Chapter 1.0 Purpose of And Need for Action

1.1 Introduction

This environmental assessment (EA) describes the environmental effects of the Bald Ridge and Dead Indian project proposals, as well as alternatives to them, to reduce fuels on the Clarks Fork Ranger District, Shoshone National Forest (SNF). It provides the site-specific resource analysis necessary for the responsible official to make an informed decision for managing the project area. The direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the alternatives are displayed.

Both fuels reduction projects are located in northwest Wyoming approximately 25 miles northwest of Cody, Wyoming in Park County (*see* Figure 1). Ownership is entirely National Forest System lands. None of the lands within the project area are within inventoried roadless lands.

One of the primary objectives of both proposals is to lower the potential for a large, catastrophic fire by reducing the build-up of fuels which are accumulating from the lack of periodic fire. Visual enhancement along a scenic byway is another objective for the Bald Ridge project.

1.2 Proposed Action

The Shoshone National Forest is proposing two fuel reduction projects to help protect public health/safety and enhance resource conditions by reducing the effects of fire exclusion. The build-up of fuels is above average due to decades of fire suppression efforts.

The proposals involve the use of prescribed fire (management ignition) to reduce fuel accumulations and to protect property and investments. No road construction is being proposed.

Bald Ridge. The Bald Ridge project's proposed action is to reduce the build-up of fuels by removing considerable dead and dying limber pine trees through fuelwood sales and prescribed burning. Hand crews and engines would be used to implement the prescribed burn.

Dead Indian. The Dead Indian project's proposed action is to provide a fuel break between the North Absaroka Wilderness and areas outside the wilderness to allow fire to play its natural ecological role in the wilderness. Hand crews and engines would be used on five of the six burn units. For safety reasons, one unit within the wilderness would be ignited with a helicopter.

1.3 Purpose and Need for the Proposal

This EA is tiered to the 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for National Forest Management Act (NFMA) consistency and the Shoshone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. All management prescriptions for resource protection shall be consistent with the relative resource values involved, minimize serious or long-lasting hazards from flood, wind, wildfire, erosion, or other natural physical forces unless these are specifically excepted, as in wilderness (36 CFR 219.27).

The overall intent of the Bald Ridge and Dead Indian projects is to move from the existing conditions to the desired future conditions in conformance with the goals described in the Shoshone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, pages III-6 through III-10. They include:

- Manage designated wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964 to protect and perpetuate essentially natural biophysical conditions and to provide for wilderness recreation opportunities
- Reduce the accumulation of natural fuels
- Provide cost effective fire protection to minimize the combined costs of protection and damages, and prevent loss of human life
- Manage activities along travel routes to maintain and enhance recreation and scenic values

The project proposals are designed to comply with Forest Plan Management Area Direction, including all contained under these management prescriptions:

- 3A Semi primitive Non-motorized Recreation
- 4A Visual Resource Management
- 7E Wood Fiber Production
- 8B Primitive Wilderness
- 9A Riparian Areas

The 2000 wildfire season, in which over seven million acres burned nationally, has helped bring many to the realization that years of fire suppression and other management practices have resulted in an increased risk of high-intensity fires to burn areas throughout the Rocky Mountain West. Wildland-urban interface areas where there are fire prone areas that are in proximity to private lands and dwellings are a primary concern.

The timing of this project is appropriate. The next severe fire year or extreme burning conditions can not be predicted so there is no way of knowing when a catastrophic fire might occur within this portion of the Shoshone National Forest. Recent dry years, with a current potential drought in progress, and an extreme fire season in 2000, point to a high degree of concern relative to the risk of high-intensity burns in the identified project areas. Forest-wide standards and guidelines for other resources as applicable

Bald Ridge/ Dead Indian Fuels Reduction Project

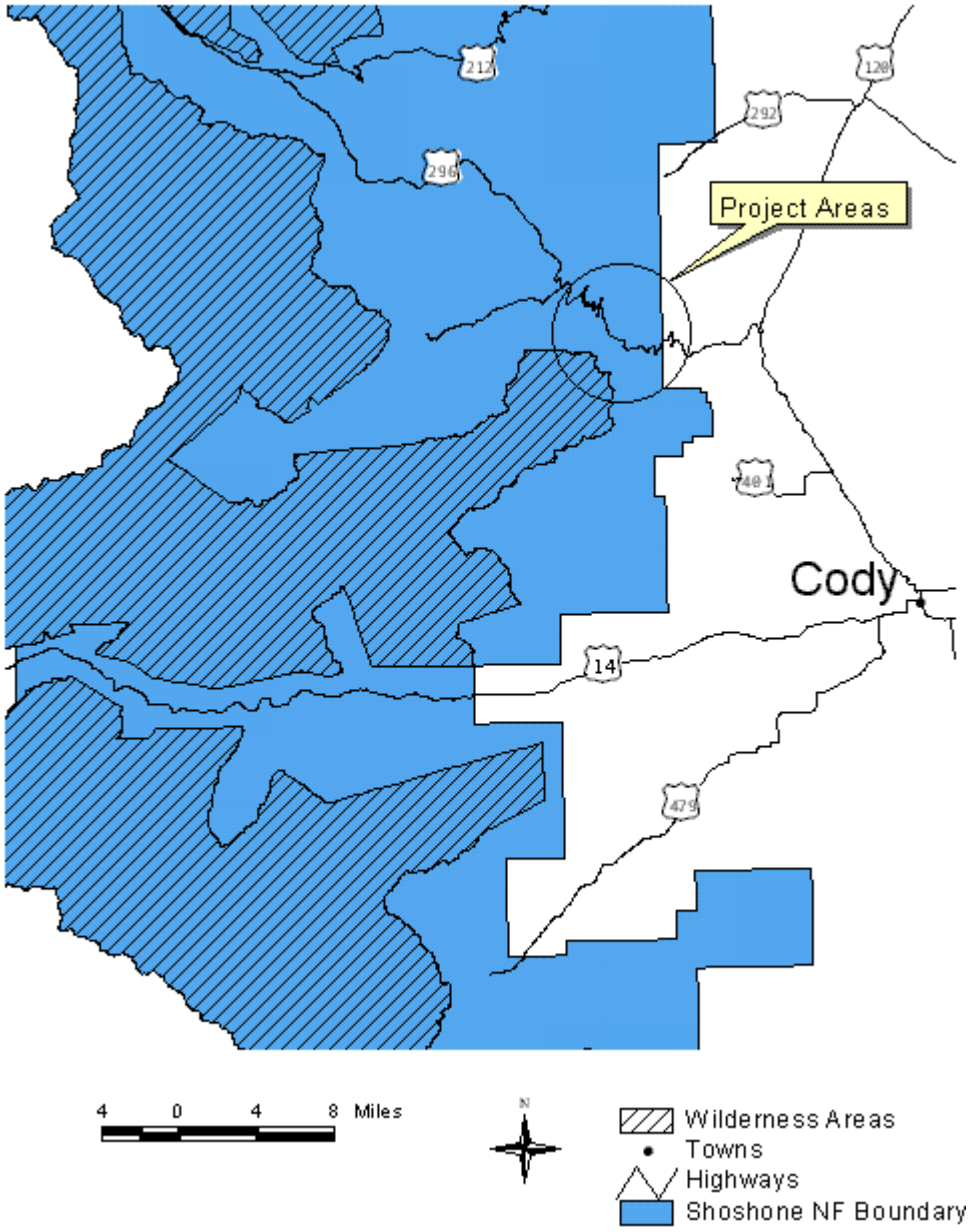

Figure 1-Project Vicinity Map

Once all planning and NEPA steps are completed, firewood sales associated with the Bald Ridge

project would occur during the summer (July/August) and burning would occur in the fall (September/October) of 2001 in accordance with the prescribed burn plan. The earliest any burning would occur on the Dead Indian project is the fall of 2001. It may take from three to five years to implement all the proposed treatments.

Bald Ridge Project. The Bald Ridge fuel reduction project includes these actions: 1) cutting and removing about 60% of the dead/dying limber pine through a commercial firewood or a public firewood sale, and 2) the use of prescribed fire in designated burn units. The project involves 210 acres in six treatment units.

Goals of the Bald Ridge project are: 1) to reduce future fuel accumulations that may contribute to a wildfire threatening public health and safety by burning adjacent private property and resources, and 2) to enhance the visual quality along the Highway 296 corridor.

The Bald Ridge project is on the east side of Dead Indian Pass in proximity to the Chief Joseph Scenic Highway (Highway 296). The project area is near the Dry Fork of Paint Creek, located in Township 55 North, Range 104 West, Sections 25, 26, and 27. No wilderness or roadless areas are involved with the Bald Ridge project.

In the Bald Ridge project area, since the early 1990s, disease has killed large areas of limber pine along the highway, contributing to fuel accumulations. No whitebark pine is located within the Bald Ridge project. The current visual condition of the area is declining due to the expansive area of dead and dying trees. A natural or human-caused fire starting in these heavy down fuels would be difficult to control, threatening improvements along the eastside of Dead Indian Pass. The Northwest Wyoming Community College field station, air quality and visibility monitoring station, private property, houses, cabins, fences, and power lines all exist adjacent to the proposed project area.

Dead Indian Project. The Dead Indian fuels reduction project includes these actions: 1) prescribed burning approximately 2,100 acres within the Dead Indian and Dry Fork Paint Creek areas. A portion (two units, approximately 675 acres) of this project would occur within the North Absaroka Wilderness.

Goals of the Dead Indian project are: 1) to create a fuel break along the boundary of the North Absaroka Wilderness, and 2) to allow fire to play its natural ecological role within the wilderness and to reduce the risk of a large, uncharacteristically intense fire burning out of the wilderness onto private property and threatening other resources.

The project is within the Dead Indian and Dry Fork Paint Creek areas located in Township 54 North, Range 104 West, Sections 2, 3 and 4, and Township 55 North, Range 104 West, Sections 19, 20, 21 and 28-35. In the Dead Indian project area, accumulations of fuel and fuel continuity are a concern. This condition of continuous fuels and lack of well-defined topographic breaks along the wilderness boundary contribute to the risk of an unwanted wildland fire escaping the wilderness. It also reduces the ability to allow natural ignitions (i.e. lightning) to burn as a wildland fire for wilderness resource benefits.

Reducing the amount and arrangement of the fuels within the project area through prescribed

burning could allow future lightning caused fires to play a more natural role within the wilderness since the risk of wildland fire escaping the wilderness is reduced. Reduction of excessive fuels will allow the return to more historical ecological conditions.

Past fire history on the SNF has shown that most large fires burn in a northeast direction, pushed by southwest general wind patterns. The Dead Indian Creek area is oriented in the same general direction as the general wind flow, which would contribute to any fire burning to the northeast out of the wilderness. Sunlight Basin and considerable private land and structures are located north, northwest, and northeast of the project area.

1.4 Other Environmental Documents, Decisions, Plans

The projects would comply with guidance from the National Fire Plan (reference 163). All prescribed burning would be conducted under a prescribed burn plan that would specify conditions under which the burn can safely occur. Burning would take place both in the spring and fall and would be scheduled to minimally impact other uses of the areas (i.e., hunting, traffic on the highway, etc.) to the extent possible.

Forest Service policy and procedures for use of a helicopter to aerially ignite one burn unit in the wilderness would be followed. This would include completing a minimum tool analysis and seeking Regional Forester approval.

The Shoshone Forest Plan and North Absaroka Wilderness Fire Management Plan (reference 161) allow management ignited fires within the wilderness under these specific conditions:

- Management ignitions would be considered in areas adjacent to and into the North Absaroka Wilderness only where historic exclusion of fire has altered the natural fire regime and consequent fire dependent vegetation and fuel loadings.

- Management ignitions may also be considered around historic structures and along boundaries to create defensible fuel profiles so that wildland fire use might proceed.

- An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists would evaluate and recommend the proposed use of management ignited fire.

- Interested people would also be involved appropriately in the evaluation and review process.

- A separate National Policy Act (NEPA) document, a consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a Shoshone National Forest prescribed burn plan would be completed and reviewed by an interdisciplinary team for each project.

- Management ignited fire will not be used to achieve wilderness fire objectives where lightning-caused fires can achieve them (FSM 2324.22)

All documents incorporated by reference in this document can be reviewed upon request at the Supervisor’s Office or the Ranger District office in Cody, Wyoming. The coordination and

consultation section is found in Appendix A and the list of preparers in Appendix B.

Prescribed burning would be implemented only under very controlled conditions that account for weather, moisture, fuel and fire behavior parameters, and provide sufficient control and backup suppression resources of personnel and equipment. These parameters would be described in the Prescribed Burn Plan. Contents of the burn plan are summarized in Appendix C.

Any treatment of noxious weeds is already covered under the Shoshone National Forest Noxious Weed Treatment Plan.

1.5 The Decision to be Made

Based on the analysis disclosed in this environmental assessment, the District Ranger must decide whether or not to approve the project(s). Also, the decision might include what additional mitigation measures would be applied. The projects were scoped as two separate projects and analyzed in one environmental assessment with the potential for a separate decision document for each project.

1.6 Coordination with Other Agencies

A cultural resource inventory and the required coordination with the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) was completed, as well as the cultural resource documentation called for in 36 CFR Part 800. A concurrence letter from the SHPO (Case Number 0900RLC019) is located in the project file.

A biological evaluation (BE), addressing potential effects on all proposed, listed, and sensitive species with known or potential habitat within the project area was completed for this proposal. The BE is located in the project file and would be available for review.

Watershed Regulatory Framework - The Forest Service is directed by five major federal laws, as amended, to protect watersheds through sound management. Other federal laws and regulations complement these five major laws (s*ee* Appendix D). The Forest Service must also comply with the Wyoming Environmental Quality Act (reference 144) and regulations pursuant to it. Floodplains and wetlands within the analysis area are regulated by Executive Orders 11988 and 11990 (reference 128,129).

1.7 Required Permits

These projects would be conducted to minimize impacts to air quality. Prior to implementation of the projects a burn permit would be requested from the Air Quality Division of the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). The permit specifies the conditions under which the project can be conducted to minimize air quality impacts. The permit would become a part of the burn plan and will help in the development of the burn prescription by addressing the issues to minimize any air quality impacts.

1.8 Scoping and Management History

Scoping was conducted to identify the issues relevant to this proposal. On April 4, 2000 a scoping letter describing the project proposals was sent to over 250 individuals, groups, private landowners and organizations that have expressed an interest in this type of project. In addition, on February 5, 2001 letters were sent out to twenty-five Indian tribes seeking their comments on the proposal. On March 28, 2001 a copy of scoping statement was faxed to the Greater Yellowstone Coalition per their request.

All comments received through scoping and the public involvement processes were used in developing the issues and alternatives, which directed the analysis process.

1.8.1 Issues Analyzed in Detail

There were several issues relative to this proposal. All comments, issues, and concerns were given in-depth review and consideration, however only significant issues are addressed in detail. As this NEPA analysis is issue driven, the significant issues provide focus for analysis. An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists also provided input and reviewed the project proposals. In addition to resource specialist input, ten letters or phone calls from individuals or agencies provided comments on the proposal that were used in the analysis. The significant issues helped formulate the alternatives and focus on the resources to be analyzed in Chapter 3 - Affected Environment and Chapter 4 - Environmental Consequences. The significant issues are in the form of a question that is analyzed and answered in the remainder of the document.

Public Health and Safety/Issue: Air Quality and Control of Wildland Fire

- What air quality and visibility impacts will result from prescribed burning?
- What measures will be taken to ensure public health and safety, particularly the protection of private land and structures from prescribed fire?

Aesthetics/Issue: Visual Quality and Recreation

- How will the project meet Visual Quality Objectives and aesthetics be enhanced along the Chief Joseph Scenic Byway?
- What is the effect of the project on recreation, particularly rifle and bow hunting (the hunting experience and hunting success)?

Scoping raised visual quality as a concern but did not identify any extraordinary circumstances specific to this project, which would indicate the need to examine this concern in detail. Large scale, high-intensity fires have the potential to be the most disruptive to scenery, recreation opportunities, and a vegetative mosaic.

Vegetation/Issue: Vegetation and Fire History, and Fuel Loading

- What is the rationale for the burn unit boundaries as drawn and how do they relate to the overall fire management and fire prescriptions on the north zone?
- What is the fire history for the project area and what is the fuels buildup in the area?

- What effect will the activities have on the white pine blister rust or the spread of noxious weeds into the future?

An ongoing program exists for weed control. Any increases in noxious weeds would be treated during annual spraying and monitoring of weed sites. Treatment would be adjusted to site needs.

Wildlife/Issue: Big Game Security, Winter Range, Proposed, Threatened and Endangered, Sensitive Species and Management Indicator Species

- What is the effect of the project on management indicator species (MIS) and on threatened and endangered species, especially grizzly bears and their relationship to whitebark pine?
- What would be the impact of vegetation changes on wildlife habitat, specifically big game security, habitat capability and wintering habitat for mule deer?

Watershed/Issue: Soil, Water, Riparian and Aquatic Resources

- What will be done to protect aquatic resources, particularly water quality, riparian areas and fisheries and to mitigate erosion and sedimentation?

Areas identified on steep slopes with erosion or landslide potential would be excluded from burning or burned at a minimum intensity to limit soil exposure.

1.8.2 Secondary Issues Considered, but not Analyzed in Detail

Issue-Tribal Concerns

- What concerns do the tribes have?

At this time, no concerns about the projects were received from the tribes. One comment letter was received from the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in South Dakota. They expressed support for the project, but requested that should a cultural property be discovered after completion of the projects that they be consulted for further consultation.

Issue-Firebreaks

- Will other areas be proposed for firebreaks and will the firebreaks be effective?

A concern from scoping is that the Forest Service could propose firebreaks along the entire wilderness boundary and that the firebreaks would not be effective. The locations of the firebreaks were carefully considered and fuel breaks in or near the wilderness beyond what is in this document are not proposed.

Previous fires or areas of reduced fuels have been effective, if in not totally stopping a fire, then in slowing the spread of fires. This retarding effect slows the spread of a fire and aids fire suppression efforts, making a more defensible boundary.

Issue-Timber Sales, Insects and Disease, and Grazing

- What opportunities exist to sell any timber as part of the project?
- What opportunities exist to treat forest insect (beetles) in the project areas?
- Will commercial livestock grazing occur in the burned areas or would the areas be rested for a period of time?

Opportunities to provide wood products to the public do exist. A 25-acre stand of small diameter lodgepole pine is designated as suited for timber production. A portion of the stand may burn and some mortality may occur but would be minimized through prescribed burning techniques such as firing and holding opportunities. Any trees killed may be made available to the public as post and pole products. The area is located along an existing road. NOTE: This area is included in Alternative 2, but not Alternative 3.

Opportunities for firewood also exist, as the project involves cutting and removing the dead and dying limber pine. Trees that are accessible from the highway would be cut and removed by a commercial operator or through a public firewood sale area.

The cause of mortality in the limber pine is primarily from white pine blister rust and the Bald Ridge project is designed to remove dead and dying trees.

To minimize or avoid increased erosion and sedimentation, actions would be taken to ensure burned areas are rested for two growing seasons before commercial livestock grazing is allowed in the treated units of the project area.