

SCOPING NOTICE

Georgetown Lake Hazardous Fuels Reduction Pintler Ranger District Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Granite and Deerlodge Counties, Montana

Background

In December of 2002 the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest conducted scoping for Georgetown Lake Vegetation Management project. A Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was issued as well. The purpose and need of the project included objectives to reduce hazardous fuels and risk to firefighter and public safety, maintain or improve forest and grassland health, and provide opportunities to harvest wood products. [Click here to view vicinity map.](#)

The project was in the alternative development phase of the EIS when during the summer of 2003, President Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) resulted in new administrative procedures for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations. The administrative changes established new categories for which a project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or EIS. One of the new categories is for hazardous fuels reduction activities, which were a component of the proposed action for the Georgetown Lake Vegetation Management project. A review of the project's purpose and need and the potential environmental effects indicated that much of it was consistent with the Healthy Forest Initiative and that with a few modifications the proposal met the criteria for the newly established category for hazardous fuels reduction activities.

Some key requirements of the new regulations are that in order to use the categorical exclusion for hazardous fuels reduction activities, the project must occur in an urban interface area or in Fire Regimes I, II, or III in Condition Class 2 or 3. Georgetown Lake meets the definition of a wildland intermix community and was listed as a community at risk in the Federal Register dated August 17, 2001 under the publication "Urban Wildland Interface Communities Within the Vicinity of Federal Lands That Are at High Risk From Wildfire." There are 3 proposed prescribed fire units that are located outside the interface area, but are within Fire Regimes I and III that are in a Condition Classes 2.

Other criteria includes having no extraordinary circumstances, no more than 1,000 acres of mechanical treatment, a maximum of 4,500 acres of prescribed fire, and have a primary purpose of reducing hazardous fuels. The modifications to the project include revising the purpose and need to focus on hazardous fuels reduction, adding strategically located treatment units as well as eliminating treatment units not meeting purpose and need.

The proposed action is now identified as the Georgetown Lake Hazardous Fuels Reduction project and the Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS for the Georgetown Lake Vegetation Management project has been cancelled.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service is proposing to treat hazardous fuels on the Pintler Ranger District in the Flint Creek, North Fork Flint Creek, and upper Warm Springs drainages. The proposed project includes the Georgetown and Echo Lake recreation areas, located approximately 10 miles south of Philipsburg, Montana. [Click here to view a map of the proposed action](#)

The Georgetown Lake Hazardous Fuels Reduction project proposes fuel reduction treatments in the form of thinning 859 acres of forest within the urban interface area surrounding Georgetown and Echo Lakes.

In addition, mechanical and prescribed fire treatments to control conifer encroachment and reduce fuels would occur on an approximately 706 acres. This includes cutting small trees encroaching on 138 acres of grasslands and the slash removed as biomass for energy production. The remaining 568 acres of timber and grasslands would be treated with a combination of broadcast burning and underburning. Ground crews using hand-firing devices would conduct the prescribed burning. Helicopters with aerial ignition devices could be used for firing operations in one of the proposed units which is located away from the residential areas. Engines, hand crews, fuel breaks and constructed fire line would be used where needed to contain and control prescribed fires.

Forest products harvested as a result of hazardous fuels reduction include an estimated 2.9 million board feet of sawtimber and approximately 2.4 million board feet equivalent of roundwood (posts and poles). Fuels reduction treatments and timber harvest activities could occur at different times of the year, including winter. Slash residue from these thinning activities would be disposed of using a mix of methods that include piling and burning, chipping, lopping and scattering, and hauling the material away for disposal at another site or used as biomass for energy production. Approximately one and one-half miles of temporary road would be constructed. Temporary roads would be closed to public use and after project activities are completed, all temporary roads would be obliterated and rehabilitated.

The proposed action meets the criteria for Category 10 FSH 1909.15, which allows up to 1,000 acres of mechanical hazardous fuel reduction activities and up to 4,500 acres of hazardous fuel reduction activities using fire. The activities must be conducted in the wildland urban interface or in Condition Classes 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III. This decision would not be subject to appeal as described in 36 CFR 215.12f.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to reduce hazardous fuels and subsequently the potential for uncharacteristic intense, large-scale wildland fire in the Georgetown Lake Wildland Urban Interface and surrounding area by reducing fuel loads, creating fuel breaks, and diversifying stand structure.

This proposal responds to the National Fire Plan which provides a strategy for a comprehensive approach to the management of wildland fire and hazardous fuels on Federal and adjacent State, tribal, and private forest and range lands in the United States. This strategy emphasizes reducing the risk to communities and the environment. As part of the National Fire Plan, a 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy has been prepared. One of the goals of this strategy is to reduce hazardous fuels.

The proposed action is also consistent with the Goals and Objectives in the Forest Plan for the Deerlodge National Forest and Record of Decision approved September 1987. The Georgetown Lake proposed project includes portions of Management Areas A7 – Developed Recreation, C2 – Big Game Winter Range, D2 – Forage Production Areas, and E1 – Productive Forest Land.

The specific objectives related to the purpose and need for this proposed action include the following:

- **Reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland-urban interface**
The area surrounding Georgetown Lake and Echo Lake contains a considerable amount of private land intermixed with national forest. There are several hundred homes and other structures within the project area with subdivisions and new home construction continuing on private property. There are approximately 70 permitted recreation residences and structures on Forest Service administered lands, several campgrounds and recreation facilities, and the Discovery Basin Ski Area. Based on the number of structures and developments in portions of the project area in combination with the structures being distributed throughout the forest, the area is classed as an urban interface intermix community. The values at risk in these areas are rated as high. The infrastructure in much of the area is such that firefighting capabilities are limited or hindered in many areas by narrow dead end roads and one-way in/out routes.
- **Reduce the risk to firefighters and public safety from wildland fire**
Suppressing intensely burning wildfires is often a difficult and dangerous job. The degree of difficulty increases significantly when populated areas are threatened. Not only are firefighters at risk, but forest users and the citizens of the threatened community are also in danger. Reducing fuel loads through thinning, prescribed fire and other mechanical treatments would decrease the intensity of a wildfire and the potential for a catastrophic wildfire. The treatments would help create defensible spaces near private and Forest Service developments with the end result being a safer environment for firefighters and the public.

- **Improve fire regime condition class**

The overall historic fire regime for the project area is described as mixed severity which is characteristic of Fire Regime Group III. A major component of the project proposal is to treat forested lands comprised of vegetation in Condition Class 2 within and adjacent to areas defined as wildland urban interface intermix communities. Condition Class 2 is characteristic of forests susceptible to stand replacement or severe wildfires that are associated with a mixed severity regime. When these types of fires occur in areas such as those described for Georgetown and Echo Lakes, there is potential for catastrophic damage to occur. Removing hazardous fuel by thinning forests and maintaining open grasslands would reduce the potential for uncharacteristic severe and damaging wildfires.

Decision to be Made

The decision to be made is to determine if thinning, prescribed fire and other mechanical treatments to reduce hazardous fuels and improve fire regime condition class would occur as proposed, and if an action is to occur, how much area will need to be treated to meet the purpose and need.

Collaboration

Collaboration with governmental and nongovernmental interest is a component of the public involvement process for this project. The proposal to treat hazardous fuels in the Georgetown Lake area was presented to the Georgetown Lake Homeowners Association in February of 2003 and 2004. There is an on going coordinated effort between Forest Service and Montana DNRC to reduce hazardous fuels in the Georgetown Lake area. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) is currently administering a National Fire Plan grant that provides matching funds to homeowners that wish to conduct fuels reduction work around their homes. The Forest Service is proposing the Georgetown Lake Hazardous Fuels Reduction project to treat fuels adjacent to or near the private lands.

Additional collaboration is planned. A meeting is scheduled for June of 2004. It will be held at the Georgetown Lake Volunteer Fire Department building on June 12, from 1 – 4 p.m. This meeting will include representatives from Granite and Deerlodge counties, Montana DNRC, Georgetown Lake VFD, Georgetown Lake Homeowners Association and other interested groups or individuals. Please contact Bob Gilman (406) 846-1770 or Mark Giacoletto (406) 859-3349 if you plan on attending this meeting so we know how many people to plan for.

Scoping

A news release soliciting public input regarding the proposal will be sent to local media. Interested parties on the District NEPA mailing list will be sent a scoping notice. Residents and property owners that may be affected by the proposed project are also being sent a copy of the scoping notice. This scoping document and a map of the proposed project have been posted on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest web site at www.fs.fed.us/r1/b-d/.

Please submit any written comments to Bob Gilman, District Ranger, Pintler Ranger District, 88-10A-Business Loop, Philipsburg, MT 59858, telephone (406) 859-3211 by June 14, 2004. Comments may also be submitted electronically to comments-northern-beaverhead-deerlodge-pintler@fs.fed.us. The subject line in an email message should contain the title "Georgetown Lake Hazardous Fuels Reduction." If you choose to comment by email, please include your name and your regular mailing address with the comment.

We are looking for feedback related to the purpose and need, proposed action, and alternatives to the proposed action. Comments received from the scoping for the Georgetown Lake Vegetation Management proposal in January of 2003 will be incorporated into the Georgetown Lake Hazardous Fuels Reduction project record. These comments will be considered in the development and analysis of this project. Otherwise, if we do not hear back from you we, we will assume you want your name removed from this project's mailing list.

Comments received in response to this solicitation and the Georgetown Lake Vegetation Management project, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 15 days.

Bob Gilman

BOB GILMAN
District Ranger

5/10/2004

DATE