate paper bag per fuel size class (e.g. 3 bags per plot for 1hr, 10hr, and 100hr). Collect only woody material, not litter or duff (e.g. no needles or cones, which are classified as litter).
   b. All woody material should then be returned to the lab, oven dried to constant mass, weighed to attain dry weight (loading in tons/acre).
      ii. Double sampling woody fuels can be time intensive and is not required. Generally a double sample rate of 20% is adequate. We recommend collecting biomass in one sample frame outside of the plot (e.g. 3 large steps in a random direction from the end of the North transect away from the plots center) approximately every other plot.

2. **Herbaceous Biomass**
   a. Clip all herbaceous material at the soil surface (current year’s growth and senesced/dead material that is still attached to plants) for each plant rooted within the frame.
   b. Place in paper bag with plot, date, “HERB”, and the sample frame location (15ft, 40ft, or 62ft).
   c. All herbaceous material should then be returned to the lab, oven dried to constant mass, and weighed to attain dry weight of herbaceous material (loading in tons/acre).
      iii. Clipping herbaceous biomass can be time intensive. We recommend collecting biomass at only one sample frame (e.g. plot center), or at an additional sample frame outside of the plot (e.g. 3 large steps in a random direction from the end of the North transect away from plot center).
Herbaceous biomass should be collected at EVERY plot, unlike woody fuels, which is collected every other plot or when appropriate.

37.2 ft Transects
Along each of the 8 transects in cardinal and ordinal directions from the plot center:

1. Understory Vegetation
   a. Using the line-point intercept method, record any plant present at 25 evenly spaced points (every 1-foot) on all 8 transects. Begin counting at 6-ft from the center and collect data along a 24-ft section of each transect (e.g. understory data should be recorded along the 46 – 70, and 10 – 34 foot marks along each transect tape).
   i. A buffer near plot center reduces trampling and autocorrelation of counts, and buffering the transect ends ensures vegetation estimates are within the plot area.
   b. Identify plants to the species level using the USDA PLANTS database 4 letter code or the full Latin nomenclature if unsure of code. If unable to identify a plant, give the plant an unknown number and name. Show the plant to everyone on the crew to ensure that consistent unknown names are used. Collect a specimen from outside the plot for later identification in the lab, and place in a paper bag labeled with the appropriate unknown name.
   c. If more than one species is visible at a sampling point record them all (i.e. kinnickinnick, mountain mahogany, Douglas-fir). Record the top most vegetation as the top hit, and then other species of shorter stature as bottom hits. This allows calculation of total percent cover as well as relative species cover.
      i. Each transect can have no more than 25 top vegetation counts, i.e. 1 top hit at every point measured. Multiple bottom hits may be recorded at each point.
      ii. Include ANY live vegetation when they are encountered below 4.5 ft, e.g. large shrubs, tree branches, and live tree trunks, etc.

2. Forest Floor Substrate
   a. At each of the 25 points per transect record forest floor substrate as well. Each transect should have exactly 25 substrate counts, i.e. 1 substrate for every point measured.
   b. Substrate categories: litter/duff, soil/gravel (<0.5 in), rock (>0.5 inch), Coarse fuels (1000hr, rotten or sound), moss/lichen, woody basal, and herbaceous vegetation basal.
      i. If stumps or live tree trunks occur in the frame, record them separately as woody basal.
      ii. If large dead plant material suppresses growing space, record as herbaceous vegetation basal (rarely found in Colorado).
      iii. When estimating ground cover, exclude live vegetation from estimates.

3. What about logs suspended off the forest floor?
   a. If 1000hr coarse fuels are encountered suspended higher than ~1 inch above the ground, record that substrate as a species with the notation “in air” and then record a separate substrate category on the forest floor. For example, if a log is suspended above the ground with a grass growing under it, and pine needles are under the grass, you would record 1000hr in air, Muhlenbergia montana for the grass, and then litter as the substrate. Be judicious and only use the “in air” category if you can see potential growing space for plants under the suspended substrate. This measure will be used to estimate woody debris abundance, compare different slash disposal techniques, and estimate potential vegetation growing space.

4. Fine Woody Fuels
5. Heights for Vegetation and Fine Woody Fuels
   a. At the end of each transect estimate the average maximum height of herbaceous and
      shrub vegetation, as well as 1hr/10hr/100hr wood that was tallied, in inches to the
      nearest 1 inch. This is recorded at the bottom of the datasheet for each transect
      (H=Herbaceous, S=Shrub, W=1hr/10hr/100hr fuels). This is not the height above the
      ground where the sampling point touches the vegetation, but the average maximum
      height of the plants that are tallied.
      i. Measure heights where they occur and do not average in zero values within each
         transect. If you record a cover of any herbaceous, shrub, or 1hr/10hr/100hr on
         a transect, the height must be >0. Therefore, only height values >0 should be
         calculated into averages. A yard stick is handy to estimate heights.

6. Litter and Duff Depths
   a. At regularly spaced intervals along N, E, S, and W transects, measure litter and duff
      depths to the nearest 0.25 in. Measurement are at 10 ft, 20 ft, and 30 ft in each direction
      from plot center (e.g. 10 ft, 20 ft, 30 ft, 50 ft, 60 ft, and 70 ft on each transect tape.
   i. Following the FIREMON protocol (RMRS-GTR-164-CD) “Litter” is the loose
      layer made up of needles, dead grasses detached from the plants, recently fallen
      leaves, twigs not visible from above, and so forth, where the individual pieces
      are still identifiable and little altered by decomposition. The “duff” layer lies
      below the litter layer and above the mineral soil. It is made up of litter material
      that has decomposed to the point that the individual pieces are no longer
      identifiable. Pine cones are considered litter or duff, not woody fuel.

7. Tree Cover
   a. Using the densitometer scope, at every foot along the North-South transect record
      cover of any live tree taller than 4.5-ft (DBH). Begin counting at the start of the South
      transect (3ft mark on the tape), and count every 1-ft until you reach 37-ft from plot
      center on the North transect (77ft mark on the tape) for a total of 75 measurements (37
      counts each side of the plot center, plus one count over the plot center). Stand directly
      over each point on the transect, look straight up through the densitometer scope and
      record when tree (foliage or trunk) is encountered. For each hit, record the tree species.
      i. If multiple live tree species are encountered at one point, record the tree species
         lowest in height at that point.

8. Tree Group Size Transect
   The objective of this technique is to measure the distances covered by closed-canopy forest areas (“tree clumps”) versus openings along a transect.
   a. Walking along the entire length (75 ft) of the North-South transect, record the start and
      end points of "openings" and "canopy clumps" that are directly overhead the transect.
      Include as canopy clumps, any canopy overhead the transect produced by trees > 1 in.
      DBH. Use the densitometer scope to identify the location along the transect at which
      transitions between canopy and openings occur.
   b. Along with the start and end points for each length of canopy clump, record the
      number of trees that contribute to the formation of that clump. For example, the tree
      canopy intersecting the transect may be an individual tree, or it may be part of a small
or large clump of trees extending beyond the transect. Record the number of trees forming each canopy clump as classes (0 if open, Class 1= 1 tree, Class 2= 2-4 trees, Class 3= 5-9 trees, Class 4 = 10-15 trees, or Class 5= 16+ trees). If canopies of trees are interlocking or less than 5 ft apart, count them as part of the same canopy clump.

**1/10th Acre Plot (37.2 ft radius)**

1. **1000 hr fuels** (larger than 3 in diameter)
   a. Measure the end diameters and the length of every log larger than 3 inches diameter within the 1/10th acre plot to the nearest 0.1 inches.
   1. If diameter drops below 3 inches on the log, stop measuring at that point.
   2. When a log travels outside of the 1/10th acre plot boundary, stop measuring the log at the plot boundary.
   3. If the center point of the log is below the duff, stop measuring at that point.
   b. Record if the fuel is rotten or sound. Consider pieces rotten when the piece at the intersection is obviously punky or can be easily kicked apart.
   c. Tip: occasionally 1000hr fuel is very abundant and can take very long to measure. Consider measuring half, or even a quarter of the plot if this is the case and recording total area measured on the datasheet. Always start from the North transect and work clockwise around the plot. If half a plot is measured the loading will be multiplied by 2, a quarter plot multiplied by 4. Our general rule of thumb is to measure maximum of approximately 30 logs in a plot, unless 1000hr fuels are a main focus of the monitoring. **If only measuring a portion of the plot due to abundant 1000 hr fuel, ALWAYS circle “Full,” “Half,” or Quarter” indicating the portion of the plot measured.**

2. **Understory Vegetation Presence**
   a. Systematically search for and record any additional plant species present in the 0.1-acre plot that were not recorded on the 8 transects surveyed for percent cover.
   b. Identify plants to the species level. If unable to identify a plant, give the plant an unknown number and name. Show the plant to everyone on the crew to ensure that consistent unknown names are used. Collect a specimen from outside the plot for later identification in the lab.
   c. If any exotic species of concern are found during this search, estimate their cover in the 0.1-acre plot as rare (>0 – 1%), common (2 – 10%), abundant (11 – 50%), or very abundant (51% +).
**Gear List** (for a crew of 3 people)

**Field Gear Bag**
- Plot Center
  - 1 – 10 BAF Basal area prism or angle gauge
  - 1 – 20 BAF Basal area prism or angle gauge
  - 1 – 11.78ft fixed plot rope
  - 1 – Clinometer
  - 2 – Compass
  - 1 – Garmin e-trex
  - 1 – Diameter tape
  - 1 – Measuring tape
- Canopy Cover
  - 2 – Clicker counter
  - 1 – Densitometer
- Quadrats
  - 2 – Go no go fuels gauge
  - 2 – Litter/Duff ruler
- Main Compartment
  - 4 – 100ft tape
  - 1 – Hand saw for woody biomass
  - 1 – Hammer
  - 1 – Hypsometer
  - 2 – Logger’s tape with diameter/length dual measurements
  - 1 – Trowel
  - 1 – White Board
  - 1 – Metal caliper in case
  - 1 – Pair of gloves
- Zipper Pocket
  - Batteries: AAA (4), AA (4), 9V(1), 123A (2)
  - >10 - Pencils, Pens, Sharpie, Dry erase markers
  - 1 – Pink flagging roll
  - 40 - Plot tags and Washers
  - Paper bags: 10 small, 10 medium, 3 large
- Side Compartments
  - 1 – Camera
  - 2 – Grass clippers/shears in sheath
- 2 – Clipboard/Tatum: filled with below forms
  - Data sheets
  - Unknown plant sheets (Rite in Rain)
  - 1 – Protocol
  - 1 – Photoload for herbaceous fuels
  - 1 – Photo load guides for 1hr, 10hr, and 100hr fuels (pages 15-17)
  - 1 – Random number table (0-359)
  - 1 / person - Species lists
  - Maps of the site (quads and plot maps)

*Refill each day from vehicle*
- 3 / plot – Painted Nails, Washers, Stamped Tags
- 2 of each size / plot – Paper bags for fuels
- Forms

**Shoulder Sheath**
- 1 – 1m² sampling frame
- 1 – 18in Calipers
- 10 – Chaining pins
- 15 to 20 – Pin flags of 2 different colors
- 1 – Yard stick w/ seedling class marks

**Each Vehicle**
- Form Box
  - Data sheets
  - Protocols
  - Herb and Woody Photoload Templates
  - Random number lists
  - Example Reports
  - Tax Exempt Form
  - Crew and Emergency Contact List
- Plot Gear
  - 4 – Cruising Vests
  - 4 – Hard Hats
  - 1 – Metal detector
  - Monuments
    - Box of Nails
    - Box of Washers
    - Box of Stamped Tags
  - 1 – Plant press
  - Paper Bags (Small, Med, Large)
- Safety/Navigation Supplies
  - 1 – Duct tape
  - 1 – Complete First aid kit, bug spray, sunscreen
  - 1 – Jumper cables
  - 1 – Road atlas (navigating to study area)
  - 1 – Shovel
  - 1 – Tow rope
- Camping Supplies
  - Water cooler(s)
  - Food cooler
  - Cookery
- Electronics Box
  - 2 – Tablets
  - 1 – Walkie-Talkie (Motorola)
  - 1 – Walkie-Talkie micro USB charger
  - 1 – Camera cable
- 1 – Tablet USB Charger
- 1 – Portable charging device
- 2 – Tablet stylus
- 1 – Flora of Colorado