



File Code: 1950

Date: November 21, 2008

Dear Interested Party,

The Buffalo Ranger District is proposing to conduct vegetation management activities in the South Fork Spread Creek drainage to enhance habitat effectiveness for grizzly bear by improving forest health conditions for whitebark pine and moving the existing road system towards Forest Plan standards and guidelines. Enclosed is a public scoping notice which includes the purpose and need for action, a description of the proposed action, location (maps included), Forest Plan direction, preliminary issues, the scoping process and how to comment. It is important for us to hear from you concerning this proposed action so that we can consider your issues and concerns during the analysis.

Please review the enclosed document and send me any comments that you have that might help us in our analysis no later than December 29, 2008. Please return your comments or suggestions concerning this project to:

Buffalo Ranger District
attention: Jeff Laub
P.O. Box 278
Moran, WY 83013

This constitutes an opportunity to comment on the project while it is at an early conceptual stage. A subsequent opportunity to comment will be provided later in the process which complies with 36 CFR215.11 and individuals who comment at that time will have standing to appeal the project. If you would like additional information, please contact Jeff Laub at the Buffalo Ranger District, at (307) 543-0130.

Sincerely,

John Hagenruber,
Buffalo District Ranger

Enclosure



Public Scoping Notice
Grouse Mountain Whitebark Pine Restoration Proposal
Buffalo Ranger District
Bridger-Teton National Forest
November 21, 2008

Introduction

Public involvement is an important part of the environmental planning process for the U. S. Forest Service. Please take the time to read the following information and let us know your concerns about the proposed actions and decisions to be made. We appreciate your contribution of time and effort, and believe the information you share with us will lead to a better decision.

The Buffalo Ranger District is proposing to implement vegetation management activities, including prescribed burning, thinning trees and associated road rehabilitation in the Grouse Creek, Dry Lake Creek and Leidy Creek drainages over the next 2 - 3 years. Approximately 920 acres will be treated within the analysis area of approximately 5,187 acres. The area is located 20 miles southeast of Moran, Wyoming in the South Fork Spread Creek drainage. The area is habitat for grizzly bear recovery, which will be enhanced through implementation of the project by improving forest health conditions for whitebark pine and moving the current road system towards Forest Plan standards and guidelines. Access to the site is by Highway 26/287 and Forest roads 30160 and 30100.

The main tree species present are lodgepole and whitebark pine, with Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir occurring in the mixed conifer stands. There are also minor amounts of Douglas-fir. Whitebark pine in the project area is declining due to mountain pine beetle and blister rust. Mountain pine beetle, dwarf mistletoe and commandra rust are causing damage and mortality in lodgepole pine. The severity of these conditions is increasing. The need for vegetation management in this area has previously been identified and studied in the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) implemented in 1990 and the Teton Division Landscape Scale Assessment (Teton LSA) of 2003. Each effort included extensive public and Forest Service interdisciplinary input and use of the best data available on forest resources. Management opportunities, practices, standards, guidelines, and mitigations have been developed to achieve desired resource conditions.

Current and historic uses of the study area are quantified in the Teton LSA and Forest Plan and include past timber harvest activities. Many old roads associated with past timber activities have been closed by rehabilitation actions, but some roads require additional work to bring them into Elimination Condition 3 or 4 (obliteration or restoration). This would improve watershed health and improve grizzly bear habitat by reducing road density.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the proposed action is to enhance habitat effectiveness for grizzly bear by improving forest health conditions for whitebark pine and moving the existing road and trails system towards Forest Plan standards and guidelines. The Teton LSA identified the following as high priority projects to meet desired conditions:

- fire and mechanical treatments to sustain and restore whitebark pine
- selective removal of decadent or diseased lodgepole pine using existing roads
- treat past timber harvest units to improve existing contrasts by edge feathering and favoring whitebark pine
- close roads where densities exceed Forest Plan standards

Insects and diseases are at epidemic levels within the South Fork of Spread Creek drainage and its tributaries, causing high amounts of conifer mortality. Mature whitebark and lodgepole pine in particular are dying and decreasing habitat effectiveness for species dependent upon whitebark pine seeds. There are approximately 300 acres of clear-cut harvest areas from the 1970's in the analysis area. These areas are currently in various stages of forest re-growth, with young trees, primarily lodgepole pine, beginning to restore a forested appearance and wildlife hiding cover. Most areas have achieved sufficient regeneration and tree growth to meet wildlife cover standards under Forest Plan direction. Some old roads remain from logging activities created in the 1970's that may benefit from watershed restoration activities. Cutting and harvesting dead and dying trees and trees competing with whitebark pine and prescribed burning in whitebark pine stands provides an opportunity to enhance habitat by improving growing conditions and regeneration of whitebark pine.

Proposed Action

The Buffalo Ranger District proposes to selectively cut and harvest trees on approximately 320 acres, use prescribed fire on approximately 500 acres of whitebark pine stands and cut non-commercial trees to release whitebark pine seedlings and saplings on approximately 100 acres, within the 5,187 acre project area. The project area lies in the South Fork Spread Creek drainage, with the legal description of T44N, R112W, Sections 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 and 34, and T43N, R112W, Sections 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14 and 15 and T43N, R113W, Sections 1 and 12 (please see the attached map).

Cutting and removal projects would occur in mixed conifer stands with a whitebark pine component and in some nearly pure stands of whitebark pine. The project would remove dead and dying trees and trees competing with whitebark pine while retaining healthy whitebark pine trees as well as other species while promoting whitebark regeneration. There will be areas of up to 5 acres where there are heavier pockets of dead and dying trees where most trees would be removed. Some healthy larger trees and seedlings and saplings would be retained in these areas. Conditions would be created to encourage regeneration of whitebark pine seedlings by thinning out competing vegetation from around their locations. Planting of whitebark pine will be considered where natural regeneration may not be sufficient.

Prescribed fire is planned for approximately 100 acres of harvest areas to treat slash concentrations and encourage whitebark regeneration and approximately 500 acres of upper

elevation whitebark stands to encourage whitebark regeneration. Slash burning treatments would be located and designed to assist with burning adjacent un-cut stands.

Verbenone, a naturally occurring pheromone, will be used within and adjacent to treatment areas to protect healthy individual trees or groups of whitebark pine from bark beetle attack.

No permanent roads or other improvements would be constructed in the project and adjacent areas.

Proposed treatments would include:

- cutting and removal of dead and dying conifer trees and those competing with whitebark pine on up to 320 acres;
- regeneration of whitebark pine seedlings in treatment areas through natural and artificial methods;
- release thinning of whitebark pine seedlings on approximately 100 acres;
- slash will be treated by a combination of broadcast burning, yarding tops and piling concentrations;
- broadcast burning without harvest on approximately 500 acres to promote whitebark pine regeneration;
- select non-system roads will be brought to elimination classes 3 and 4 (obliteration or restoration) as defined in the Forest Plan;
- scenic integrity will be enhanced by decreasing stand contrast created by past and proposed treatments through selective removal of dead and dying trees.

Maps of the proposed treatment areas are attached.

Preliminary Issues and Resource Concerns

The following is an initial list of issues and resource concerns. Some of these may not exist upon further examination and survey while other issues may surface through further survey, assessment and public scoping:

1. Forest stand health in relation to levels of insect and disease activities;
2. Sustainability of whitebark pine;
3. Impacts to habitat and populations of grizzly bears within the present grizzly bear recovery area;
4. Stand structure composition relative to the Forest Plan Amendment for Canada Lynx;
5. Disturbance to wildlife by harvest activities;
6. Road density in relation to the Forest Plan and Plan Amendments for grizzly bear habitat conservation for the Greater Yellowstone Area National Forests;
7. Accelerated soil erosion;
8. Stream habitat conditions for cutthroat trout;
9. Impacts to water quality, water quantity, and stream channel condition;
10. Impacts to Native American religious or cultural sites and archeological resources;
11. Impacts to populations of Forest Service sensitive plants and animals;
12. Scenic integrity impacted by past and proposed timber harvest activities;
13. Noxious weed establishment and spread;

14. Impacts to recreation activities and hunting;
15. Impacts to special use permittees;
16. Impacts to roads from harvest activities.

Decision Framework and Responsible Official

Responsible Official: John Hagengruber, District Forest Ranger, Buffalo Ranger District, P.O. Box 278, Moran, WY 83013.

In the decision, the District Ranger will answer the following two questions based on the analysis:

1. Whether the proposed action will proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?
2. What mitigation measures, design features and monitoring requirements will the Forest Service apply to the proposed action?

Forest Plan Consistency

The project must be consistent with the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan of 1990. The purpose and need described above is supported by the following Bridger-Teton Forest Plan Goals: 1.1(a,b,c), 1.2 (a,b), 1.3(b), 2.1(a), 3.1(a,b), 3.3(a), 4.1(a,b), 4.2(a,b,c,d), 4.2(c) and 4.9(a). The Teton LSA (pg 5-1) further reviewed these goals for the Jackson and Buffalo Ranger District and applied them to all recommendations.

The proposed Grouse Mountain project lies within Management Area 62 (Spread Creek) as described in the 1990 Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (pp 264-265).

Management Area 62 is further divided into Desired Future Condition (DFC) areas that have specific management direction to accomplish Forest goals and objectives. There are 2 DFC areas represented within this proposed project area. Applicable standards and guidelines will be reviewed during IDT meetings and spelled out in the project record. Management emphasis for the DFC is summarized as follows:

DFC 7a - Grizzly bear habitat recovery through scheduled timber harvest: Management emphasis is on enhancement of habitat and maintenance of recovered grizzly bear populations. (See pages 201-205 of the Forest Plan for specific standards and guidelines).

Fisheries and Wildlife Prescription – Long-term grizzly habitat management provides for vegetation diversity, approximates natural conditions, and includes all stages of forested environment from old growth to grass and forb stages. Thus, seasonal production of grizzly foods and cover and denning habitat is provided. Habitat is managed to achieve the game and fish populations, harvest levels, success and recreation day objectives identified by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and agreed to by the Forest Service. Cumulative effects analysis is performed for all development proposals within grizzly bear habitat

Vegetation: Timber Prescription – Silvicultural practices are used to preserve and enhance grizzly bear habitat values. Timber harvest is scheduled. Vegetation management practices provide limited opportunities to obtain firewood and other products

Access: Roads – Management of the area requires a limited road system providing access for some public and commodity uses. Most vehicle access is limited to arterial and collector roads with closure of most local roads for grizzly bear security.

DFC 10 - Some resource development while having no adverse and some beneficial effects on wildlife. Management emphasis is to provide long-term and short-term habitat to meet the needs of wildlife, managed in balance with timber harvest, grazing and minerals development. (See pages 235-239 of the Forest Plan for specific standards and guidelines).

Fisheries and Wildlife Prescription – Groups of species are emphasized, such as early or late succession-dependent species, in order to increase species richness or diversity.

Vegetation: Timber Prescription – Silvicultural practices including scheduled timber harvest, emphasize achieving desired wildlife habitat conditions, while developing long-term, overall big game hiding cover values. Utilization of firewood and other products is encouraged in ways compatible with maintaining wildlife values.

Access: Roads – Management of the area requires a moderate road system to provide commodity and public access.

Comments

It is important that we understand your views regarding this proposal. Your comments will also help us determine if there are alternative ways to achieve the purpose and need. Although your comments are always welcome, comments received by December 29, 2008 will be most useful to this analysis. A subsequent opportunity to comment will be provided later in the process which complies with 36 CFR215.11 and individuals who comment at that time will have standing to appeal the project.

Comments or suggestions should be sent to:

Buffalo Ranger District, Bridger-Teton National Forest
Attention: Jeff Laub
P.O. Box 278
Moran, WY 83013

phone: 307-543-0130

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 15 days.

Submitting comments will ensure that you are included in the mailing list for further information. If you do not wish to comment at this time, but want to remain on the mailing list, please notify us.

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MAP ATTACHED