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Cottonwood Rim Analysis Scoping Report

Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District

**MEDICINE BOW-ROUTT NATIONAL FORESTS &
THUNDER BASIN NATIONAL GRASSLAND**

Carbon County, Wyoming

T.12N., 13N., & 14N., R.85W., 86W., 87W., & 88W.

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INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service is seeking public input on several proposals that have been identified for the Cottonwood Rim Analysis Area, including: fuels and vegetation management, watershed improvement, developed and dispersed campsite renovation, and travel management. The analysis area is located on the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, in Carbon County, Wyoming. Situated primarily in the South Savery and Upper Little Snake River Geographic Areas, the analysis area is located in the southwestern portion of the Sierra Madre Range.

The purpose of these proposals is to implement management direction from the Medicine Bow National Forest 2003 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) to manage for ecosystem needs.

Based on a review of the existing condition of the area's resources, Forest Plan standards and guidelines, desired future condition, and resource management needs, the following preliminary Proposed Action(s) have been developed for the Cottonwood Rim Analysis Area:

Cottonwood Rim Fuels Management project: This fuels/vegetation management project has been proposed to address the need to maintain and promote fire-dependent plant communities such as aspen and Gambel oak, the need to reduce the wildfire hazard to adjacent private land in the vicinity, as well as the need to improve area forage for wildlife and livestock. Possible treatments would include prescribed burning and mechanical treatments, which are designed to improve area shrublands and to regenerate new aspen and, where present, Gambel oak in areas where conifer tree species have encroached.

Little Snake River Restoration project: This watershed improvement project has been proposed to reduce streambank erosion and restore aquatic habitat along a one-mile stretch of the Little Snake River.

North Fork Little Snake River Fish Barrier project: This project has been proposed to maintain or enhance Colorado River cutthroat trout populations and habitats in the area.

Battle Creek Campground Renovation project: This project has been proposed to look at ways to improve and upgrade the existing campground facilities, along with addressing resource damage that is occurring in adjacent dispersed campsites along Battle Creek.

Cottonwood Rim Travel Management proposal: Part of the implementation of Phase 2 of the Forest-Wide Travel Management Environmental Assessment (October 16, 2000), this proposal will determine whether or not unplanned and unmanaged user-created roads and trails will be added to the Forest Transportation System, and if existing Forest Transportation System routes should remain opened or closed to motorized vehicle use in this portion of the Sierra Madre Range. The analysis will also look at whether or not additional motorized and non-motorized trail opportunities should be developed and added to the area's system.

All of these projects, except for the campground renovation proposal and the fish barrier proposal, were identified separately on the April 2004 Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests & Thunder Basin National Grassland Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA).

The Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Assessment to analyze and disclose the environmental effects of these proposals. Although the analysis will include all of the above-mentioned proposals, separate decision documents may be issued for each distinct project.

This scoping report contains background information on these proposals. Scoping is an integral part of the environmental analysis process. It provides an opportunity for you to express your opinions about site-specific areas on the Forest that are being considered for possible projects or proposed actions. The purpose of scoping is to identify issues and concerns related to the proposed action(s). In addition, scoping may identify additional information and management opportunities that may be incorporated into the proposed action(s), as well as formulating alternatives to the proposed action(s).

The District Ranger has determined that the scoping period is the most effective timing for the 30-day comment period on the proposed actions [36 CFR 215.5(2)]. This will be the only opportunity for the public to comment before decisions on these projects are issued.

EXISTING CONDITION

The Cottonwood Rim Analysis Area (AA) is located in the Sierra Madre Range, in Carbon County, approximately 20 miles southwest of Encampment and 30 miles east of Baggs, Wyoming. The legal description is T.12N., 13N., & 14N., R.85W., 86W., 87W., & 88W. The main route into the area is via Wyoming Highway 70 (Battle Highway). Most of the analysis area is situated south of Highway 70. The AA extends from Battle Pass west to the Forest boundary and south from Hwy 70 to the Colorado state line. See Vicinity Map (Figure 1) for an approximate location of the analysis area.

The AA encompasses approximately 106,154 acres, of which an estimated 91,495 acres are National Forest System lands. There are approximately 10,357 acres of private land and 4,302 acres of State of Wyoming land within the analysis area. The area's elevation ranges from 7,200 feet along the Forest's western boundary near Battle Mountain to the top of Bridger Peak and the Continental Divide at just over 11,000 feet.

Identified in the 2003 Revised Forest Plan, the AA includes portions of six Geographic Areas (GAs) in the Sierra Madre Range including: South Savery, Upper Little Snake River, Battle Creek, Encampment River, North Savery, and Northeast Sierra Madre. It also includes the western half of the Huston Park Wilderness area (19,076 acres) and the entire Battle Mountain Research Natural Area (1,204 acres).

Vegetation

The analysis area consists of approximately 31,262 acres (34%) of aspen, 23,789 acres (26%) of spruce-fir, 9,993 acres (11%) of lodgepole pine, 20,650 acres (23%) of shrublands, 4,601 acres (5%) of forbs and grasses, and a small amount (1%) of cottonwood, Douglas fir, and Gambel oak (tree size). Shrubs include Gambel oak, bitterbrush, sagebrush, serviceberry, snowberry, and willows. (*Source*: District resource information system (RIS) database)

The western half and lower elevations of the AA are dominated by aspen forests and shrublands. The aspen forest(s) on the west slope of the Sierra Madre and this area is considered the largest continuous stand of aspen in the State of Wyoming. The lower elevations also contain unique stands of Gambel oak, which reaches the northernmost extent of its natural range in the area. The central portion and middle elevations of the analysis area are a mix of lodgepole pine and aspen. Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir are the dominant vegetation types at the higher elevations in the eastern portion of the area. The upper treeline occurs at approximately 10,700 feet on the sides of Bridger Peak and Red Mountain, where rocky soils and harsh climatic conditions have created glades of krummholtz forest. Here there are scattered glacial lakes, including Battle Lake.

Vegetation Disturbance

In the Sierra Madre ecosystem, disturbance is the critical factor in maintaining coexisting species. Without disturbance, subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce would replace disturbance dependent species such as lodgepole pine, aspen, and Gambel oak. The presence of these species at the middle and lower elevations of the analysis area is reflective of disturbance in the form of fire. Natural and human caused wildfires have been a major factor in forming the forests we see today on the Sierra Madre. It is known that fires burned large portions of this range, playing an important role in the appearance of the landscape, and maintaining a mix of tree species in various successional stages.

Much of the existing aspen stands in the analysis area resulted from fires reportedly set by Native Americans in 1841. The fires were set following a battle between a group of mountain men and their Shoshone allies headed by Henry Fraeb and a party of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. It was this battle that gave the many local present day sites their name "Battle."

Stand origin dates, estimated from tree growth ring data, provide a map of where and approximately when stand replacing/regenerating fires occurred. In examining the fire history or stand origin data for the analysis area, as with much of the District, it appears that the majority of existing stands resulted from fires that burned the area between 1840 and 1910. Since the establishment of the Medicine Bow National Forest in 1902, fire appears to have been effectively controlled within the vicinity. The most recent wildfire to occur in the area was during the fall of 1999, when strong winds ahead of a cold front pushed a controlled burn on private land onto the National Forest, burning approximately 1,000 acres in the Lower Big Gulch area.

The control of fire since 1900 appears to have contributed to the noticeable conversion through natural succession of what were aspen stands to subalpine fir stands at the lower forested elevations. The RIS database indicates that approximately 66% of the existing aspen within the analysis area is mature to overmature (100+ years old). Only 4% of the existing aspen is considered to be young stands. Only 2% of the Gambel oak within area is considered to be young shrublands.

Forest Insects and Disease

Bark beetles are always present in the forest in low numbers. The various types of bark beetles that exist are specific to certain tree species. For example the mountain pine beetle is specific to the pine species such as lodgepole, ponderosa, and limber, while the similar spruce beetle is specific to the spruce species such as Engelmann and Blue. Under endemic conditions, the beetles cause periodic, very low amounts of single tree and small group mortality of what are typically the unhealthiest trees in the stand, providing important snag habitat to dependent wildlife. Endemic beetle populations are naturally regulated through cold winter temperatures and through predation by birds--such as woodpeckers, small mammals, and other insects.

Much like and possibly due to droughts, beetle epidemics are cyclic. When conditions are favorable, the beetle population increases to epidemic levels. Beetle epidemics were a part of the natural variation before settlement. A beetle epidemic is defined as the point in which annual tree loss is greater than annual tree growth, causing disturbances of normal relationships in the forest. Dense mature stands have little or no defense against these beetles, and are extremely susceptible when these insects reach epidemic levels. When beetle populations increase, even healthy trees are subject to infestation. Beetles often kill entire stands of trees during an epidemic.

Since 1998, aerial surveys conducted over this portion of the Medicine Bow-Routt by Forest Service entomologists have seen a marked increase in beetle activity and subsequent mortality within the area's three dominant conifer species—subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, and lodgepole pine. The most noticeable increase in tree mortality has been within area subalpine fir stands. Western balsam bark beetle, along with a root disease (armillaria), have caused scattered fir mortality at the lower forested elevations, with larger concentrations of fir mortality, some covering hundreds of acres, at the higher elevations in Huston Park Wilderness.

Beginning in 1999, the District has monitored spruce beetle trap-lines along the Battle Highway in the northern part of the area. Monitoring has found a marked increase in spruce beetles affecting the area's Engelmann spruce. Along with spruce beetles, there has also been a marked increase on mountain pine beetle affecting area lodgepole pine stands. Acknowledged in the Bark Beetle Evaluation of the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District submitted by the Lakewood Service Center in 2001, there is every indication that both spruce and pine beetle epidemics are beginning to take place in this portion of the Forest.

Past Vegetation Management

Because of the dominance of aspen, relatively very little commercial timber harvest has occurred within the AA. Most recent harvest activity has been along the Battle Highway corridor. During the 1960's much of the non-forested, sagebrush dominated areas in the western part of the AA were aerielly sprayed with the herbicide 2 4D to reduce the amount of shrubs and increase forage production. Other non-commercial vegetation treatments that have occurred in the area include a small amount of prescribed burning and cutting of aspen to promote new regeneration. The northern portion of the AA overlaps with the Battle Hazardous Fuels project area that was analyzed in 2002. Currently being implemented, the July 2002 Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice for this project covered 1,758 acres of prescribed burning and 2,742 acres of mechanical fuel treatments along Battle Creek and the Highway 70 corridor.

Water/Fisheries

The analysis area is composed of eight 6th level watersheds: Haggarty Creek, North Fork Encampment River (Upper portion), Upper Battle Creek, Lower Savery Creek, Lower Battle Creek, Little Snake River-Roaring Fork, North Fork Little Snake River, and Little Snake River-Fly Creek. Both native fish and introduced trout occur in the area's streams. Several amphibian species occur or have historical ranges in the area.

The North Fork, West Branch, and Roaring Fork of the Little Snake River contain important Colorado River cutthroat trout fisheries. Cooperative efforts with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to actively conserve populations of Colorado River cutthroat trout are on-going. These efforts have been focused on the removal of non-native trout from the North Fork Little Snake River and its tributaries so that native cutthroat may repopulate habitat in these streams, which comprise the single largest enclave of Colorado River cutthroat trout habitat within its historical native range. However, restoration outcomes are threatened by potential for invasion of relatively recently stocked rainbow trout from downstream stream segments. A recent river restoration project was completed for the Little Snake River on private, State, and Bureau of Land Management lands directly adjacent to the AA and National Forest.

Although stream water quality in the area is good overall, there are two stream reaches Haggarty Creek and West Fork of Battle Creek that are on the State of Wyoming 303(d) list of "Waterbodies with Water Quality Impairments" (WYDEQ, 2002). Both stream segments are listed as water quality impaired due to metals from the Ferris-Haggarty mine and possibly from background levels of metals in this highly mineralized area. On-going WYDEQ monitoring is focused on determining the extent of impairment and the level of natural metal concentrations.

Water resources have been developed for a variety of agricultural, recreational, and municipal uses. There are 3 private diversion ditches and the Cheyenne Stage I and II trans-basin diversion and transport structures. Hog Park Reservoir, Hog Park Creek, and the Encampment River receive water from Cheyenne Board of Public Utilities trans-basin diversions in the North Fork Little Snake River. Municipal water supply for Dixon and Baggs is obtained from the Little Snake River 20-30 miles downstream of the Forest. The North Fork of the Encampment River provides the principal source of municipal water supply for the Town of Encampment.

Wildlife

Wildlife species occurring in the project area are typical of those occurring in similar habitats throughout the Sierra Madre Range and the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests. Much of the analysis area is within the vegetation/elevation range preferred by northern goshawks. There are known Columbia sharp-tailed grouse leks in the western portion of the AA.

The elk herd on the western slope of the Sierra Madre is considered the second largest herd in Wyoming behind the Jackson Hole herd. The western portion of the area includes a major big game migration route to winter range areas in the Red Desert to the west. Extensive shrub/grass/aspen communities provide transition and winter range, as well as calving and fawning areas. The Lost Creek Bowl/Bridger Peak area is important elk summer range. The spruce-fir forest provides habitat for several late-successional forest wildlife species. There is potential bighorn sheep summer range in the Huston Park Wilderness Area from sheep in the Encampment River canyon. Some animals from this herd move westward to high elevation summer range in the Huston Park Wilderness Area. A portion of the AA is within the Battle Creek and Green Mountain Canada Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs).

Grazing

Livestock grazing has in the past and continues today to be a very important use of the AA. Beginning in the 1880's this portion of the Sierra Madre was extensively grazed by predominantly sheep. Prior to 1900 and the establishment of the Forest in 1902, hundreds of thousands of sheep used the area for summer grazing. One of the first major resource issues faced by early day Forest Rangers in this area was the establishment of grazing allotments and restoration of the range. Stock driveways were established across the Forest, such as the Savery-Fireline stock driveway, with counting corrals at the Forest Boundary. There are currently 14 grazing allotments within the analysis area. Primary range for these allotments is located within sagebrush meadows at the lower elevations and non-forested meadows, parks, and hillsides at the middle and upper elevations.

Recreation

The analysis area provides a variety of year-round recreational opportunities with most use occurring in the Fall during the big game hunting seasons. Viewing wildlife and scenery are popular day use activities, along with picnicking, hiking, and fishing in the streams and high elevation lakes. There are three small, developed campgrounds including: Lost Creek, Haskins Creek, and Battle Creek. Battle Creek Campground has been identified as being in need of a renovation project to upgrade the existing facilities. Dispersed camping in the area, particularly during the big game hunting seasons, takes place throughout the AA. Some dispersed campsites along Battle Creek are causing resource damage to the adjacent riparian area. All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) use on existing travel ways is high. Both motorized and non-motorized segments of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail pass through the eastern portion of this area. The area north of Highway 70 near Bridger Peak along the Continental Divide is one of the most popular snowmobile play area of the Sierra Madres.

Wildland-Urban Interface

The Cottonwood Rim AA is unique in that many of the old mining claims in the area were patented and became private land surrounded by National Forest. Much of the 10,357 acres of private land within the analysis area is undeveloped. Exceptions are the private land and structures along the Battle Highway corridor in the northern portion of the AA and several ranches that are located mostly in the southernmost portion of the AA. It is anticipated that the variety of recreation opportunities, along with the scenery, and improved access will continue to encourage further second home/cabin and business development in the area.

Roads

The main access to the area is on the Battle Highway (State Hwy 70), which passes roughly east to west across the northern portion of the AA. Other major roads off the Battle Highway accessing the area include National Forest System Roads (NFSRs) 807 Battle Creek Road, 851 Roaring Fork Road, 879 Big Gulch Road, and 850 Savery Stock Driveway.

The District database currently identifies an estimated 176 miles of open and closed roads in the Cottonwood Rim Analysis Area. The Sierra Madre Roads Analysis revealed that there are a number of roads within the project area requiring maintenance and/or repairs to reduce soil erosion and sediment entering area creeks. In addition, high open road density could potentially be degrading wildlife security areas and habitat. The popularity of ATV use in the vicinity has led to the creation of a number of user created trails throughout the area—including ones that have encroached into Huston Park Wilderness.

DESIRED CONDITION

The 2003 Medicine Bow National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) guides natural resource management activities and provides an overall strategy for managing the Medicine Bow National Forest. The Forest Plan includes specific direction on how to manage different land areas, or management areas. Based on the desired condition of the overall Forest, desired condition statements for individual Management Areas and Geographic Areas on the Forest have been developed.

A desired condition is developed, based on what exists now, knowledge of how it got that way, what is ecologically possible, what is economically feasible, and what is socially desirable. A description of a desired future condition provides the management goals for an area. Goals for each resource are based on the general desired condition discussed in the Forest Plan (pp. 1-13 through 1-24).

Direction in the Forest Plan is identified at several levels including:

- **Forest-wide level Management Direction** (Desired Conditions, Goals & Objectives, Standards & Guidelines)
- **Management Area Direction** (Management Area Desired Conditions, Standards & Guidelines)
- **Geographic Area Direction** (Desired Condition, Standards & Guidelines)
- **Project Level Direction** (Project Decision Documents)

Forest-wide level Management Direction:

Forest Plan direction is implemented with the most site-specific direction superceding the more general direction. The Forest Plan contains the following direction that is pertinent to this analysis and to the activities identified for the analysis area:

Cottonwood Rim Fuels Project

- Where feasible and appropriate, use prescribed fire throughout the landscape, including in wilderness areas, special interest areas, research natural areas, and inventoried roadless areas to accomplish resource management goals and objectives. (*Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-49*)
- Reduce the threat of wildfire to public and private developments by following guidelines in the National Fire Protection Association Publication 299, Protection of Life and Property from Wildfire, and reduce the fuel load to acceptable levels. (*Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-49*)
- Manage for fire conditions and fire fighting strategies in Wild Land Urban Interface areas with a high level of coordination with cooperating agencies and governments. Place high priority on fuel reduction and treatment activities in fire regimes I, II and III, and condition class 2 and 3 (shrublands, lower elevation mixed conifer, lodgepole pine and aspen). Additional high priorities include municipal watersheds. (*Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-49*)

Little Snake River Restoration Project

- Conduct actions so that stream patterns, geometry, and habitats are maintained, or improved toward robust stream health. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-29*)

North Fork Little Snake River Fish Barrier Project

- Install fish migration barriers only if needed to protect endangered, threatened, sensitive or unique native aquatic populations and only where natural barriers do not exist. (*Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-30 #2*)

Battle Creek Campground Renovation Project

- Manage vegetation in high-use recreation areas to provide for public safety, to improve forest health, and to maintain or improve the desired recreation setting(s). (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-49*)
- Provide a range of universally accepted opportunities, within the limits of the site characteristics, at all new or reconstructed developed recreation sites. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-52*)
- On sites where dispersed recreation activities have resulted in accelerated erosion or loss of riparian/wetland function, mitigate the impacts by redirecting the use, rehabilitating or hardening the site to minimize erosion and off-site movement of soil. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-52*)
- Close or rehabilitate dispersed sites or otherwise mitigate impacts when unacceptable environmental damage is occurring. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-53*)
- Close, harden, restore, or relocate dispersed recreation sites within 100 feet of lakes and streams where unacceptable resource impacts are occurring. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-53*)

- Discourage dispersed camping within ¼ mile of developed campgrounds. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-54*)

Cottonwood Rim Travel Management Proposal

- Provide a wide range of recreation opportunities and difficulty levels, both motorized and non-motorized, with the trail system. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-60*)
- Decommission unneeded travelways to achieve resource objectives or where resource damage cannot be mitigated. (*Forest-wide Standard, p. 1-61*)

Geographic Area Direction:

Analyses at the geographic area level provide a framework for short and long-term projects, for monitoring the effectiveness of Forest-wide goals and management area standards and guidelines, and for achieving Forest-wide goals and objectives.

A geographic area (GA) is a watershed or aggregation of watersheds, 125,000 acres or smaller, in which management is directed toward achieving a specified desired condition. Geographic areas link the Forest Plan to management at a landscape or watershed scale. Application of management area prescriptions and associated standards and guidelines will move specific portions of each geographic area towards the desired condition (LRMP p. 3-1). The AA includes portions of six (6) Geographic Areas in the Sierra Madre Range:

Table 1. Geographic Area acres within the Analysis Area

Geographic Area (GA)	Total GA Acres	Analysis Area Acres*
South Savery	76,479	45,594
Upper Little Snake River	43,286	30,683
Battle Creek	26,458	26,436
Encampment River	77,538	3,405
North Savery	30,390	18
Northeast Sierra Madre	61,568	16
TOTAL	315,719	106,152

* Includes non-federal lands

The Forest Plan contains the following geographic area direction that is pertinent to this analysis:

Desired conditions pertinent to the South Savery Geographic Area (Chapter 3, pp. 3-47 to 3-49) include:

- Aspen will continue to be the dominant cover type; its current distribution will generally be maintained or increased.
- Backcountry nonmotorized year round recreation opportunities will occur on 3% of the area. Dispersed motorized recreation opportunities will dominate the area although season restrictions will occur on 14% of the area in big game winter range.
- Good quality big game winter range will continue to dominate the western slopes of this area. Shrubland vegetation in this area will include a mix of seral stages.

Geographic area Objectives include:

- Develop a managed cross-country ski trail system and develop parking infrastructure for winter recreation at the west side State Highway 70 winter road closure location.
- Maintain and enhance fire-dependent species such as aspen, ponderosa pine, Gambel oak, serviceberry, and Douglas-fir and unique riparian species, including narrowleaf cottonwood and blue spruce.

Desired conditions pertinent to the Upper Little Snake River Geographic Area (Chapter 3, pp. 3-50 to 3-52) include:

- Spruce/fir and aspen will continue to be dominant cover types.
- Dispersed motorized recreation opportunities will occur in the southern portion of the area. The Huston Park Wilderness area and recommended additions will provide semi-primitive nonmotorized recreation opportunities on 43% of the area.
- Key Colorado River cutthroat trout habitat will be maintained or enhanced.

Geographic area Objectives include:

- Maintain and enhance fire-dependent species such as aspen and Gambel oak.
- Maintain or enhance Colorado River cutthroat trout habitat.

Desired conditions pertinent to the Battle Creek Geographic Area (Chapter 3, pp. 3-30 to 3-31) include:

- Aspen in the western portion of the area will be maintained within historic ranges.
- Recreation opportunities will primarily be backcountry motorized north of the Battle Highway. Nonmotorized year-round opportunities are provided in the Huston Park Wilderness to the south. Access to private inholdings is maintained.

Management Area Direction:

Management emphasis within the analysis area and larger geographic areas is distributed among several Forest Plan management area prescriptions (see table below). Application of management area prescriptions and associated standards and guidelines will move specific portions of each geographic area towards the desired condition (LRMP p. 3-1). The descriptions of each management area prescription include: theme, setting, desired condition, and standards and guidelines. This information can be found in the Forest Plan Chapter 2, pp. 2-1 through 2-80.

Table 2. Management Area Distribution within the Analysis Area

#	Management Area Prescription	Acres in AA
1.13	Wilderness, Semi-primitive	19,076
1.2	Recommended for Wilderness	6,044
1.33	Backcountry Recreation, Summer Nonmotorized with Winter Snowmobiling	1,488
2.2	Research Natural Areas	1,204
3.31	Backcountry Recreation, Year-round Motorized	10,007
3.5	Forested Flora or Fauna Habitats, Limited Snowmobiling	8,645
3.56	Aspen Maintenance & Enhancement	26,154
3.58	Crucial Deer & Elk Winter Range	7,417
4.2	Scenery	4,582
5.12	General Forest & Rangelands, Rangeland Vegetation Emphasis	6,663
5.13	Forest Products	76
8.21	Developed Recreation	140
8.3	Utility Corridor	8.36 miles
	TOTAL	91,496

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

As set forth in law, the mission of the Forest Service is to achieve quality land management under the sustainable multiple use management concept to meet the diverse needs of people. The Forest Service has responsibility for implementing the Forest Plan by completing analysis and evaluation of site-specific projects. The Forest Plan guides natural resource management activities and provides the Forest Service, forest users, and the public with an overall strategy for managing the Forest. The intent of these plans is to manage National Forest System lands for multiple-use and not for any single purpose.

Based on Forest Plan direction, National Fire Plan emphasis, the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Forest-wide Travel Management Environmental Analysis, the Sierra Madre Roads Analysis Report, and the analysis area's current existing condition versus the desired condition, the Forest Service has identified the following resource needs or Proposed Actions for the Analysis Area:

1) Maintain & Promote Fire-dependent Plant Communities/Reduce Wildfire Hazard

The RIS database indicates that approximately 66% of the existing aspen within the analysis area is mature to overmature (100+ years old). Only 4% of the existing aspen is considered to be young stands. Though Gambel oak dominates less than 1% of what is considered forested, a closer look at the database information shows that approximately 3,900 acres of the 6,500 acres classified as non-forested mountain shrubland is dominated by or has Gambel oak as a major component. Of this amount, only approximately 66 acres or 2% of the Gambel oak is considered to be young shrublands.

The Forest Plan designates over 26,000 acres in the analysis area as Management Area 3.56 (Aspen Maintenance and Enhancement). These areas are managed to develop a range of successional stages of aspen from seedlings to mature and old growth stands. The desired condition is: Aspen, and other hardwoods and shrubs will be managed to produce healthy stands at various successional stages; maintaining or increasing aspen clones will be emphasized; fire will influence landscape vegetation patterns according to site-specific objectives, including aspen regeneration and wildlife benefit. Because of past fire management, or lack of natural fire occurrences in the area, many of the aspen and Gambel oak stands have become decadent and/or encroached by conifer and contain a heavy build-up of fuels. Without treatment aspen will continue to decline and be replaced by conifers.

The Forest Plan designates an additional 8,600 acres in the analysis area as Management Area 3.5 (Forested Flora and Fauna Habitats). These areas are to be managed to provide adequate amounts of forage, cover, escape terrain, solitude, breeding habitat, and protection for a wide variety of wildlife species and plant communities. Because much of the habitat has reached the late successional stage, it does not provide quality forage.

- *There is a need to treat area vegetation in the Cottonwood Rim area to maintain and promote aspen and associated fire-dependent plant communities, along with reducing the wildfire hazard to adjacent private lands.*
- *There is a need to maintain and/or improve forage for big game wildlife and livestock.*

Cottonwood Rim Fuels Management Proposed Action

The purpose of the fuels and vegetation management proposal is to maintain and promote fire-dependent plant communities such as aspen and Gambel oak, reduce the wildfire hazard to private land in the vicinity, and improve forage for big game wildlife and livestock.

Situated almost entirely within the 3.56 Aspen Maintenance and Enhancement Management Area, under this proposal prescribed fire and mechanical treatments would be used to treat forested and non-forested National Forest System lands in the Cottonwood Rim area to reduce natural fuel build-up, improve plant vigor, improve shrublands, and regenerate Gambel oak and new aspen stands in areas where conifers have encroached. Consideration will be given to using a commercial timber sale and/or a stewardship service contract to mechanically treat one of the units (M1) that is accessible off the existing road system. Plans are to broadcast burn the slash in this unit following the mechanical treatments to further encourage new aspen regeneration.

Two of the units (B1 & B2) identified for treatment under this proposal are predominantly aspen, with areas of conifer encroachment. Plans are to broadcast burn these units during late summer or fall to create a mosaic of new aspen regeneration and age classes along with Gambel oak in areas where present.

Lastly, one non-forested area of shrublands, composed primarily of sagebrush, serviceberry, some oak brush and stringers of aspen, has also been identified for treatment. Plans are to broadcast burn this unit (B3) during the Spring to create a mosaic of shrub, forbs, and grass age classes, to improve forage for big game and livestock, and to encourage new aspen and shrub regeneration in areas where present.

It is anticipated that only a minimal amount of fire line will be required for this proposal using area two-track roads and natural barriers, such as ridges and rock outcrops serving as the primary firebreaks for the burn. (See Table 3, Table 4, & Figure 2)

Description of Hazardous Fuels/Vegetation Prescriptions:

Prescribed Burn – The primary goal of the burn will be to target conifer encroached aspen stands within the primary burn units, thereby creating a mosaic of burned vs. unburned. After burning, the conifer will be replaced by re-sprouting aspen, which will create a more “fire-safe” stand. Without the presence of conifer, future wildfire behavior will be limited to the surface, whereas in a conifer stand, a wildfire has the potential to transition into the canopy and limit fire suppression efforts. Three separate burn units have been identified. Implementation of the burn may take place as early as fall 2005, or later, and will be dependent on a suitable prescription window (i.e., weather and fuel conditions). Burning will be carried out under the guidance of an approved Burn Plan and will meet the State DEQ guidelines for smoke dispersal.

Secondary Burn Area/MMA (Maximum Manageable Area):

A secondary burn area (referred to as an MMA) has been identified for each of the primary burn units. MMAs are situated adjacent to the primary burn units and are areas where the prescribed burn will be allowed to enter. No ignition operations are planned within any MMA. However, fire entering the MMA will be allowed to burn until suppressed by a season ending weather event (i.e., snow or heavy rain). Suppression action will only be taken if fire behavior indicates the potential for fire to leave the MMA. Areas within the MMA that have a high probability to burn have been identified, allowing specialists to analyze potential resource effects. The MMAs cover large areas, however, the areas with the highest probability to burn within any MMA are much smaller. See Table 3 for potential MMA acres and the number of acres with a high probability of being burned.

Mechanical Treatment/Clearcut & Sanitation/Salvage- Proposed for one area, mechanical treatments in the form of commercial timber harvest would be used to remove merchantable trees from conifer-encroached aspen stands. Best described as a combination of clearcut and sanitation/salvage treatments, following timber harvest the resulting slash would be broadcast burned. The burning will reduce fuel quantity and stimulate aspen regeneration and sprouting. This timber sale is currently scheduled to occur in 2007.

Table 3. Prescribed Burn Treatment

Treatment Unit	Primary Burn Acres	MMA Acres	MMA acres with a high probability to burn
B1	1,632.0	12,948.7	952.12
B2	2,677.8	6,512.7	1,391.62
B3	626.1	180.8	13.77
B1 & B2*		*10,092.8	
TOTAL	4,935.9	29,735.0	2,357.51

* MMA acres that are located in both units (B1 & B2) and should not be counted twice.

Table 4. Mechanical Treatment

Treatment Unit	Mechanical Treatment Acres	Primary Burn Acres	MMA acres with a high probability to burn
M1	Clearcut 150 Sanitation/Salvage 50	713	0
TOTAL	200	713	0

See Figure 2. Proposed Action.

Table 5. Cottonwood Rim Fuels Management Proposed Action

#	Management Area (MA) Prescription	Acres in AA	Treatment Acres (Primary burn acres)	Secondary Burn Acres	Secondary burn acres with a high probability to burn
1.13	Wilderness, Semi-primitive	19,076		13,885	520
1.2	Recommended for Wilderness	6,044	920	4,507	574
1.33	Backcountry Recreation, Summer Nonmotorized with Winter Snowmobiling	1,488		2	0
2.2	Research Natural Areas	1,204		0	0
3.31	Backcountry Recreation, Year-round Motorized	10,007		0	0
3.5	Forested Flora or Fauna Habitats, Limited Snowmobiling	8,645	200	2,673	28
3.56	Aspen Maintenance & Enhancement	26,154	713* 3,805	7,372	1,236
3.58	Crucial Deer & Elk Winter Range	7,417		0	0
4.2	Scenery	4,582		1,273	0
5.12	General Forest & Rangelands, Rangeland Vegetation Emphasis	6,663		0	0
5.13	Forest Products	76		0	0
8.21	Developed Recreation	140	7	23	0
8.3	Utility Corridor	8.4 miles		5.67 miles	0
	TOTAL	91,496	5,649	29,735	2,358

*Mechanical treatment acres

2) Watershed Improvement

A recent river restoration project was completed for the Little Snake River on private, State, and Bureau of Land Management lands. Analysis of the National Forest System (NFS) portion of the river will evaluate a similar river restoration project on NFS lands.

The Little Snake River contains important Colorado River cutthroat trout fisheries. Cooperative efforts with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to actively conserve populations of Colorado River cutthroat trout are on-going. These efforts have been focused on the removal of non-native trout from the North Fork Little Snake River and its tributaries so that native cutthroat may repopulate habitat in these streams, which comprise the single largest enclave of Colorado River cutthroat trout habitat within its historical native range. However, restoration outcomes are threatened by potential for invasion of relatively recently stocked rainbow trout from downstream stream segments. Until recently cutthroat habitat was protected from smaller non-native trout by a natural waterfall that these fish were not large enough to surmount, but larger fish are now able to pass the waterfall. Preliminary discussion of additional barrier construction is ongoing between Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and Forest Service fisheries biologists and is included in scoping for this analysis area.

- *There is a need to maintain or enhance Colorado River cutthroat trout and aquatic habitat in area.*
- *There is a need to maintain or enhance Colorado River cutthroat trout populations and habitats in the area; an effective fish barrier is needed to meet this need.*

Little Snake River Restoration Proposed Action

The purpose of the watershed improvement proposal is to reduce streambank erosion, improve the stream width/depth ratio, and restore aquatic habitat along a 1.0-mile reach of the Little Snake River.

Typical restoration techniques would involve construction of instream structures intended to reduce bank erosion and restore the channel to a more natural shape (narrower and deeper). Structures would likely be made out of rock with the use of an excavator working within the stream channel. Relocation of the stream channel outside of existing highwater mark is possible, but unlikely. Access to site for stockpiling of material could involve the use of dump trucks. Access to the site will be field verified this spring. This project may include fencing to exclude livestock for several years while the disturbed streambanks revegetate. A water gap or other water facility could be installed if necessary.

North Fork Little Snake River Fish Barrier Proposed Action

The purpose of the North Fork Little Snake River Fish Barrier project is to create an effective barrier to movement of non-native salmonids from the lower mainstem North Fork and Little Snake Rivers into the upper mainstem and tributaries.

Additional collaboration between state and federal fisheries biologists would continue, with the goal to identify the most likely successful location for a man-made barrier to non-native trout movement. Typical barrier construction resembles a small dam that creates a large vertical drop with no jump pool at the base. This keeps fish from being able to migrate upstream under low to high flow conditions. Other barrier designs include flume-like velocity barriers through which stream flow is too fast to allow fish to swim upstream against it. Barriers may be constructed of wood, stone, wire-mesh gabions filled with cobble, or concrete. Motorized access is usually required to bring materials and equipment to the barrier site. Temporary mitigation measures are commonly implemented to control erosion and sedimentation during barrier construction.

See Figure 2 for location of these two proposals.

3) Campground Renovation

The purpose of the Battle Creek Campground Renovation project is to improve and upgrade the existing campground facilities, along with addressing resource damage that is occurring in adjacent dispersed campsites along Battle Creek.

- *There is a need to upgrade the existing developed campground and address resource damage, riparian degradation, and human waste issues within dispersed campsites along Battle Creek.*

Battle Creek Campground Renovation Proposed Action

Under this proposal the existing 4 campsites within Battle Creek Campground would be renovated to improve access, site designation, and existing facilities. Dispersed campsites along Battle Creek directly west of the campground would be rehabilitated to alleviate current resource damage by a variety of methods including improving the access and hardening the surfaces of existing campsites, placement of physical barriers to prevent riparian damage by motorized vehicles, and/or the physical closure of the most degraded campsites. Consideration would be given to incorporating the existing dispersed campsites in with the campground and making the entire site a more viable fee area. Under this scenario, dispersed campsites would also be upgraded with picnic tables and fire grates. An expanded fee area would also require that wells for potable waters and outhouses would be installed, along with the placement of trash cans in strategic locations adjacent to the dispersed sites. See Figure 2 for location of this proposal.

4) Travel Management

Phase 2 of the Forest-wide Travel Management Decision (October 2000) requires completion of site-specific travel management analyses to decide the future status of the Forest Transportation System.

The purpose of the travel management proposal is to determine whether or not unplanned and unmanaged user-created roads and trails will be added to the Forest Transportation System, whether or not additional motorized opportunities should be developed, or if existing Forest Transportation System routes should be opened or closed. A special emphasis will be placed on identifying trail opportunities for ATVs in the area.

To identify roads to be decommissioned, the interdisciplinary team reviewed the entire road system in the study area. The Sierra Madre Roads Analysis found that there are a number of roads within the analysis area requiring maintenance and/or repairs to reduce soil erosion and sediment entering area creeks. In addition, high open road density could potentially be degrading wildlife security areas and habitat. Closing or decommissioning routes that have the potential, through continued use, to create resource damage will contribute to improved ecosystem and watershed health.

Implementation of this proposal will help to reduce soil erosion and sediment entering area creeks. Over 8,000 acres in the AA have been designated crucial deer and elk winter range. Forest Plan guidelines for this management area are to close roads, as needed, to prevent disturbance during the winter and during fawning/calving periods. Big game will also benefit from increased forage on closed roadbeds, increased travel distance without crossing an open road, and increased number of security areas where animals can get away from potential traffic stress.

- *There is a need to improve the area's wildlife habitat capability and minimize human-caused soil erosion within the area.*
- *There is a need to identify a manageable future transportation system within area that provides adequate area access for both recreational and management activities while minimizing resource damage and/or degradation.*

Travel Management Proposed Action

This proposal would complete "Phase 2" travel management analysis in this project area, as described in the Forest-wide Travel Management Decision (October 2000). The district database currently identifies an estimated 176 miles of road in the analysis area, with 3 miles of that amount already closed and the remainder being open. Under the current proposal, approximately 61 miles of road would be considered for closure (see Figure 3), removing them from the Forest Service road system. Most proposed decommissioned segments and closures are short spurs or have parallel roads (that will remain open) within one mile.

Road decommissioning results in the deactivation of a road currently on the National Forest road system. There are roads no longer needed for permanent access as the result of evolving Forest land management allocations and current access needs. Decommissioning includes treatments that range from blocking or signing the entrance, scattering limbs and rocks on the roadbed, revegetation, water barring, removing road fills, reestablishing drainage-ways, and pulling back unstable shoulders--to full obliteration by recontouring slopes. On certain roads, existing culverts will be removed.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The following potential issues and concerns were identified through internal scoping:

- Impacts of proposal on Colorado cutthroat populations and viability in area.
- Effects of fuel treatments and road decommissioning proposals on big game hunting and fall recreational use in area.
- Effects of fuel treatments and road decommissioning proposals on area livestock allotments and permittees.

Based on your comments, these issues will be refined, expanded, and new ones identified as needed. Major issues will be identified, and alternatives to the proposed action(s) will be developed to respond to the major issues.

ANALYSIS SCHEDULE

The interdisciplinary team will prepare an environmental analysis (EA), to disclose a more detailed description of the proposed actions, as well as alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose. The EA will summarize the potential changes to the environment due to implementation of the alternatives. The Responsible Official will consider the environmental effects of implementing the proposed actions, as well as the No Action alternative and any other alternatives described in the EA, and determine whether or not the proposed actions will take place. Both the EA and the decision documents will be posted on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest website.

If a decision is made to implement these projects, it is anticipated that potential fuels treatments could begin as early as the fall of 2006, while the road decommissioning and watershed improvement projects may begin sooner. The Brush Creek/Hayden District Ranger will be the Responsible Official for these proposals.

There may be additional opportunities for fuels reduction treatments and aspen enhancement projects in the analysis area that will not be treated under the current proposal. Any such future proposal would require additional environmental analysis, appropriate documentation and public input/involvement.

To ensure consideration in this process, comments on the proposed actions to be analyzed and documented in an Environmental Analysis must be submitted within 30 days following the date of publication of the legal notice in the *Rawlins Daily Times*.

Please address your comments to Terry DeLay, ID Team Leader, USDA Forest Service, PO Box 249, Saratoga WY 82331. Those commenting should include (1) name and address, (2) title of the proposed action, and (3) specific facts and supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider. E-mail: comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt-brush-creek-hayden@fs.fed.us. (Acceptable format for electronic comments: rtf, pdf, word)

Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must provide the following:

- (i) Name and address;
- (ii) Title of the proposed action;
- (iii) Specific substantive comments (§215.2) on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision;
- (iv) Signature or other verification of identity upon request;
- (v) Individual members of an organization must submit their own substantive comments to meet the requirements of appeal eligibility; comments received on behalf of an organization are considered as those of the organization only;
- (vi) Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone or in person.

Figure 1. Vicinity Map

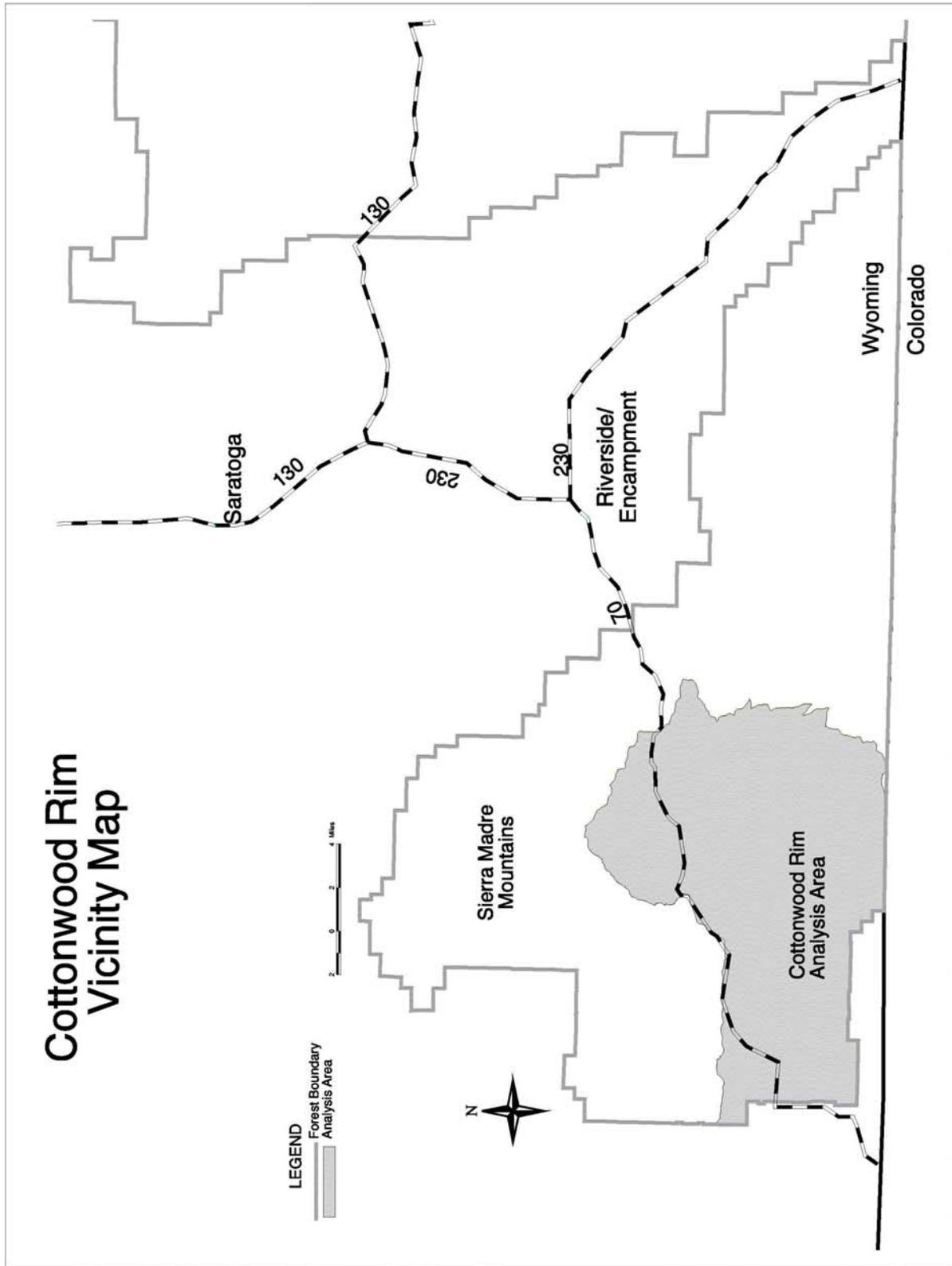


Figure 2. Proposed Action

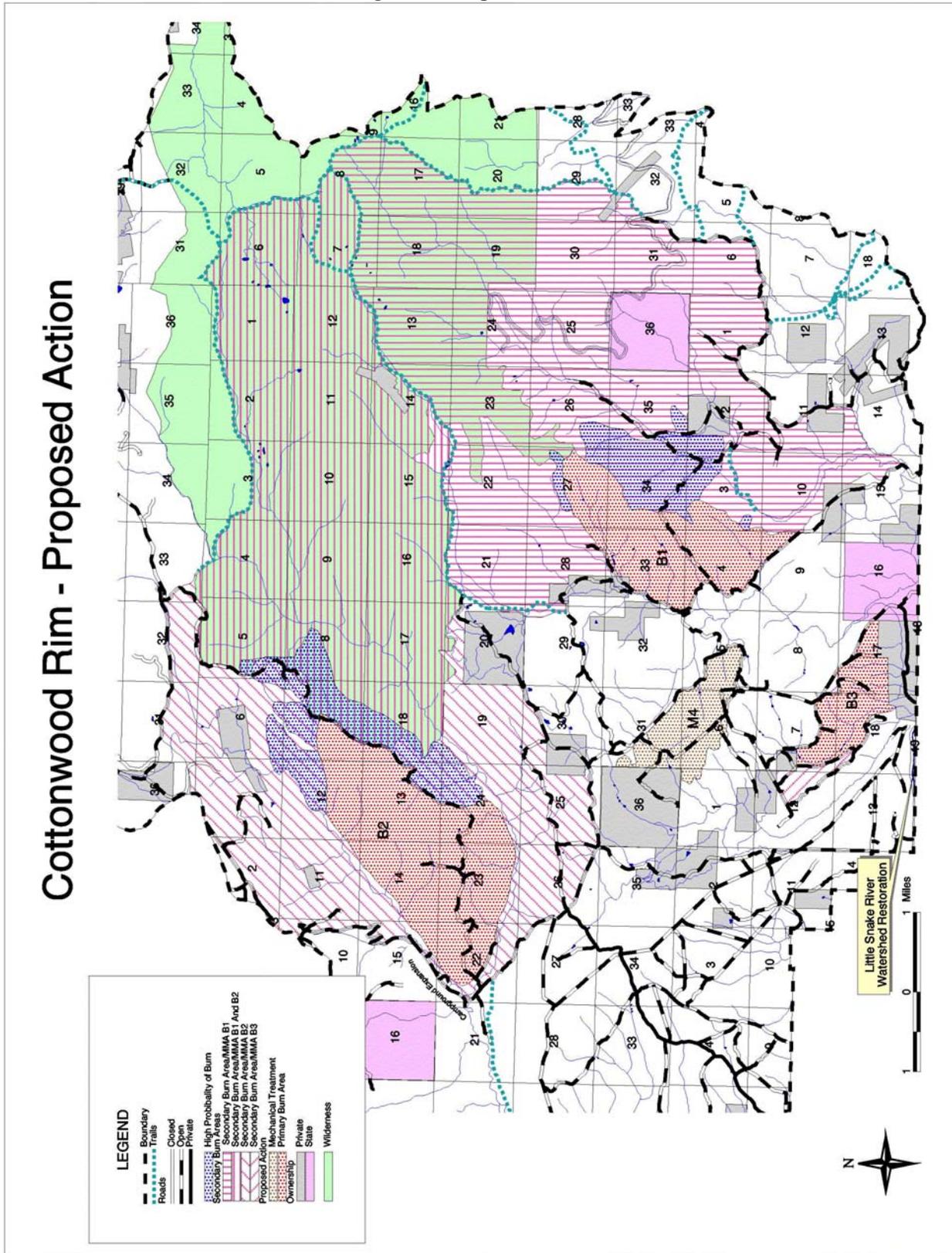


Figure 3. Proposed Travel Management

