

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009

**North End Wildlife Habitat Enhancement and Fuels Reduction Project  
Public Scoping Letter**

**Bearlodge Ranger District  
Crook County, WY**

The Bearlodge Ranger District of the Black Hills National Forest is in the planning phase of a wildlife habitat enhancement and fuel reduction project.

*Proposed Action*

The District is proposing fuel reduction north of Wyoming State Highway 24 in the Bear Lodge Mountains, east of Alva and west of Aladdin, Wyoming. Prescribed broadcast burning would take place on about 1,488 acres, and a fuel break would be constructed on about 150 to 200 acres along National Forest System Road (NFSR) 830.4 (see attached map). No road construction or reconstruction would be necessary. Activities would take place over the next two to five years.

Preliminary analysis indicates that this project can be excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. Regulations allow this exclusion for actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. The project is proposed under the authority of Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, chapter 30, section 31.2 (Categories of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo are Required), category 6:

- (6) Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction. Examples include but are not limited to:
  - (i) Girdling trees to create snags;
  - (ii) Thinning or brush control to improve growth or to reduce fire hazard including the opening of an existing road to a dense timber stand;
  - (iii) Prescribed burning to control understory hardwoods in stands of southern pine; and
  - (iv) Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor.

There are no known extraordinary circumstances (sensitive species, wetlands, etc.) that would be affected by the project.

*Purpose of and Need for Action*

The purpose of this project is to implement the Black Hills National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) by improving the vigor of understory vegetation in pine stands and reducing natural fuel build-up. Assessment of the project area indicates that pine stands have become overgrown with immature trees, reducing the productivity of understory shrubs, forbs, and grasses and increasing fire hazard. The proposed actions would contribute toward achievement of Forest Plan goals related to wildlife habitat (Goal 2) and hazardous fuels (Goal 10). The project area is located in Management Area 4.1, where the Forest Plan emphasizes wood fiber production, wildlife habitat, and visual quality.

The objective of the proposed burning is to increase vigor of grass and forbs and regenerate hardwood shrubs. This would improve foraging habitat for big game as well as other species. Reintroducing fire into this fire-dependent ecosystem would also be expected to reduce existing surface and ladder fuels, thereby decreasing the risk uncharacteristically intense wildfire.

The objective of the proposed fuel break is to reduce potential fire intensity in order to create defensible space and strategic control points for wildfire suppression operations.

### *Project Description*

Prescribed burning is proposed in four burn units totaling approximately 1,488 acres that lie north of Wyoming Highway 24 (see map). Burning would take place in autumn or spring when weather and fuel moisture conditions tend to be most favorable. Manual and possibly aerial ignition techniques would be used.

Placement of burn unit control lines would take advantage of existing roads, topographic features, and appropriate fuel types where available. Where these features are not available, control lines would be constructed. An estimated 2.7 miles of control line would be constructed using a combination of manual labor and small machinery.

Burning is proposed on approximately 1,278 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands and 210 acres of adjacent, privately owned land. Owners of affected lands have been contacted regarding these proposals, and formal cooperative agreements would be developed. Burning on these lands would allow the use of existing roads on private land as control lines, reducing the need for constructed lines.

A site-specific burn plan would be developed for the proposed burns. This plan would identify the weather and fire behavior parameters necessary to conduct the burns safely and effectively. Production of smoke would be inevitable, but smoke management techniques would be used to minimize nuisance smoke drifting downslope to residences.

The proposed fuel break would extend approximately 10 miles along NFSR 830.4, from Wyoming Highway 24 north to NFSR 837.1 (see map). Ponderosa pine less than five inches in diameter would be thinned to a relatively wide spacing (10-20 feet). Thinning would be accomplished manually or using machinery that chips and shreds woody materials. In areas treated manually, slash would be piled by hand and burned. Width of the fuel break would depend on fuel conditions. Where timber harvest has recently occurred, fuel reduction would concentrate on areas of dense pine reproduction within 20 to 30 feet of the road. In other areas, treatment may extend up to 300 feet from the road. Lower branches on remaining trees would be pruned to raise the height of the canopy, which decreases the risk of fire transitioning from the ground surface into tree crowns.

Proposed actions would be implemented in accordance with Forest Plan standards and guidelines, Regional Watershed Conservation Practices, and applicable laws and regulations.

*How to Comment*

Your comments on this proposal are welcomed. Comments from interested members of the public as well as resource specialists within the agency will help us refine the proposed actions and conduct appropriate analysis of effects. Written comments should be addressed to Steve Kozel, Bearlodge Ranger District, PO 680, Sundance, WY 82729.

You may also send comments via electronic mail to:  
comments-rocky-mountain-black-hills-bearlodge@fs.fed.us

Comments may be hand-delivered to the Bearlodge Ranger District office, 101 South 21st Street, Sundance, Wyoming, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.

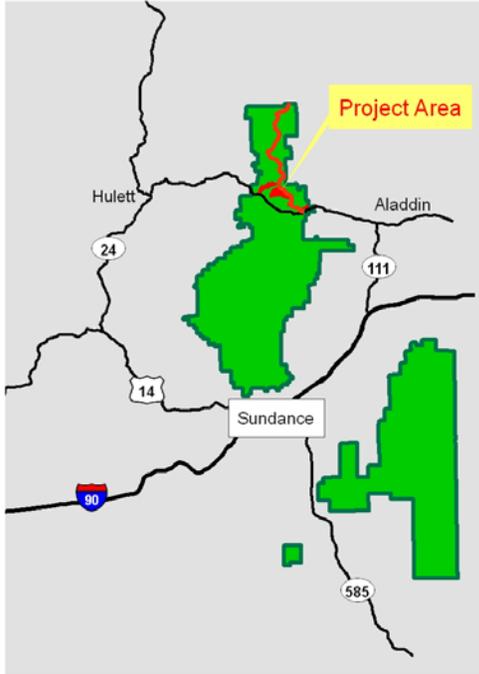
Comments are requested by **April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009**.

*For More Information*

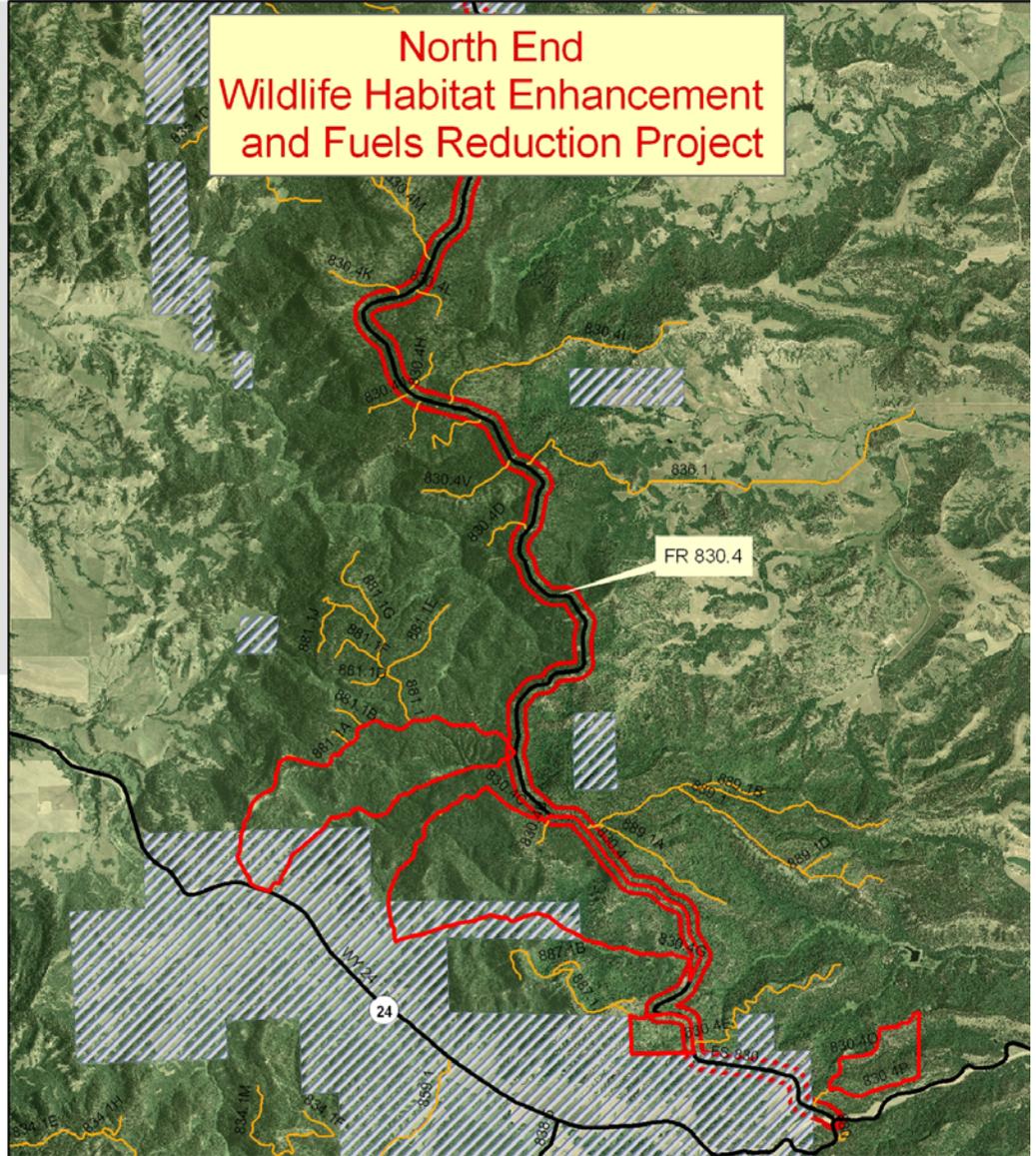
To find out more or to be placed on a mailing list for the Decision Memo contact Steve Kozel, District Ranger, at the Bearlodge Ranger District, (307) 283-1361.

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Steve Kozel



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**Legend**

-  Burn Unit
-  Fuelbreak
-  Private Land

