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News Release

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Rocky Mountain Ranger District Releases Benchmark Fuels Reduction Decision

Mike Munoz, the District Ranger on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District, has decided to implement the Benchmark Fuels Reduction Project. This project is located along the Benchmark Road corridor approximately 13 air miles southwest of Augusta, Montana. Major drainages included in this area are the South Fork of the Sun River, Ford Creek, and Wood Creek. A project area of approximately 10,600 acres, was analyzed for this project. The decision calls for the treatment of fuels on 763 acres lying within the project area. Fuels will be reduced using a variety of treatments including: hand thinning and slashing, mechanical thinning, and the application of prescribed fire. The project requires 0.1 mile of temporary road that currently exists on the landscape as a two-track road. The temporary road will be obliterated when project implementation is completed.

Implementing this project will reduce fuels that pose a risk to human life, recreation residences, permitted guest lodges, Forest Service administrative sites, and campgrounds along the Benchmark Road as well as private property adjacent to the National Forest's eastern boundary. The reduction of fuels in the area will also improve the safety for fire fighters responding to future wildland fires that may occur in the area. "Throughout this analysis and looking back at recent wildland fire events it is clear that unsafe conditions for fire personnel exist," said Munoz, "Recent fire events, like the High Fire (2003), the Ford Creek and Cigarette Fires (2006) and the Ahorn Fire (2007), make it clear that we will likely experience wildland fire in this area again. The fuel reduction activities that we intend to implement will not prevent wildfire from occurring but they may well give us the upper hand in allowing safe and effective fire management, enhancing our ability to protect human life and private property." This fuels reduction project will support ongoing efforts to reduce the chance that future wildfires could burn off of the Forest onto adjacent private lands. "We continue to implement prescribed fire in the Scapegoat wilderness to lessen the chance of catastrophic fire exiting the wilderness into the Benchmark area. However those actions are not enough because wildfire can initiate anywhere on the forest." Munoz said.

Many public comments were considered in arriving at the decision resulting in some substantial changes to the final decision. Notable support from recreation residence permittees, local conservation organizations, and the general public was expressed during the analysis process. A number of resource concerns were addressed in the decision including goshawk nesting habitat, inventoried roadless area, old growth, threatened and endangered species, management indicator species, visuals, and soils. It is expected that the fuel reduction project authorized in this decision will begin this coming spring.

For additional information on this project, contact Mike Munoz or Russel Owen at the Rocky Mountain Ranger District, at (406)466-5341.

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