

File Code: 1900

Date: January 27, 2003

Dear Interested Party:

The Shoshone National Forest is proposing vegetation and fuels management projects in the North Fork Shoshone River to address problems, issues, and concerns identified through public involvement conducted in the summer of 2002. Three public meetings were held for proposed vegetation and fuels management¹ in the North Fork corridor, where through a collaborative process the public helped identify and prioritize possible actions.

The overriding reasons for proposing the set of actions is to respond to the increasing wildfire risk which threatens life, property and resource values. At the public meetings in 2002, we heard from many members of the public that they had concerns over existing forest conditions. The concerns are precipitated by a Douglas-fir beetle epidemic, on-going drought, advanced successional stages of the forest, nearly a century of fire suppression and the increasing danger of large, uncontrollable fires in the North Fork corridor due to hazardous fuel conditions.

These factors, in combination, pose an increasing risk to human health and safety, loss of structures and investments, and a threat to historical lodges, summer homes and tourism and the regional tourist economy. In addition, these concerns were corroborated by local government entities, including the Cody Chamber of Commerce, Park County Commissioners and other elected officials, and State agencies. Social and political attention is intently focused on the Shoshone National Forest to take action and address these concerns, and reduce the risk of uncontrollable wildfires such as what occurred in Colorado and Arizona in 2002.

Preferences, expectations, and opinions that people have for forests and the management and use of particular areas differ. For example, differing attitudes, beliefs, values and expectations can result in perceptions that a healthy environment requires protection of lands from human influence, or that increased attention to environmental quality presents a threat to employment, economy, or life-style. The North Fork corridor is no different, people's expectations for the management and use cover a broad spectrum of opinions and ideas. The Forest, through on-going public involvement, is trying to narrow the range of issues to address for the North Fork corridor (*see* enclosed scoping statement).

Based on public input at the 2002 meetings and documented problems such as extensive areas of bug-killed trees and high wildfire risk due to hazardous fuels, we are proposing numerous, small projects as part of the overall vegetation and fuels management strategy for the North Fork corridor.

Thank You. Your interest in our programs and projects, and your participation and comments are important to us. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

/s/ Brent L. Larson
BRENT L. LARSON
District Ranger

Enclosure

¹ Fuel Management-Manipulation or reduction of flammable matter for the purpose of reducing the intensity or rate of spread of a fire, while preserving and enhancing environmental quality

Scoping Statement North Fork Vegetation and Fuels Management Projects

USDA Forest Service
Shoshone National Forest
North Zone/Wapiti Ranger District
Park County, Wyoming

Introduction

The Shoshone National Forest is proposing vegetation and fuels management projects in the North Fork Shoshone River corridor to address problems, issues, and concerns identified through public involvement conducted in the summer of 2002. The Forest is proposing a set of activities to implement vegetation and fuels management. The overriding reasons for proposing the set of actions is to respond to the increasing wildfire risk which threatens life, property, and resource values. One or a combination of the following activities would be integrated in priority areas; the vegetation and fuels management activities that make up the proposed action include the following: 1) create fuel breaks, 2) salvage beetle-killed trees, 3) reduce hazardous fuels, and 4) enhance wildlife habitat. They are discussed in detail in the proposed action section.

In most cases, a separate environmental analysis document will be prepared, and a separate decision made for each type of proposed activity.

Project Scale. A relatively small area of land would potentially be treated. Based on slope criteria, about 3,000 acres (approximately 3%) of the corridor is less than the 40% slope standard suitable for mechanical treatment. About 3,200 acres (3 to 4%) of the corridor would be possible for prescribed fire treatment. Of these acreages, only a portion would actually receive treatment and other restraints would further reduce the possible total acres treated. Realistically, only about 1 to 2% of the corridor may actually receive treatments in strategic locations to meet the purpose and need. The proposed action would enhance the defensibility of the developments in the corridor but would not prevent the possibility of a large wildfire occurring in the North Fork drainage. The proposed action would have a limited effect on the current insect and disease problems in the drainage. Much of the area is in wilderness, roadless areas, or has operability problems restricted by access, slope, etc. However, these projects can reduce insect and disease mortality and hazardous fuels in priority areas with high resource values or developments.

The Proposed Action

The proposed action is designed to meet the purpose and need and to conform to Forest Plan direction. The proposed action would not be implemented all at once, but over the course of the next five years. The proposed action can be summarized as:

Create Fuel Breaks. The primary action would be to create fuel breaks² strategically placed to modify fire behavior from wildfires that burn into the corridor allowing better defensibility of corridor developments. The fuel breaks would extend from the corridor bottom or forest boundary up onto the upper slopes of the

² Fuel Break-A natural or human-made change in vegetation (fuels) that alters fire behavior by decreasing the rate of spread and fire intensity, allowing suppression and containment opportunities. For maximum effectiveness, fuel breaks are in place prior to a wildfire event threatening life and property.

corridor and would enhance current existing natural fuels breaks of rock or meadows. The intent of the fuel breaks will be to slow or stop wildfires burning down the side drainages into the corridor or off the forest. The fuel breaks would be located away from the developments to provide a first line of defense before a wildfire burns into any developments. Prescribed fire will be the primary tool used to create these fuel breaks although some mechanical treatment may occur in accessible locations near the corridor bottom. Through either prescribed fire or mechanical treatment, in timber stands, the intent is to remove the understory trees that aid in moving fire from the surface into the tree crowns, thinning the overstory trees to break crown continuity and remove the current dead and down fuels that increase fire intensity. The use of prescribed fire in timbered stands would create a mosaic effect with some areas burning hot and intense while other areas are untouched by fire, giving the appearance of a natural appearing landscape. In nontimbered areas, the intent is to reclaim the historic meadows by removing the encroaching conifers with prescribed fire. An estimated seven to ten fuel breaks of 100 to 1,000 acres each totaling about 2,200 acres is envisioned.

Salvage of Beetle-killed Trees. The primary action would be to salvage the mostly Douglas-fir trees that are dead or dying around the developments. The principal tool would be mechanical treatments with chainsaws and a skidder, utilizing small timber sale contracts for salvage and sanitation logging, service contracts, fuelwood permits, house log sales, etc. By harvesting dead and dying trees around developments, scenic values and recreation settings can be maintained and the hazard from falling trees around developments can be minimized. Salvage of beetle-killed trees can also maintain wildlife habitat and vegetation diversity. The majority of the trees removed will provide a direct local economic benefit to local firewood cutters and sawmill. An estimated eight to ten small salvage sales (<250 acres each) is envisioned. Volume estimates for forest products harvested by the treatments are premature at this preliminary stage of planning.

Reduce Hazardous Fuels. The primary action would be the use of mechanical treatments (thinning, cutting/piling/burning, logging, firewood removal) to reduce hazardous fuels in accessible areas within ½ mile around the corridor developments. The mechanical treatments would remove the understory trees that aid in moving fire from the surface into the tree crowns, thinning the overstory trees to break crown continuity and remove the current dead and down fuels that increase fire intensity. These would be small, numerous projects (<50 acres each) as envisioned. All hazardous fuels reduction projects in and near developments would be completed before utilizing prescribed fire to create fuels breaks. Commercial fuelwood and house logs sales and salvage sales might be used in certain areas.

Enhance Wildlife Habitat. The primary action would be the enhancement of seral deciduous species (such as cottonwoods) in riparian areas and aspen communities by mechanical treatment and prescribed burning. Crucial range and migration corridors for bighorn sheep would be restored by mechanical treatment and prescribed fire. Seral deciduous species (such as cottonwoods) in riparian areas and aspen communities would be enhanced by mechanical treatment such as salvage logging (5 to 250 acres) and prescribed burning (>250 acres in a mosaic pattern) in conjunction with vegetation and fuels management projects in the North Fork corridor.

Location. The proposed action would occur on the Wapiti Ranger District in Park County, approximately 25 to 50 miles west of Cody, Wyoming in the North Fork corridor. Project areas have the potential for enhanced natural fuel breaks such as rock areas, meadows, or other natural fire barriers. Areas with excessive tree mortality and excessive fuel buildups can be reduced, especially in strategic areas near developments. Possible priority areas are:

- 50-mile to Kitty Creek (T52N, R109W, portions of sections 11, 12, and 13; T52N, R108W, portions of sections 12, 12, 13)
- June Creek/Moss Creek (T52N, R107W, portions of sections 22, 26, 27, 28, 29)
- Green Creek (T52N, R105W, section 33)

Implementation. The proposed action would include one or a combination of the four action categories above, and would be integrated in key areas as part of the overall vegetation and fuel management strategy for the North Fork corridor. Fuel breaks, salvage logging, fuel reduction, and/or wildlife habitat enhancements would be concentrated in the identified priority areas. To accomplish hazardous fuel reductions, other actions, such as small commercial fuelwood sales, house log sales or salvage sales could occur outside the three key areas.

Purpose and Need

Purpose for the Action. Current vegetation trends need to be reversed to begin moving the area toward ecologically sustainable conditions and the desired vegetation conditions. The primary purpose for action is to develop and implement a vegetation and fuels management strategy to address human health and safety concerns resulting from the increasing fuel conditions, drought, and wildfire risk. Actions would move vegetation toward desired conditions, primarily through tools such as prescribed fire and mechanical treatments such as cutting or timber harvest. An emphasis would be given to priority areas to reduce wildfire hazards to life and property, to firefighters, and to reduce fire suppression costs by means of vegetation and fuels treatments.

The proposed action is designed to reduce hazardous fuels while not adversely affecting other resource values such as wildlife, recreation, visuals, and watershed. The reduction of fuels and enhancement of tree species and age class diversity would improve stand conditions and provide healthier stands of trees in the long term. Additionally, improvements of aspen stands in some areas would be a result that benefits diversity and wildlife habitat.

Need for the Action. The Forest Plan, Chapter III, includes direction for management of the Forest. The need for action is derived from comparing relevant Forest Plan direction/desired conditions to the existing conditions in the analysis area. The comparisons between existing conditions and desired conditions show where a need or opportunity for action exists. The proposed action was developed in response to the management need or opportunity to move toward or achieve the desired conditions.

Existing Conditions. The existing forest conditions can be summarized as:

The Shoshone River drainage is about 60-65% of normal snowpack as of January 20, 2003. The drought exacerbates the risk of wildfire and human health and safety concerns and forest health conditions such as insect epidemics.

Much of the forest in the North Fork is older, consisting of mature to over mature stands at the end of the successional process. This makes trees highly susceptible to insect and disease attacks, particularly during drought. Direct control of epidemics is an expensive, short-term solution. Replacing older trees with younger trees, through vegetation manipulation, provides a means to fight existing problems while creating diversity in large blocks of trees of the same species and age class, reducing hazardous fuels, improving the health of forest stands, and reducing insect and disease epidemics. Instead of a monoculture of timber where all trees are susceptible at the same time to fire or insects, the forest in the long term becomes a mosaic of species and age classes where a smaller portion is susceptible.

The current Douglas-fir beetle epidemic threatens Douglas-fir stands, as extensive tree mortality is occurring. Large, older trees are the prime target for insect infestation because of their size and age. From a forest health perspective, the heavy tree mortality and loss of tree cover has greatly affected fuel loads and wildfire potential, forest health and productivity, with an overall reduction in habitat quality for big game and other wildlife dependent on a forest canopy. Douglas-fir beetles and other insects are expected to continue to spread to the majority of the remaining live trees and to adjacent healthy stands. A large amount of dead fuel exists that could contribute to future wildfire spread and increased fire intensities.

From a habitat standpoint, the conifer trees are encroaching on open meadows and aspen stands, reducing the occurrence of these habitat types in the area. From an economic feasibility standpoint, the dead trees in the project area will rapidly decay to an unmerchantable condition.

There are 68 summer homes, 12 lodges, four trailheads, eight campgrounds, a ski area, and the historic Wapiti Ranger Station in the North Fork corridor. All of these developments are on Forest Service administered lands. Many of the lodges are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Additionally, the Buffalo Bill Scenic Highway provides the only ingress/egress through the east entrance to Yellowstone National Park via Cody, Wyoming. The infrastructure in much of the area is such that firefighting capabilities are limited or hindered by narrow, dead end roads, and one-way in/out routes.

Desired Conditions. In comparing the existing conditions to Forest Plan direction and desired conditions in the project area, a need for action exists to move vegetation toward the desired condition. Based on Shoshone Forest Plan management goals (pages III-6 through III-10) and management direction for management areas 2B, 3A, 4D, 5A, 7E and 9A, resource management needs/opportunities have been identified for the project area. These opportunities include benefits such as:

- Reduce fuel loads and spread of fire
- Maintain or enhance tree age class and diversity
- Enhance the occurrence of aspen and deciduous species
- Salvage dead and dying timber in insect infested stands
- Improve wildlife habitat
- Maintain scenery and recreation settings.

Scoping and Public Involvement. Public involvement began last summer, when three public meetings were held. We want to continue dialogue with the public on these proposals and are available to discuss proposals and answer questions.

Scoping is to determine the scope of the issues to be addressed and to identify significant issues related to the proposed action (40 CFR 1501.7). The intent of this letter is to solicit written comments from interested parties to help identify issues and concerns relative to the proposed action. This is an opportunity for your involvement early in the planning process; your comments and suggestions are needed and encouraged. Alternatives to the proposed action will be determined and environmental consequences analyzed during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process initiated by this scoping letter. We are asking for comments, alternatives to the proposed action, and any information you may want us to consider during planning and the environmental analysis.

Resource Protection/Project Design Measures. Soils, topography, aspect, elevation, slope, access, recreation, and other environmental considerations will be part of the design for the proposed action, along with additional concerns and issues identified through this scoping. An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists will review and analyze the effects of the proposed action commensurate with the issues raised from the scoping and public involvement process. Additional specifics of the proposed action and possible project design/mitigation measures would be included in the analysis documents.

Possible Alternatives. Other alternatives that meet the purpose and need may result from scoping and further analysis. Alternative actions or area(s) will be analyzed if issues and concerns related to the proposed area and actions are identified and could not be addressed through additional planning or mitigation. At a minimum, these alternatives will be addressed: 1) No Action Alternative – Current management would continue and the proposed actions would not be implemented; 2) Proposed Action – The proposed action would be authorized as described.

Preliminary Concerns and Issues. The analysis will include a review for consistency with the Forest Plan and any need for a Plan amendment. Public input will help determine the complexity of the issues that may affect the physical, biological, social, and economic resources and the appropriate NEPA level document to be prepared. Human health and safety are the over-riding concerns, considering the increasing risk of large, devastating fires such as those that occurred in Colorado and Arizona in 2002 and what effect large wildfires would have on the recreation and tourism industry on the Forest and in Yellowstone National Park. The projects would enhance defensibility of corridor developments in selected priority areas with high values, but the possibility of a large wildfire occurring in the drainage still exists. Preliminary concerns would likely relate to the treatment methods used, drought, potential effects to watersheds (soil, water and fisheries), and possible benefits or impacts to wildlife and scenic values. These concerns can be summarized as:

- The length of time the fuel reductions would be functional, and the frequency and amount of maintenance that might be needed to sustain effectiveness in selected areas
- Possible negative economic impact if a large fire forced a lengthy closure of the east gate to Yellowstone National Park and the affect to regional economies, lodge owners, summer homeowners, historic buildings, scenic values, and recreation settings along the corridor
- The increasing risk of large wildfires and possible impacts to habitat for threatened and endangered species, particularly potential effects to lynx, grizzly bears, and wolves
- Big game habitat and what positive or negative effects the proposed action would have on elk, deer, bighorn sheep, and moose, or conversely, what effects a large wildfire would have in the short term, and possible habitat benefits in the long term
- Erosion and sedimentation from large wildfires may affect watershed resources, fisheries, and municipal water supplies.
- Positive or negative effects the proposed action would have on watershed resources, streams, riparian areas, and soils
- What positive or negative effects would the proposed action have on forest conditions and diversity, aspen and deciduous species, epidemic insect and disease outbreaks, and ecological conditions? The proposed action would have a limited effect on the current insect problems since the epidemic is so widespread, and a relatively small area of land is proposed for treatments.
- The need for management of roads, access to project areas and roadless areas
- The opportunity to gather firewood, house logs and other wood products in the project area, both commercial and personal use is a concern, as is harvesting dead and dying trees before they become unmerchantable, and economic benefits to the county, local job market and businesses are lost

Contacts. The public³ is provided this opportunity to identify and submit issues and concerns they feel the Forest Service should address. If you feel we have overlooked something or have additional information, comments need to be as specific as possible to assist us in planning and analysis. Questions should be directed to Clint Dawson, Project Leader, telephone (307) 527-6921, or email at cdawson@fs.fed.us. A 30-day public comment period is being provided. Your comments will be most helpful if received in writing no later than March 1, 2003. Written comments can be mailed to: Marty Sharp, NEPA Coordinator, North Zone/Wapiti Ranger District, 203A Yellowstone Ave., Cody, WY 82414, e-mailed to msharp@fs.fed.us, faxed to (307) 578-1202, or phone (307) 527-6921.

³ NOTE: If you no longer want to be included on the NEPA mailing list to receive scoping notices, please notify the office and help us keep the list current. Scoping Statements, the quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and other related NEPA documents are available on the Internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/shoshone/planning.htm>.

Sincerely,

/s/ Marty Sharp, for

Brent Larson

District Ranger