

**UPDATED SCOPING DOCUMENT
SOUTHWEST FUELS MANAGEMENT PROJECT
POWDER RIVER RANGER DISTRICT
BIGHORN NATIONAL FOREST
NOVEMBER 3, 2004**

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is conducting an environmental analysis as part of the NEPA process to evaluate the environmental effects of a proposal to conduct fuels management activities and watershed improvement measures in the Tensleep drainage of the Bighorn National Forest. Public involvement is vital to assuring a thorough and responsive NEPA process.

We asked for public input in December of 2002 to determine the issues and the scope of this environmental analysis. The project was delayed due to other priorities. Currently, the project has received funding to be completed, with additional components of mechanical fuels reduction and sanitation/salvage harvesting added. No new permanent roads or closures of existing open roads are planned as part of this modification. Due to the delay in completing this project, and a change in project proposal to include more mechanical treatments, scoping is being conducted again. In addition, a collaborator's meeting (for those interested in providing specific insight to the proposal) is scheduled for 1pm on December 14th, at the Tensleep Town Hall in Tensleep, WY. Italicized text in this document indicates a change from the previous scoping effort. Comments previously submitted in the initial scoping will still be considered as part of this analysis effort.

Please take the time to read the following information and let us know your concerns about the proposed action and decisions to be made. Issues identified through scoping will shape the scope of the environmental analysis and be used to develop reasonable alternatives to the proposed action and the level of analysis. We appreciate your time and effort in providing us information that will lead to a better decision.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The overall purpose of the project is to:

1. Restore and/or maintain stand structure, fuel loadings (amount of combustible material), stand understory characteristics, habitat diversity, and forest road systems to meet the Region's "Accelerated Watershed and Vegetation Restoration Plan" and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.
2. Modify fuel profiles (the condition of fuel hazard in different vegetation types) to increase public and firefighter safety and to reduce wildfire severity.
3. Increase forage for livestock and wildlife, and improve wildlife habitat.

The following ecosystem elements within the analysis area are outside their desired condition as defined by Forest Plan goals and objectives and fuels condition rating and hazard mapping. The treatments proposed correspond to the USFS Chief's 4 threats that are being used to focus resource management on National Forests, in conjunction with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. The project area encompasses approximately 44,050 acres. Refer to map.

- *Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas have been identified in the project area, with known concentrations of fuel loadings that pose unacceptable risks for the protection of the associated structures. There is a need to reduce fuel loadings adjacent to the Canyon Country subdivision, along Forest Road 25 and 452 (primary access and escape routes), and adjacent to the Tensleep Fish Hatchery and the two campgrounds in that area.*
- In the absence of wildfire, ponderosa pine stands have become dominated by sapling pine, fir, and juniper. There is a need to remove understory saplings and juniper to return these stands to a fire maintained ecosystem condition and to retain this community type for the long term.
- Fire has been excluded from the majority of the sagebrush communities within the project area. Currently sagebrush is predominately at late successional stages and densities are high. There is a need to provide increased habitat diversity through a mosaic of canopy cover and multiple age classes, and increased herbaceous vegetation for wildlife and livestock.
- Aspen stands, critical for wildlife habitat, scenery, and fuel breaks, are decreasing and at risk of being permanently lost. There is a need to maintain or restore aspen stands while clones are still vigorous enough to regenerate.
- Limber pine has become infected with white pine blister rust, for which there is no known treatment. The resulting mortality has increased visual impacts and heavy fuel loads in Tensleep Canyon. There is a need to reduce these impacts, primarily with prescribed fire.
- *Douglas-fir beetle activity has increased dramatically in the Tensleep Canyon area, including Squaw Creek (along the old Highway, Forest Road 18) and in the Teepee Creek area (a previous timber sale). The resulting mortality needs to be treated through sanitation/salvage harvesting and fuels reduction. In addition, stand conditions of Douglas-fir in the Sand Draw area are outside of the desired fire condition class hazard rating, with insects infecting the stands.*
- *Stand health and fire condition class ratings in lodgepole pine have deteriorated in the Leigh Creek area (a previous timber sale) due to mistletoe infestations, resulting in the need to improve stand health for both fuels and timber management purposes.*
- There are sites within the project area where the existing transportation system does not meet Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and or State of Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality Best Management Practices (WYDEQ 1997). There is a need to improve these road conditions to reduce or eliminate sedimentation sources and bring the transportation system into compliance with current standards and requirements for watershed health and functioning, and reduce unauthorized motorized use of closed roads.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Refer to the attached maps to view the location of proposed treatments.

A. Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)

*Mechanical removal of forested and non-forested vegetation is proposed for the three following sites. First, approximately **130 acres** of Douglas-fir needs fuels reduction*

activities in the area adjacent to Canyon Country subdivision. Second, forested and non-forested vegetation needs thinned around the Tensleep Fish Hatchery and the Tensleep and Leigh Creek campgrounds, totaling approximately 100 acres. Thirdly, forested vegetation along the primary access/escape route (Forest Road 25/452) to the Canyon Country subdivision needs thinned, for approximately 200' either side of the road where needed, totaling approximately 50 acres of mostly lodgepole pine. Mechanical harvesting would be employed in all of these sites, with temporary roads needed in the Canyon Country subdivision area.

B. Ponderosa Pine

Prescribed fire will be used to treat all ponderosa pine units, totaling approximately **4,400 acres**. Fire severity will vary from non-lethal, low intensity ground fire to mixed severity fire that will include single tree torching and may include occasional group torching. Mechanical removal of smaller, understory trees prior to burning is proposed for several sites. This will increase the probability of survival for the large ponderosa pine trees in this area.

C. Sagebrush

Sagebrush within the project area covers approximately 12,200 acres, typically occurring in dense stands of a mature age class. By treating these stands, forb and grass production will be increased, and the pattern of vegetation on the landscape will be altered to improve habitat diversity.

Prescribed fire will be used as the preferred treatment tool for sagebrush units. Herbicide treatment with tebuthiuron will also be evaluated as a treatment tool in areas where fire may not be a feasible treatment option. Maximum acreage that may be treated with herbicide is anticipated to be up to 25% of the sagebrush stands, with specific locations and total acreage to be determined on a site-specific basis. Mechanical treatment (shredding) will also be evaluated as a possible treatment tool for units in the Lone Tree area, up to a maximum of 700 acres of treatment. Treatments would occur over a multi-year period (up to two decades), with approximately **2,500 acres** done per year depending on funding and resource needs.

Range improvements in the form of fencing and/or water developments would be reconstructed or added to several allotment pastures to facilitate the prescribed burning and improved distribution of livestock desired to improve resource conditions.

D. Aspen

Currently, the project area has approximately **850 acres** of aspen, most of which suffers from conifer encroachment and heavy ungulate browsing. Treatment of aspen is necessary to halt or reverse the decline. Treatment for aspen may include any of the following:

- Removal of competing conifers within and adjacent to (up to 150 feet) aspen clones.
- Burning residual materials to increase soil exposure to sun, thereby increasing regeneration potential.

- Partial cutting of aspen clone to reduce apical dominance and increase regeneration.
- Mechanically treat aspen roots, for example by “ripping”, to reduce apical dominance and increase regeneration.
- Fencing to reduce livestock and wildlife browsing of aspen regeneration.

Due to the cost of fencing and regeneration treatment, many areas will just have conifer non-commercially removed from within the stand to prolong the clone’s lifespan. More extensive removal of conifer adjacent to the stand (likely involving a commercial product removal) and fencing of stands is planned on approximately **150 acres**.

E. Limber Pine

Regenerate aspen stands, as described above, in Tensleep Canyon where feasible to reduce the visual impact of dead limber pine trees, and to reduce the fire hazard posed by the large volume of dead material. *Additional prescribed burning are proposed in Ten Sleep Canyon to regenerate vegetation and alter fuels conditions, totaling 930 acres.*

F. Douglas-fir

There are approximately 1,120 acres in the previous Tepee Creek timber sale area that have been heavily infested with the Douglas-fir beetle with resulting mortality of the overstory. Up to ½ mile of temporary road may be needed in this area in support of mechanical harvest to meet sanitation/salvage objectives and improve the condition rating of these stands.

A second site involves approximately 250 acres in the Sand Draw area, where condition class ratings adjacent to the Sand Draw road are overly dense, resulting in increased Douglas-fir beetle mortality. Mechanical harvest is proposed to reduce stand density and remove bug-killed trees. Up to ½ mile of temporary road may be needed in this area in support of mechanical harvest.

A third site involves approximately 60 acres along the old Highway (Forest Road 18) in Tensleep Canyon, where condition ratings and insect caused mortality in the stands have provided an unacceptable risk around a heavily used dispersed camping site. Mechanical harvest is planned around this site, with less than .25 mile of temporary road needed.

F. Lodgepole pine

The area known as the previous Leigh Creek timber sale has experienced declining stand conditions outside of the desired condition rating due to understory growth and a heavy infestation of dwarf mistletoe. Approximately 1,300 acres in this area have been identified to treat these conditions with mechanical harvest. Treatments would also improve the use of Road 25/452 as an escape route in a potential wildfire scenario. This is the primary access road to the Canyon Creek Country subdivision.

G. Roads

The following sites have road conditions that do not meet current Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines or Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality Best Management

Practices (BMPs). Measures are proposed for implementation at each site as described below. See the roads map for exact locations.

Site 1: Roads 414 and 410 are likely contributors of sediment into the South Fork of Brokenback Creek. Roads receive heavy use during the spring, summer, and fall months. Culverts may be needed to reduce or eliminate impacts.

Site 2: Road 426 into Big Horn Mountain Resort becomes plugged with ice during the winter months and causes overtopping of the road by spring high water flow. The road surface and fill slopes are a source of sediment during these events. There is also a threat of human injury and large quantities of sediment input if the road were to fail. If the current culvert replacement does not suffice, road relocation may be necessary.

Site 3: Stovepipe Road (user-created, non system) is located near Stovepipe Creek, and is generating substantial sediment through unauthorized use. Reinforcement of existing closure or obliteration of the road is being considered.

Site 4: The network of closed system roads stemming from road 420 was constructed for past timber sales and is receiving heavy use during the fall hunting season, causing erosion and sedimentation. Improvement of existing closures would be conducted following mechanical harvest in this area.

Site 5: Road number 440.01 is currently closed, but is being traveled by unauthorized motor vehicles. The road crossing at the headwater section of Canyon Creek is causing sedimentation to the creek. An additional user-created route has also been created on the east side of Canyon Creek. Improvement of existing closures would be conducted to prevent use of stream crossing.

Site 6: The Gold Mine Road, road number 452, has a low water crossing on Canyon Creek approximately .25 miles from its junction with road 25. Approaches to the crossing are on steep hill slopes that provide a direct source of sediment from the road. A bottomless arch culvert or additional waterbars and relief culverts before the crossing are being proposed at this site.

Site 7: Old Highway 16, road number 18, has two perennial crossings, one on Indian Creek, and one on Squaw Creek. Culverts appear to be undersized at those crossings and are causing some erosion of the road fill material. Upgrading culverts is planned.

Site 8: This closed road on Leigh Creek Vee has a high erosion potential due to the steep slope and lack of vegetation on the road surface, and runs directly into Tepee Creek, causing sedimentation. Water bars and seeding are being considered to improve road conditions. *In addition, closed roads located in the past Tepee timber sale are proposed to be effectively closed upon completion of proposed salvage activities to reduce unauthorized use of motor vehicles and erosion.*

Site 9: Road number 436.03, west of road number 25, provides access to the Canyon Creek cow camp and is used heavily by recreationists. Along the first .5-mile, the road is steep and narrow in places, posing an unsafe or hazardous condition, and causing substantial erosion. Beyond Canyon Creek cow camp, there are two road crossings generating substantial sediment. Proposed treatments include reconstruction or relocation of the first .5-mile before Canyon Creek, a bottomless arch culvert installed at Canyon Creek, upgrading the culvert at the unnamed tributary, and installing a properly sized culvert at Prospect Creek.

Site 10: Road number 436.03/436.04 is being used to access the Gold Mine Road (road number 452) to/from road number 25. The road is adjacent to and in contact with an intermittent, spring fed, stream channel for most of its length. The road is approximately .75 miles and is an impact to the aquatic resources of Canyon Creek drainage. *Heavy maintenance including surfacing, culverts, and/or relocation of the road is proposed.*

Site 11: Road number 501 is a closed road, but is being traveled by unauthorized motor vehicles to a vantage point overlooking Tensleep Creek. Improvement of the existing closure would be conducted.

Site 12: The Childs Creek crossing on road number 436.01 receives a high level of use by recreationists and permittees, with sedimentation occurring. Proposed treatment includes upsizing and realignment of culvert with crossing constructed using a viable fill material.

Site 13: *There is a previously used gravel pit in this area that is proposed for use to obtain surfacing and fill material necessary for road improvements planned in this area. In addition, there may be other previously used gravel pits in the project area needed for road improvements necessary to reduce erosion, primarily along roads 25/452.*

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

The following potential issues have been identified by the USFS. No determination has been made by the District Ranger as to which will be examined in detail in the environmental analysis. Your input is valuable here to help us determine which of these potential issues merit detailed analysis. Your input is also needed to help identify additional issues related to the proposed action that may not be listed here.

1. What are the effects to structural diversity of forested and non-forested vegetation community types?
2. How will the project affect roadless characteristics in inventoried roadless areas, and use of existing roads and trails?
3. How will the project affect private property within and immediately adjacent to the Forest?
4. What are the effects to range improvements, livestock distribution and rotations?
5. What are the effects on water quality, soils, riparian areas, and fisheries?
6. What are the effects on threatened, endangered, and sensitive species (including sage grouse)? On management indicator species and other wildlife?
7. What are the effects to air quality?

8. Will the project increase noxious weeds?

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

This document serves as updated scoping for public comment. Comments or questions regarding the proposed actions will be reviewed after the due date of **December 7, 2004**. Comments previously submitted will still be included in this analysis. Please include your name, address, phone number, and the title of the document (Southwest Fuels) on which you are submitting comments. Include specific facts with supporting rationale which you believe the deciding officer should consider in reaching a decision regarding this proposal. Other input which would be helpful may include 1) identification of resource issues and concerns that may be associated with this project proposal, and 2) information on past or current activities and resources which you believe is relevant to the project.

Please submit comments to Mark Booth, Powder River District Ranger, 1415 Fort St., Buffalo, WY, 82834, phone 307-684-7806. Additional information can be obtained from Jon Warder, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, Bighorn National Forest, 2013 Eastside 2nd St., Sheridan, WY 82801, phone 307-674-2631.

The Bighorn National Forest website, www.fs.fed/r2/bighorn, will also contain this scoping notice and other documents related to this project as they are completed, and an opportunity to submit comments via email.

Issues identified during scoping will be used to develop alternatives to the proposed actions. Alternatives will be analyzed and an analysis document made available for public review and comment. A decision document will then be issued in accordance with the allowances within the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

DECISION TO BE MADE

The District Ranger will decide whether or not to implement all or a portion of the proposed action or any alternatives. The environmental analysis is scheduled to be completed and a decision rendered by September 30, 2005.

/s/ Mark Booth
MARK BOOTH
District Ranger

November 2, 2004
Date

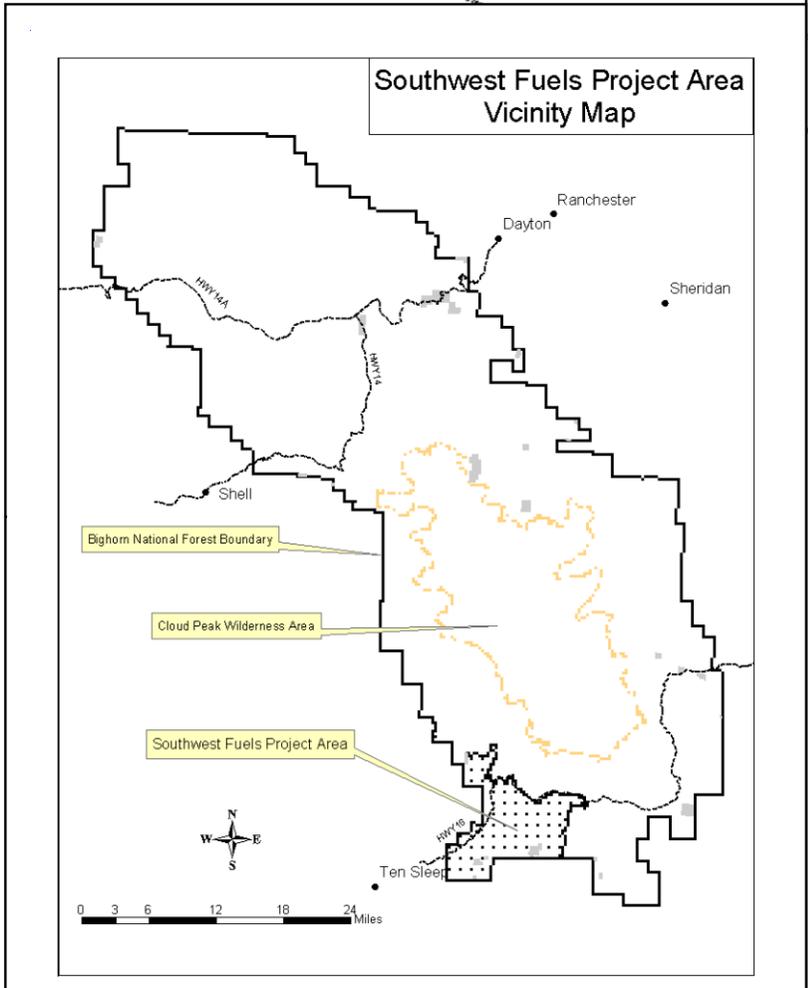
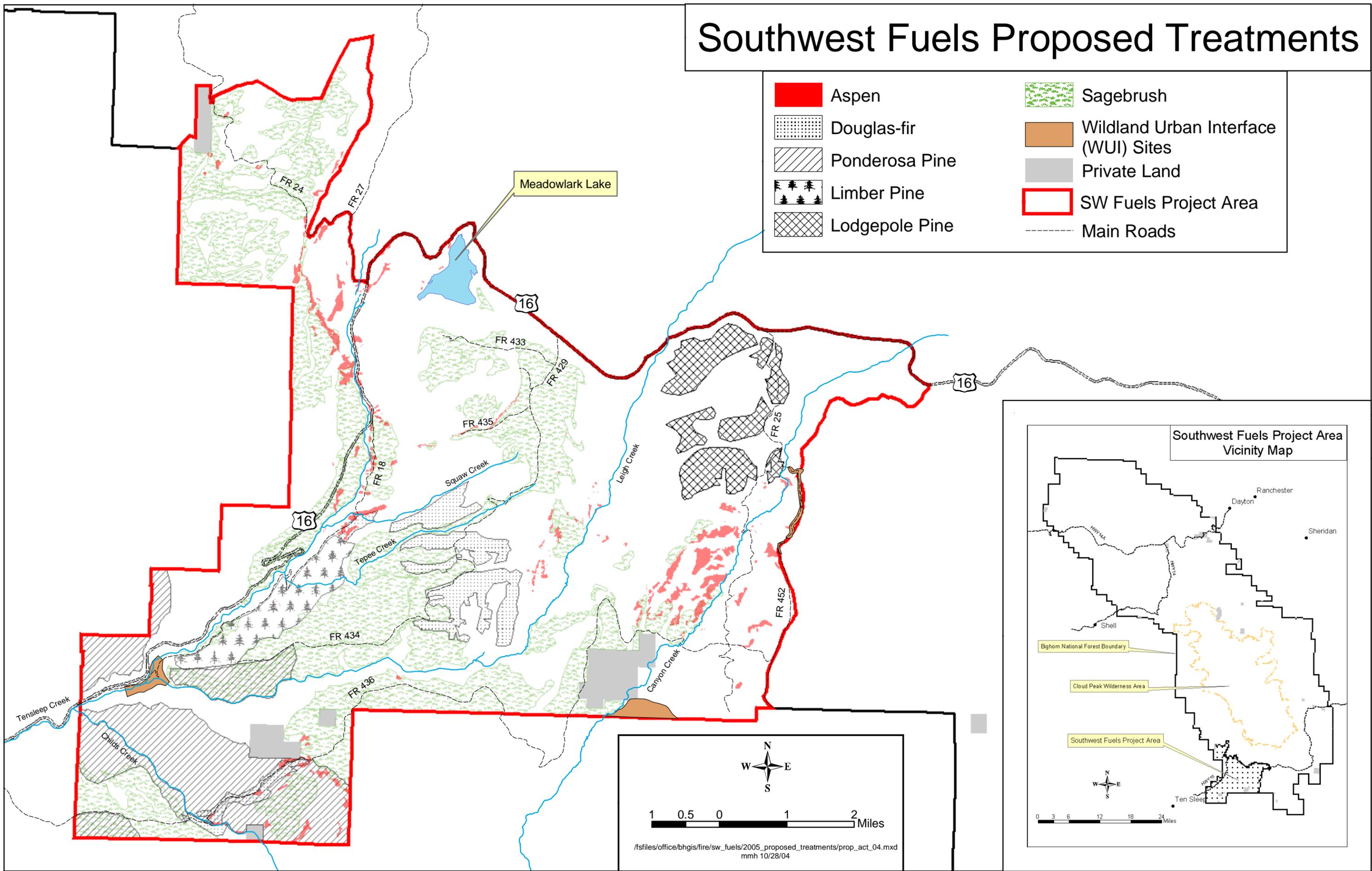
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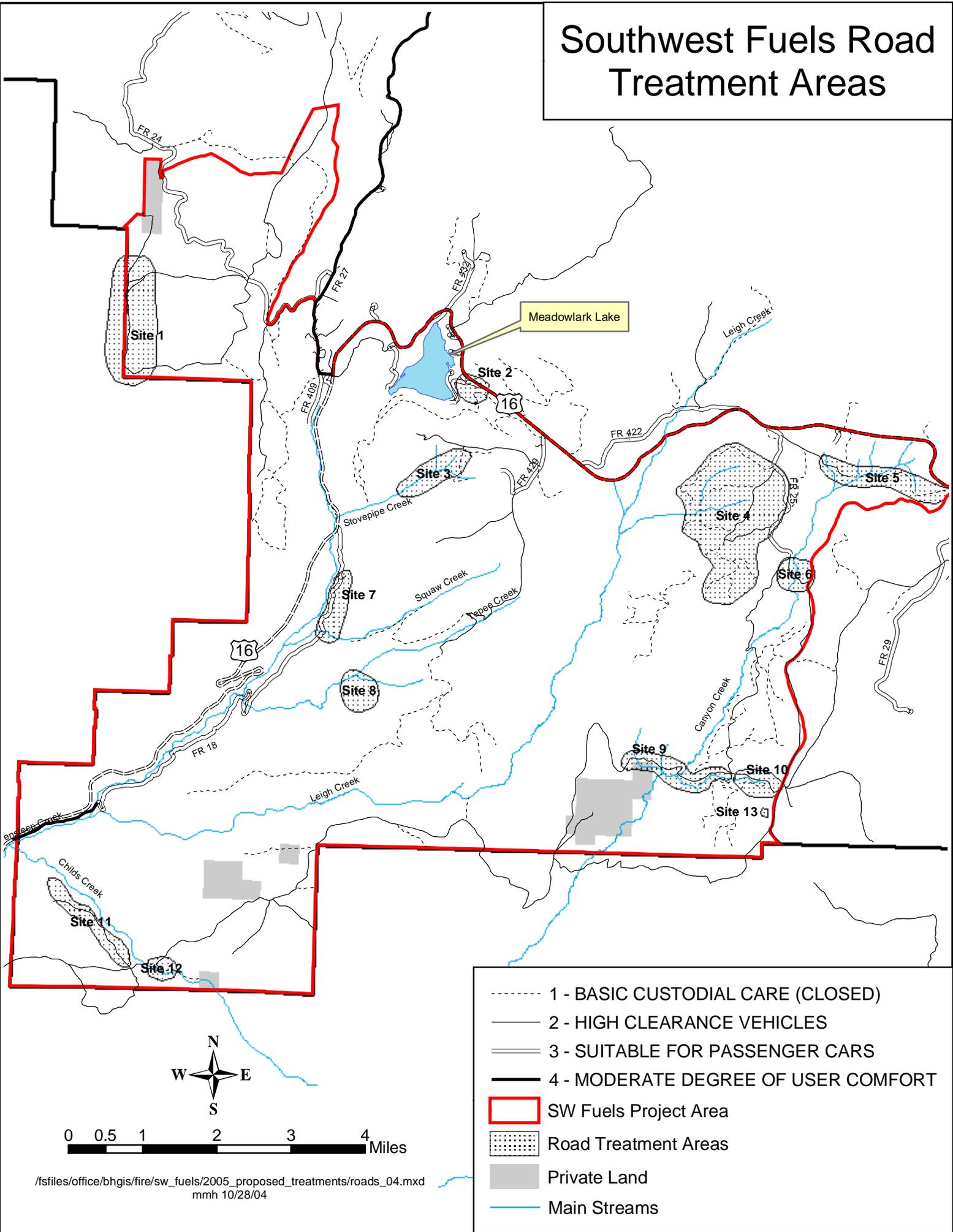
Southwest Fuels Proposed Treatments

- | | | | |
|---|----------------|---|--------------------------------------|
|  | Aspen |  | Sagebrush |
|  | Douglas-fir |  | Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Sites |
|  | Ponderosa Pine |  | Private Land |
|  | Limber Pine |  | SW Fuels Project Area |
|  | Lodgepole Pine |  | Main Roads |




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Southwest Fuels Road Treatment Areas



- 1 - BASIC CUSTODIAL CARE (CLOSED)
- 2 - HIGH CLEARANCE VEHICLES
- ==== 3 - SUITABLE FOR PASSENGER CARS
- 4 - MODERATE DEGREE OF USER COMFORT
- ▭ SW Fuels Project Area
- ▨ Road Treatment Areas
- Private Land
- Main Streams