



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Mark Twain National Forest
Houston – Rolla – Cedar Creek
Ranger District

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File Code: 1950/5140

Date: August 12, 2004

To Pine Fuel Reduction Respondents,

Thank you for your interest in the activities that are occurring on the Houston/Rolla/Cedar Creek Ranger District.

I have completed my analysis and it is my decision to implement hazardous fuel reduction activities on a total of 971 acres of National Forest System Lands (NFSL). I have determined there are no extraordinary circumstances related to this project and it may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Interdisciplinary Team's analysis is contained in the Project Record upon which I base my decision, documented in a Decision Memo, that these actions fall under FSH 1909.15, Chapter 31.2 –Categories of actions for which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo are Required, Category 10 (Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing not to exceed 1,000 acres). This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (f).

Enclosed with this letter you will find a copy of the Pine Fuel Reduction Project - Zone A Decision Memo with Attachments A (mitigation measures) and B (project maps). The scoping documents for this project proposed thinning 2,731 acres, and also proposed prescribed burning with thinning on 376 acres. This decision covers only those stands within 3-5 air miles of the Roby-Evening Shade, Missouri area. Additional decision memos are expected in the near future that will cover the remaining stands described in the scoping document.

This Decision Memo and transmittal letter will also be available electronically at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/marktwain/projects/project.htm> or to those who request a copy of the Decision Memo by written request, fax, telephone request, or in person at the Houston Office.

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Mark Hamel, NEPA Coordinator during normal office hours (weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Houston Ranger District (Address: 108 S. Sam Houston Blvd., Houston, MO 65483; Phone: voice 573-341-7443, or 417-967-4194; Fax: 417-967-2524).

Sincerely,

/s/ John C. Bisbee
JOHN C. BISBEE
District Ranger



DECISION MEMO
Pine Fuel Reduction Project
Zone A
Project Number 30405

USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region, Mark Twain National Forest

Houston/Rolla/Cedar Creek Ranger District
Texas County, Missouri
T33N R 12W sec. 24
T 33N R 11W sec. 9, 10, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28
T 33N R 10W sec. 6
T 32N R 11W sec. 12, 13, 23

I. DECISION TO BE IMPLEMENTED

A. Description of Decision

My decision is to implement hazardous fuel reduction activities on a total of 971 acres of National Forest System Lands (NFSL). The approved actions consist of two primary actions dispersed over 7 project sites (see Attachment B).

1. Thinning 971 acres to reduce the biomass and fuel continuity. Pine stands are to be thinned to a level that reduces the fuel loading levels in overstocked stands but maintains a stocking level of dominant trees that fully utilizes the growing space and allows for optimum growth of the remaining trees. At a minimum, the resulting stand condition will have one half of the existing trees or a stocking level B, whichever leaves the highest stocking.
2. Prescribed burning 362 acres (of the 971 acres described above) under conditions that follow Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF) guidelines resulting in a low to moderate intensity fire to further alter the existing fuel conditions to lower the risk of catastrophic wildfire by consuming surface fuels and likely top killing smaller hardwood stems.

In addition to the thinning and prescribed fire activities, other connected actions include:

- fire line construction and maintenance;
- pre-burning where needed to increase the safety of prescribed fire personnel and public;
- retreating with prescribed burns as needed on a 3-5 year rotation may be conducted in these units to further reduce hazardous fuel buildup and keep the area in a desired condition.

My decision also includes specific project mitigation features that are described in Attachment A.

The scoping documents for this project proposed thinning 2,731 acres, and also proposed prescribed burning with thinning on 376 acres. This decision covers only those stands within Zone A, 3-5 air miles of the Roby-Evening Shade, Missouri area (see Attachment B-1). Additional decision memos are expected in the near future that will cover the remaining stands (see Attachment B-1, Zones B, C and D) described in the scoping document. This decision authorizing the thinning of 971 acres and prescribed burning of 362 acres is identical in treatment to the remaining stands, with similar direct and indirect effects. However due to geographical locations, different watersheds, etc., resulting in different unconnected cumulative effects, separate decisions will be made for each portion of the Houston/Rolla Ranger District that was scoped.

B. Purpose of Decision

The National Fire Plan laid the foundation for a long-term program to reduce fire risk and restore healthy, fire-adapted ecosystems on the nation's forest and grasslands. Wildfire is considered an unplanned fire that burns organic soil, grasses and forbs, shrubs, trees, and associated fuels in the natural or modified state.

Many dense pine stands scattered across the district consist of 30 to 60 year-old, overcrowded stands where tree canopies interconnect. Trees growing in these conditions tend to be weakened through the competition for available growing space and become more susceptible to disease, insects and drought. Overcrowded stands are also characterized by dead or dying trees and accumulated forest debris that provide fuel for wildfires. The current fuels conditions, amount, density and arrangement are conducive to wildfires that would burn intensely under adverse fire weather conditions of high winds and low relative humidity. These wildfires could fundamentally change the vegetative composition of the ecosystem, destroy communities (Evening Shade, Success – Communities at Risk—FEDERAL REGISTER, 08/17/2001, p.43407) and/or habitat or be stand replacing.

The primary purpose of the Pine Fuel Reduction Project is to reduce the risk of wildfire damage by disrupting fuel continuity, and reducing the available fuels. The Pine Fuel Project meets this purpose by thinning and using low to moderate intensity prescribed burning to achieve the following objectives:

- Reduce the risk of crown fire by eliminating or reducing the interconnection of pine tree crowns
- Reduce the available long-term fuel loads and interrupt the fuel continuity by removing or consuming accumulated fuels.

These actions would reduce the impacts of future wildfires, maintain stand health to delay tree mortality induced by crowding, and enhance wildlife diversity. The areas selected for this project are within Condition Classes 2 or 3 within Fire Regime Groups I, II, and III, as established in the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, and the proximity of the areas to communities and structures.

These activities to reduce the accumulation of fuels buildup are consistent with the Forest Plan for the purpose of decreasing the risk of catastrophic fire (Forest Plan, pp. IV- 3, 4), forest management which emphasizes wildlife habitat diversity (Forest Plan, pp. IV- 2, 115), and to provide for production of shortleaf pine and other resources (Forest Plan, p. IV-125). Planned activities and mitigation measures, are consistent for management areas involved.

II. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR Part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Sections 31.1b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

I have concluded that this decision is appropriately categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. It is a routine activity within a category of exclusion and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

A. Category of Exclusion

The project is within FSH 1909.15, Category 31.2 (10), "Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, pruning, cutting, shipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres." The project is consistent with agency and departmental procedures and

applicable land and resource management plans, was identified through a collaborative framework, does not exceed 4,500 acres of prescribed fire or 1,000 acres of thinning, is not in a wilderness area, and does not include the use of herbicide or construction of new roads.

B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species: The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical habitat. As required by this Act, potential effects of this decision on listed species have been analysed and documented in the Biological Evaluation for Forest-Wide Pine Fuel Reduction Project (see Project File, C-1) For this project, we analyzed the impacts to federally-listed Threatened and Endangered species that may occur, may be affected by, or have potential habitat in the project area. Specifically, those species are Indiana Bat, gray bat and bald eagle. The biological evaluation determined that the project would not result in any additional effects on federally listed species beyond those previously disclosed and discussed in the Service's Programmatic Biological Opinion of June 23, 1999. On June 12, 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with these determinations (see Project Folder C-4).

2. Flood plains, Wetlands or Municipal Watersheds:

Floodplains: Executive Order 11988 requires avoiding adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Floodplains are defined by this order as, "... the lowland and relatively flat areas adjoining inland and coastal waters including flood prone areas of offshore islands, including at a minimum, that area subject to a one percent or greater chance of flooding in any one year." Floodplains and downstream flood-flows will not be affected by this decision (see Project Folder C-1).

Wetlands: Executive Order 11990 directs us to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands. Wetlands are defined by this order as, "... areas inundated by surface or ground water with a frequency sufficient to support and under normal circumstances does or will support a prevalence of vegetative or aquatic life that requires saturated or seasonally saturated soil conditions for growth and reproduction." Wetland values and functions will not be directly or indirectly affected by this decision. No significant changes in soil erosion, stream flow regimes or ground-water tables will occur (see Project Folder C-1).

Municipal Watersheds: Municipal watersheds are designated by Congress and managed under multiple use prescriptions in forest plans. There is no congressionally designated municipal watershed on the Forest. This decision will not affect municipal watersheds.

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas:

Wilderness: This decision will not affect any wilderness areas.

Wilderness Study Areas: There are no Wilderness Study Areas on the Forest (Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), p. III-23). This decision will not affect Wilderness Study Areas.

National Recreation Areas: There are no National Recreation Areas on the Forest. This decision will not affect National Recreation Areas.

4. Inventoried roadless areas: The Pine Fuel Reduction Project area is not part of an inventoried roadless area (Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation FEIS). This decision will not affect inventoried roadless areas on the Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF).

5. **Research Natural Areas:** There are no Research Natural Areas on the Forest (Forest Plan FEIS, pp. III-25, 26). This decision will not affect Research Natural Areas.
6. **American Indian and Alaska native religious or cultural sites:** No tribal concerns were identified for this project (see Project Folder D-2).
7. **Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:** Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires federal agencies to take into account the effect of a project on any district, site, building, structure, or object that is included in, or eligible for inclusion in, the National Register. Section 106 of the NHPA also requires federal agencies to afford the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) a reasonable opportunity to comment. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) covers the discovery and protection of historic properties (prehistoric and historic) that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It affords lawful protection of archaeological resources and sites that are on public and Indian lands. The native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) covers the discovery and protections of native American human remains and objects that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It encourages avoidance of archaeological sites that contain burials or portions of sites that contain graves through “in situ” preservation, but may encompass other actions to preserve these remains and items. This decision complies with the cited acts. Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision (see Project Folder D-2). A ‘no adverse effect’ determination was made. Consultation on this finding occurred with the State Historic Preservation Office, with concurrence on June 16, 2003 (see Project Folder C-3).
8. No other extraordinary circumstances related to the project were identified.

III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project was originally scoped September 28, 2001, as part of a forest-wide proposal and from those comments re-developed as a district-level project in order to work more effectively with landowners that are adjacent to the project areas.

On March 1, 2004, scoping materials describing the district-level proposed action were mailed to agencies, the public, and special interest groups (see Project Folder A-1). The scoping materials requested comments to be submitted by April 5, 2004, to allow an Interdisciplinary (ID) team time to incorporate them into the analysis.

On March 9, 2004 an additional mailing of a postcard was sent to the interested individuals/groups/neighbors for this project requesting e-mail responses made previous to that date be re-submitted via regular mail due to U.S. Government electronic mail security problems.

The ID team reviewed and considered all comments in the analysis. We received twenty-three comments that were used to refine the project. These comments were also used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects.

IV. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act - This Act allows the granting of easements across National Forest System Lands. The regulations at 36 CFR 251 guide the issuance of permits, leases, and easements under this Act. Permits, leases, and easements are granted across National Forest System lands when the need for such is consistent with planned uses and Forest Service policy and regulations. This decision is consistent with this Act.

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act) - This Act requires the development of long-range land and resource management plans. The Mark Twain Forest Plan (LRMP) was approved on June 23, 1986, as required by this Act. The plan provides for guidance for all natural resource management activities on the Forest. The Act requires that all projects and activities be consistent with the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan has been reviewed in consideration of this project. The Forest Plan identifies a number of multiple-use and resource

management goals that are achieved by implementing the plan. The Forest Plan Fire Management Goals include:

- Identify a cost-efficient response to fire prevention and suppression based on objectives for the management area and the values that are at risk.
- Implement prescribed fire as a tool to meet resource management objectives.

As part of the direction for fire management, the Forest Plan states, "... fuels management will be planned based on an analysis of probable fire location, expected fire intensities, potential net resource value change, and risk to health and safety, and will be addressed in the development of management area action plans."

This project is tiered to the Forest Plan and will contribute to accomplishment of the Desired Future Conditions found on LRMP pages IV-115/116, IV-124-1, and IV-125/126 to provide for a natural appearing mosaic of stands, emphasizing wildlife habitat diversity, protection of Indiana bats and their habitat, and provide for production of other resources. This project will also protect heritage resource sites as found on LRMP page IV-30 and ensure continued viable habitat for sensitive species as found on LRMP page IV-50.

This project is responsive to the Forest Plan Goal (page IV-2) to "Provide for wildlife species requiring specialized habitat including those recognized by both Federal and State authorities as being threatened, endangered, rare, or sensitive."

Vegetation Manipulation (National Forest Management Act) – Proposed actions often carry out management prescriptions selected and scheduled during land and resource management plan development. This decision is consistent with the requirements for management prescriptions. The regulations found at 36 CFR 219.27 require that "Management prescriptions that involve vegetative manipulation of tree cover for any purpose shall" comply with the following seven requirements:

- *Be best suited to the goals in the Forest Plan.* The applicable goals are stated in Section I of this document. This decision is responsive to those goals and is best suited to meet those goals.

- *Assure that technology and knowledge exists to adequately restock lands within five years after final harvest when trees are cut to achieve timber production.*

Restocking is not applicable; the area treated will remain fully stocked after treatment (see Project Folder B-2).

- *Not to be chosen primarily because they give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber (although these factors shall be considered). This decision was made to reduce the natural fuel buildup. Subsequent measures in species richness, diversity, and frequency would continue for years following a fire, and benefit in reducing fuel loading at a reasonable cost. This decision was not based on timber outputs.*

- *Be chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.* The effects on residual trees and adjacent stands were considered in development of the Plan. The decision, including adherence to applicable Plan Standards and Guidelines, is designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on the resource values. This decision is consistent with the Plan and provides the desired effect on residual trees and adjacent stands (see Project Folder B-2).

- *Be selected to avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and to ensure conservation of soil and water resources.* This decision avoids impairment of site productivity. The nature of the decision and use of Best Management Practices will protect soil and water resources (see Project Folder B-2).

- *Be selected to provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation users, aesthetic values, and other resource yields.* The decision, including adherence to applicable Plan Standards and Guidelines, is designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on the resource values. This decision is consistent with the Plan and provides the desired effect on the above resources (see Project Folder B-2).

- *Be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration.* The project area is adequately roaded, no new permanent or temporary roads are necessary to implement this decision. The treatment in this decision is appropriate to accomplish project objectives, and is economically practical (see Project Folder B-2).

Endangered Species Act - See Section II, Item B1 of this document (see Project Folder C-1, C-4).

Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670) - This Manual direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species, those species for which the Regional Forester has identified population viability is a concern. Potential effects of this decision on sensitive species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Evaluation (see Project Folder C-1). This decision will have “no impact” on sensitive species.

Clean Water Act - This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices. This decision incorporates Best Management Practices to ensure protection of soil and water resources (Record D-9, Table 4.4).

Wetlands (Executive Order 11990) - See Section II, Item B2 of this document.

Floodplains (Executive Order 11988) - See Section II, Item B2 of this document.

Clean Air Act - Under this Act areas of the country were designated as Class I, II, or III airsheds for Prevention of Significant Deterioration purposes. Impacts to air quality have been considered for this decision. Class I areas generally include national parks and wilderness areas. Class I provides the most protection to pristine lands by severely limiting the amount of additional human-caused air pollution that can be added to these areas. No Class I airsheds are in the project area.

Federal Cave Resources Protection Act - This Act is to secure, protect, preserve, and maintain significant caves, to the extent practical. Site features and field review substantiate that no caves are in the area. No known cave resources will be affected by this decision. Subsequently identified caves will be protected.

National Historic Preservation Act - See Section II, Item B7 of this document.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act - See Section II, Item B7 of this document.

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act - See Section II, Item B6 of this document.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act - See Section II, Item B2 of this document.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) - This Executive Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision-making. Public involvement did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income populations. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

National Environmental Policy Act - This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The entirety of documentation for this decision supports compliance with this Act.

V. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to a administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f)

VI. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

VII. CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Mark Hamel, NEPA Coordinator or John Bisbee, District Ranger during normal office hours (weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Houston Ranger District (Address: 108 S. Sam Houston Blvd., Houston, MO 65483; Phone: voice 417-967-4194; Fax: 417-967-2524).

VIII. SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/John C. Bisbee
John Bisbee
Houston/Rolla/Cedar Creek District Ranger
Responsible Official

08/05/04
Date

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Attachment A
Mitigation Measures

PINE FUEL REDUCTION MITIGATIONS

- 1.** Prescribed fires would be planned and implemented when fuel conditions would result in a low-severity effects to site cover.
- 2.** Dozer control line construction is limited to the minimum required for safe implementation of the burn. It is to be seeded and fertilized as needed with a cover crop suited to the location to promote germination after construction.
- 3.** Water bars shall be constructed along control lines to discharge runoff in small quantities to the forest floor to reduce erosion.
- 4.** Prescribed burning is limited to occur between October 10 and April 30.
- 5.** Hand cutting and loading will be the preferred logging system. No skidders or mechanical felling that results in damage to residual trees will be allowed.
- 6.** Along state highways and some county maintained roads, slash disposal methods will take place. For 100' feet parallel from road, slash will be lopped and scattered up to 36" inches.

Attachment B

Project Maps