

Record of Decision

Trout-West Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

USDA Forest Service
Pike-San Isabel National Forest
Colorado

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

Hazardous fuels need to be treated within the Trout-West project area to reduce the potential for adverse effects from crown wildfire and provide for firefighter and public safety. Much of the Trout-West project area contains over-dense forests associated with high crown fire potential. Damaging wildfires similar to those experienced in recent years will continue unless action is taken to reduce forest density and fuel hazard.

The Trout and West Creek watersheds (collectively referred to as the “analysis area”) are important to the quality of life of residents and visitors, including people who live in Denver. These watersheds drain into the Upper South Platte River and contribute to Denver’s municipal water supply. The soils in the watersheds tend to erode following severe disturbance such as wildfire. The potential for catastrophic flooding and sedimentation is very high.

In 1999, Foster Wheeler Corporation published the *Landscape Assessment - Upper South Platte Watershed*, which identified the Trout and West Creek watersheds as having high fire hazard. The project area is located within the “red zone” (Colorado State Forest Service 1999).

In 2000, the National Fire Plan was adopted to address hazardous fuels concerns across the United States. The Trout and West Creek watersheds were considered high priorities under the National Fire Plan because of the density and condition of the forests, the presence of wildland-urban interface, and contribution to municipal watersheds for Woodland Park and Denver.

In 2001, seven distinct treatment units within the Trout and West Creek watersheds were selected to be evaluated for thinning, mechanical slash treatments, and prescribed burning. The Trout-West treatment units were chosen because of the high values at risk of wildfire damage (i.e., forest habitat, private property, infrastructure, clean water) in an area prone to crown fires. Proximity to private land, forest health, road access, and operations feasibility were factored into the project boundaries. A Forest Service Enterprise Interdisciplinary Team composed of resource management specialists was hired to develop a proposal to treat the approximately 32,000 acres of Pike-San Isabel National Forest lands within the seven treatment units.

The team evaluated the project area and determined that prescribed burning alone would not adequately reduce fuel hazard. They observed over dense standing trees across the project area, and concluded that thinning treatments would be needed to reduce canopy density across all seven treatment units. Research by Dr. Merrill Kaufmann was used to characterize the historic range of vegetation conditions across the project area, and a general thinning prescription was developed to promote sustainable, diverse forest conditions, more like the historic forest conditions.

The Interdisciplinary Team considered specific complexities associated with the Trout-West Project. About half the project area lies within one mile of private property. Residential areas are nestled within areas of dense forest. The Manitou Experimental Forest overlaps the project boundaries and contains many ongoing study areas that need to be protected. Several Forest Service, Management Indicator, and Threatened and Endangered Species are known to occur in the area. The watershed is susceptible to erosion, and sediment from the project area ultimately flows into Strontia Springs Reservoir as part of the water supply for the city of Denver.

The Interdisciplinary Team developed a Proposed Action to thin and burn most of the 32,000-acre project area, considering the existing and desired condition and planning guidance in the Pike-San Isabel National Forest Plan, Forest Service Roads Policy, and the National Fire Plan.

While the Enterprise Team was developing a site-specific proposal, another Forest Service team was preparing a Condition Class Analysis for the watersheds. Wendell Hann and Diane Strohm led an effort to evaluate the existing Fire Regime Condition Class. They estimated the acreage that would need to be treated in various vegetation types to reduce Condition Class to 1 across six vegetation types within the Trout and West Creek watersheds. The Enterprise Team reviewed the Condition Class analysis in the Fall of 2001 and found that the site-specific proposal would treat sufficient acreage to reduce Condition Class within the analysis area from an average of 2 to 1, especially within the two vegetation types that needed the most acreage treated.

Scoping for the Trout-West Proposed Action occurred in Fall 2001. Public input was used to focus the analysis on important public issues, to refine the proposal, and to develop alternatives. The Interdisciplinary Team devised a system of no-treatment areas to retain diversity and cover across the analysis area and protect riparian areas. The team applied stringent design criteria to temporary roads and conventional logging methods to reduce adverse effects from roads. A monitoring plan was developed to provide methods for evaluating and adapting to lessons learned during implementation. A host of design features were applied to the Proposed Action to reduce effects on soils and water quality, wildlife habitat, noxious weed populations, scenic values, and public safety, among other issues. The Forest Service held two public meetings and met with groups such as Teller County, Colorado Wild, Sierra Club, and the Kiwanis to discuss the project.

Significant public issues included the following: project effectiveness in reducing crown fire hazard, vegetation condition, forest pathogens, soils and water quality, fish and wildlife, sensitive plants, noxious weeds, air quality, scenery management, recreation management, socio-economics, and heritage resources. Many people expressed their desire to remain involved with the project and offered support in planning, fundraising, and monitoring.

Some private landowners expressed interest in “Good Neighbor” and other types of agreements to include work on private and adjacent public lands. Some people offered access through their private property to reduce the monetary or environmental costs of the operation.

By late Spring 2002, seven alternatives (i.e., Proposed Action, No Action, and Alternatives A-E) were developed to resolve public issues raised during scoping.

The year 2002 was one of the worst fire seasons on record; the high intensity, stand-replacing Hayman Fire in June 2002 was the largest in Colorado history. Hundreds of structures were destroyed. The fire burned within the Upper South Platte Watershed, the primary source of municipal water for the city of Denver. The cost of fighting the fire exceeded \$39 million dollars. The fire burned approximately 26,800 acres in the Trout and West Creek watersheds, including 25 percent of the original project area.

Once the smoke cleared, the Interdisciplinary Team revisited the project area and re-analyzed the project considering the Hayman Fire. The Condition Class Analysis was recalculated, and the results indicated that the watershed as a whole was still in Condition Class 2 and that several thousand acres still needed to be treated to reduce the Condition Class across the analysis area.

The size of the project area was reduced to 26,000 acres once burned areas were eliminated, and the Proposed Action was reduced to approximately 20,000 acres within six treatment units (the Trail Creek Area was located entirely within the Hayman Fire boundary).

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was circulated for comment late in 2002. The comment period ended March 3, 2003. A Final EIS (FEIS) and Response to Public Comment was prepared in Spring 2003. This decision considers the public comments and findings in the FEIS.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action with an adaptive management approach. This alternative includes thinning of about 20,000 acres of National Forest; yarding trees from about 17,000 of those acres; construction of about 14 miles of temporary roads to facilitate log haul; rehabilitation of temporary roads to near natural conditions; rehabilitation of existing unclassified (non-system roads)¹; and follow-up surface fuels treatments, such as piling and burning any remaining unwanted debris. I have decided to adopt all of the design features in the FEIS to reduce project impacts, and to adopt the monitoring and adaptive management plan outlined in the FEIS. I recognize that there are some unresolved issues associated with the project (discussed below). I intend to use the adaptive management strategy to address these issues. A map of the Proposed Action (“Map 2”) is attached to this Record of Decision.

¹ Non-system or unclassified roads on National Forest lands have not been constructed or authorized by the Forest Service.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered six other alternatives, which are discussed below. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in the FEIS within Chapter Two. The identification of the environmentally preferred alternative is very complex for this project. The environmentally preferable alternative is the one that “causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment and best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural and natural resources.” Alternatives that reduce Condition Class within Vegetation Types 1, 2, and 4 (Proposed Action and Alternatives A, C, and E) all meet this criteria. Alternative E would have the greatest potential benefit to the environment; however, it is associated with some increased risks discussed in the FEIS. Alternative A eliminates risks from prescribed burning, but does not include burning’s benefits. Alternative C eliminates risks from temporary roads; however, the analysis in the FEIS indicates these risks are relatively minor.

No Action

The No Action alternative would not have resulted in any hazardous fuels reduction treatments or associated road work. Fuels hazard would continue to increase until a wildfire occurred. Wildfire costs and damages are predicted to exceed \$240 million in a 30-year period under No Action. This alternative would not have treated sufficient acreage to reduce Condition Class to 1 within Vegetation Types 1, 2, and 4 and would not meet the project purpose and need for action.

Alternative A

Alternative A would have treated slightly fewer acres than the Proposed Action. It would have included mechanical treatment but would not use prescribed burning to reduce surface fuels. Fuels would be removed using tractors, cable systems, and helicopters and hauled away as logs, chips, or other products. Alternative A would have been more expensive to implement than the Proposed Action and would have eliminated all prescribed burning impacts such as accelerated erosion and smoke. Alternative A would have treated sufficient acreage to reduce Condition Class within Vegetation Types 1, 2, and 4 but would not have included beneficial ecological effects of nutrient cycling associated with prescribed burning.

Alternative B

Alternative B would have implemented thinning, piling, and burning on the portion of the project area within one mile of private property that contains at least one home per 40 acres. It would have treated about 13,570 acres. Alternative B would have been less expensive than the Proposed Action but would not have been as effective in reducing hazardous fuels across the analysis area. Alternative B would not have treated sufficient acreage to reduce Condition Class across the analysis area. The Hayman Fire demonstrated that fires can spread far more than one mile in a single burning period.

Alternative C

Alternative C would have implemented the Proposed Action without building any temporary roads. Alternative C would have been more expensive to implement than the Proposed Action and would have had similar effects. The analysis did not reveal significant benefits from eliminating temporary roads. Helicopter logging has greater safety risks and is less feasible than conventional logging.

Alternative D

Alternative D would have treated approximately 6,750 acres of vegetation within one-half mile of private property that has at least one home per 40 acres. Alternative D would have included strict diameter limits, heavier canopy retention, and increased the relative proportion of broadcast burning. Alternative D is the least expensive alternative but would not have treated sufficient acreage to reduce Condition Class across the analysis area. The Hayman Fire demonstrated that fires can spread far more than one mile in a single burning period.

Alternative E

Alternative E would have treated approximately 26,320 acres. It would have included harvest openings on 30 percent of the project area to best mimic historic conditions. It would have required a Forest Plan amendment to implement. Alternative E would have restored the landscape to its historic condition more fully and would have been more expensive to implement than the other alternatives. Alternative E would have treated more than enough acreage to reduce Condition Class across Vegetation Types 1, 2, and 4.

Reasons for this Decision

I have selected the Proposed Action because I believe it best responds to the Purpose and Need for action and contributes to meeting all project goals. It employs the practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm recommended by the Interdisciplinary Team. It includes a monitoring and adaptive management plan to ensure that standards for environmental protection are met.

Crown Fire Hazard

The primary Purpose and Need for this project relates to the existing high crown fire hazard from over dense forests within the project area. The FEIS discusses the effectiveness of each alternative in reducing crown fire hazard and reducing the Fire Regime Condition Class within the analysis area.

The FEIS indicates that the Proposed Action and Alternatives A, C, and E treat sufficient acres to reduce Condition Class across the analysis area, particularly within ponderosa pine and mixed ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir forests. No Action and Alternatives B and D would not treat sufficient acres to reduce Condition Class.

Several public commenters expressed their belief that the Proposed Action treats more acreage than necessary. Commenters further stated that only lands closest to private property should be treated.

I have decided to approve treatment of approximately 20,000 acres within six treatment units. The behavior of the Hayman Fire confirms that forests in the Trout-West area are prone to damaging crown fire that can rapidly spread. The Fire Regime Condition Class Analysis demonstrates that thousands of acres need to be treated to reduce Condition Class across the watershed. The National Fire Plan provides clear direction to reduce Condition Class in the wildland – urban interface and adjacent watersheds, especially those that contribute to municipal water supplies.

I acknowledge that lands closest to the wildland-urban interface are highest priority for treatment within the project area, and funding will be applied to these areas before outlying areas. Other priorities are as follows: 1) accessibility and strategic importance for fire suppression; 2) condition of adjacent lands and willingness of neighbors/partners to reduce hazardous fuels on adjacent lands; and 3) prior investment into “Good Neighbor Agreements” between Federal, State and local entities.

Vegetation Conditions and Forest Pathogens

One of the project goals is to promote sustainable forest conditions, more like historic conditions. Currently, stands within the project area are denser and contain a greater proportion of Douglas-fir and less aspen than they were given the historic fire regime. These conditions make the stands more prone to crown fire and insect and disease damage.

The Interdisciplinary Team developed a thinning treatment prescription to effectively reduce hazardous fuels and promote sustainable forest conditions within the project area.² Within heavy thin and on-site treatment areas, canopy cover would be reduced to an average 15 to 25 percent, with individual acres ranging from 10 to 40 percent. This range resembles historic conditions and allows for variation given existing stand conditions, including aspect, slope and elevation, stand density and structure, proportion of Douglas-fir to ponderosa pine, age and size of the mature trees, presences of insect and disease damage or risk of damage, proximity to private property, management area direction, access, and operational feasibility.

Dr. Merrill Kaufmann, whose research on historic conditions provided the foundation for the Condition Class and Vegetation Condition analysis, expressed that thinning as described for the Proposed Action in the DEIS may not successfully meet the project goal of promoting sustainable conditions that resemble historic conditions. Dr. Kaufmann took specific issue with “thinning from below” and with the lack of larger openings in the Proposed Action.

In response, the thinning description was amended in the FEIS to better reflect Dr. Kaufmann’s work. The term “thinning from below” was removed and the intent to provide a diverse forest mosaic was reinforced to better describe the proposed treatment. The intent of the prescription is to retain older trees in sufficient density to meet old-growth definitions and provide for a diverse forest structure for the future (these stands are not currently old enough to meet old-growth definitions, but will age over time). The prescription would break up crown continuity and reduce crown fire potential, but would preserve the clumpy structure developed with the mixed-interval fire regime associated with historic conditions.

² This decision approves a general prescription; however, detailed information assembled by the Interdisciplinary Team will be used to generate site-specific prescriptions for each treatment stand. Site-specific information and maps are in the analysis files.

I have decided not to create and maintain persistent openings as part of this decision. I acknowledge that Alternative E better promotes the historic condition and fire regime because it would have included created openings. However, I also recognize that Alternative E would have been met with strong resistance from some members of the public. Many people expressed support for less intensive thinning and would not want to see larger openings created or maintained. Alternative E would cost more and has greater environmental risks due to increased treatment intensity and acreage. Openings could be integrated into a future treatment decision.

I believe the Proposed Action moves toward the historic condition, but will be more socially acceptable than Alternative E.

Many members of the public stated that the general treatment prescription was too heavy-handed and that more canopy should be retained. The Environmental Protection Agency, some environmental groups, and many individuals expressed this opinion. Some commenters suggested a 15-inch diameter limit to assure that all larger trees are retained.

I have decided to approve the Proposed Action, but intend to retain the most canopy possible while still meeting fuels reduction goals. I intend to retain an average of 25% canopy in thinned areas. In addition, Abert's squirrel and other wildlife and watershed design features will be retained, which will increase the overall density within the project areas. I also intend to leave most of the small inclusions of steeper areas within "tractor ground" untreated. These measures will provide balance and diversity to the overall project and respond to public concerns.

I recognize that leaving more trees will result in a need from more frequent maintenance treatments (fewer than 20 years between treatments). Additional mature trees can always be cut in future years if needed, but they may take 100 years or more to replace. Should monitoring results indicate that a heavier thinning prescription is needed to effectively reduce crown fire and meet project goals, the prescriptions can be adapted in latter years of project implementation.

I have decided not to include diameter limits in this decision. Some large trees may need to be cut to meet the project goals and prescription variants described above. The FEIS demonstrates that sufficient numbers of large trees will be retained to meet old-growth standards without strict diameter limits and that such limits would reduce the effectiveness of the prescription and hamper its ability to mimic historic conditions. The design features intended to provide for soils, water quality, and fish and wildlife species are expected to effectively retain large trees, without inclusion of strict diameter limits. Should monitoring results indicate that diameter limits are needed to assure retention of large trees, the prescriptions can be adapted in latter years of project implementation.

Soils and Water Quality

The FEIS Soils and Water Quality analysis demonstrates that crown fire would lead to significant erosion and sediment delivery to streams. The sediment is predicted to eventually enter the Denver municipal water supply. Trout Creek is 303d-listed as impaired (under the Clean Water Act) due to sediment. Fuels reduction is needed in part to reduce potential sediment entering streams from wildfire. However, the FEIS also recognizes that fuels reduction operations (i.e., thinning and yarding; surface fuels treatments, especially broadcast burning; and roadwork) can disturb soils. The Proposed Action was developed to balance the need and feasibility of fuels reduction with the need to protect soils and water quality. Alternative A would produce the least amount of sediment of the alternatives that effectively meet the purpose and need for action. The Proposed Action would potentially produce more sediment due to prescribed burning. I find that in the balance, the benefits of prescribed burning outweigh the potential sediment delivered, especially given the design features included for the Proposed Action. The design features and monitoring included in the Proposed Action meet the intent of the Clean Water Act and incorporate all required mitigation.

I have decided to approve treatment of steeper, less accessible parts of the project area using helicopters or other methods that effectively reduce potential sediment delivery from these sites. New technology may allow on-site treatments that avoid the costs and impacts from helicopter yarding but effectively reduce fuels without unacceptable erosion. I intend to implement on-site treatments currently included in the Proposed Action and monitor them to determine how well soil and water standards and design features are met. If on-site treatments prove a viable alternative to helicopter yarding, I intend to use this technology where appropriate.

Fish and Wildlife

The wildlife biologist assigned to the Interdisciplinary Team concludes that the Proposed Action meets the intent of current guidelines for fish and wildlife protection over the long term. Even though some of the wildlife habitat model results show declines in habitat capability from the reduced canopy, these results do not consider the design features included in the prescription to protect wildlife.

I find that the thinning treatments adequately follow wildlife planning guidelines, given the risks to wildlife habitat from damaging crown fire and the historic vegetation condition with which the wildlife species evolved (as discussed in the FEIS and associated documents). A Biological Assessment has been submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who documented their concurrence with its findings relative to threatened and endangered species on May 14, 2003.

Some commenters disagreed with the Proposed Action design feature to retain stands that are mapped as existing deer and elk thermal cover. I acknowledge that the Forest Plan thermal cover standards are not necessarily appropriate for the vegetation types in the project area, given the historic, sustainable conditions described in the FEIS. However, many people commented during scoping that a system of untreated areas should be interspersed with the thinning to provide wildlife and scenic buffers and diversity. The Interdisciplinary Team evaluated the distribution of stands mapped as thermal cover and concluded the patches were well-distributed and could be retained without loss of project effectiveness. I considered treating the thermal cover units and determined that they could be left untreated to help provide diversity in the project area.

I find that sufficient acreage in each Wildlife Diversity Unit is left untreated to meet existing thermal cover guidelines in the Forest Plan. Although several of the Diversity Units are below standards and guidelines now, there are several factors that will mitigate this. First, all existing thermal cover will be retained. There are significant areas of the Diversity Units left untreated that have the potential to move into thermal cover over time. Lastly, in the thinned units, aspen rejuvenation will increase summer thermal cover, and there will be increased conifer canopy growth after thinning.

Sensitive Plants, Range Resources, and Noxious Weeds

I have decided to implement the design features included in the Proposed Action for rare plants and noxious weeds. I recognize that ground disturbance from thinning, yarding, burning, and road work could result in spread of noxious weeds. Pre-disturbance surveys will be completed during project layout and sensitive plants will be avoided. Suggested measures to reduce noxious weed spread will be applied. Range resources will improve as a result of the Proposed Action.

Prescribed Burning and Smoke

Many people expressed concern about using prescribed burning in the project. I acknowledge that Alternative A would have been feasible and would have reduced or eliminated the need for burning. However, options for on-site treatment would have been entirely eliminated in Alternative A.

I intend to use mechanical treatment where practical to reduce or eliminate need for burning in some stands. However, I believe that burning will be necessary to effectively treat surface fuels created by thinning across most of the project area. I recognize that burning has inherent risks and intend to design the project to alleviate risks as much as possible. Treatment boundaries will be laid out considering future burning.

The FEIS describes several design features to reduce risks from burning and excessive smoke. I am adopting all design features included in Chapter Two of the FEIS to reduce smoke and risk from burning.

Recreation, Roads, and Access

The Proposed Action includes development of 14 miles of temporary roads. Design criteria for these roads ensure that they will be relatively easy to rehabilitate once they are no longer needed for the project.

I decided to implement the road development and closure aspects of the Proposed Action. Alternative C would not have built these roads and would have treated sufficient acreage to meet the project purpose and need. However, the benefits of not building the roads did not outweigh the added expense of increased reliance on helicopter yarding. Therefore, I decided to approve construction and rehabilitation of the 14 miles of temporary road. The design criteria applied to these roads reduce their potential adverse effects.

The Interdisciplinary Team conducted a Forest Service Roads Analysis and identified more than 100 miles of unclassified roads within the seven original treatment units. About half of these roads will be reconstructed and used to facilitate the project, then rehabilitated after use in the project. Several commenters expressed their belief that these roads should be maintained for fire suppression, future land management, and other access needs. They suggested the roads be closed if needed, but not fully rehabilitated.

I have decided to fully rehabilitate unclassified roads within the Trout-West project area as part of this decision. The area simply has too many roads. These roads are causing environmental harm including accelerated erosion and increased off-road vehicle access. These roads are not needed for public or administrative access. Adequate access for fire suppression and other administrative needs would be retained in all alternatives. Rehabilitation would reduce the burden to manage use on these roads. Simple closures would not likely be effective given the terrain involved.

Many people suggested that the thinning itself could lead to increased adverse effects from off-road use. I have considered these comments and agree that adequate Forest Service presence, including law enforcement, needs to accompany the thinning project to assure that design features such as placing barriers between treatment areas and roads, public awareness campaigns, and signing effectively offset potential increased use. I encourage the use of volunteers to help patrol problem areas and report offenders.

Manitou Experimental Forest

I recognize that the Manitou Experiment Forest requires special consideration due to its role as a natural laboratory. Several ongoing experiments need to be protected along with the potential for future studies. All work within the Experimental Forest needs to be coordinated with its staff. Many residents within the Ridgewood Subdivision expressed their desire for adjacent lands to be treated first and their commitment to reducing fuel hazard on the private lands within the subdivision. I would like to prioritize work around the Ridgewood Subdivision and expect to work with the Manitou Experimental Forest staff to facilitate implementation given research needs.

Visual Resources

I have decided to implement the scenery management design features included in Chapter Two of the FEIS for the Proposed Action. These measures will serve to maintain scenic integrity and meet planning guidelines.

Socio-Economics

The Proposed Action is the most financially efficient alternative, given the analysis in the FEIS for all parties. The Proposed Action would save approximately \$13.5 million in fire suppression and recovery costs over a 30-year period. Private landowners and Denver Water Providers would save approximately \$148 million over the same period. Alternatives A, C, and E would result in similar savings but cost more to implement.

The No Action alternative is associated with the greatest wildfire costs of all alternatives. Costs and damages are estimated to exceed \$240 million over a 30-year period. About 79 percent of these costs are from property damage to private land. The remaining costs include fire suppression, fire recovery efforts, Denver Water expenses, and loss of Forest Service facilities.

Alternatives B and D cost less to implement but do not treat sufficient acreage to reduce Condition Class across the analysis area. Therefore, these alternatives are associated with higher wildfire damage estimates -\$237 million and -\$115 million, respectively.

Private landowners have the most to gain or lose from the selection of an alternative. The economic analysis in the FEIS highlights the need for private landowners to treat their lands to reduce fuels hazard. Working together, future losses may be avoided.

Given the steepness and accessibility issues identified by the Interdisciplinary Team, I have decided to approve helicopter yarding as part of this operation. Treatments within steeper areas are needed to reduce Condition Class across the analysis area. Based on their experience and observations, the Interdisciplinary Team did not recommend on-site treatment for the steeper, inaccessible areas within one mile of private land. The FEIS indicates that follow up burning required for on-site treatments is also associated with a higher risk for erosion and sediment delivery.

I recognize that helicopter yarding substantially increases treatment costs and is not a common practice for the type of material that would be produced from proposed thinning. The Interdisciplinary Team found few other options to treat steeper, less accessible lands containing dense forests.

New technology may be available that could alleviate the need for helicopter yarding. The project calls for about 1,000 acres of on-site treatment monitoring to determine if these treatments can effectively reduce canopy and allow safe follow-up surface fuels treatments that meet soils and water standards. Recent experiences with the Upper South Platte project indicate that on-site treatments may be more effective than previously thought.

Continued Citizen Involvement

I am impressed with the level of citizen interest in the Trout-West Project, both locally and regionally. I am committed to continued citizen involvement through the following vehicles: “Good Neighbor” Agreements to facilitate work on private land and adjacent federal land; agreements to allow residents to collect fuelwood as part of the project; agreements to allow project access through private land; discussions about site-specific prescriptions on neighboring private land; help with monitoring project effects; help with monitoring off-road vehicle use; integrated noxious weed control programs; and help with finding suitable contractors to complete the work. Interested parties may contact the Pikes Peak Ranger District office to obtain more information.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management

I have decided to approve the FEIS monitoring and adaptive management plan. In particular, I want to use the adaptive management plan to deal with continued public disagreement about specific elements of the prescription.

I have decided to implement the Proposed Action in stages, with monitoring, evaluation, and public involvement integrated into the treatments. The Proposed Action will be implemented over a 10-year period. I intend to implement the project in stages so that results from the first years of implementation can be used to improve future years' work.

I intend to prioritize treatments within the flatter, more accessible "tractor" areas within the Ridgewood, Long John, Ryan Quinlan, and Skelton treatment units. These areas will provide on the ground examples of the project prescription as applied to these areas. I intend to retain at least 25% canopy within these treatment areas. Light thin and on-site treatments will also likely be part of the first years' work. On-site treatments will be closely monitored to determine how well they reduce canopy and surface fuels to meet the need for action along with meeting soils and water standards (less than 15% adverse soil conditions following burning).

I intend to use the monitoring results to determine whether latter years' prescriptions should retain more trees to ensure that sufficient numbers of older, larger trees are retained to meet old-growth definitions. I intend to use the results to determine whether on-site treatments may be an effective alternative to helicopter yarding. I intend to use these results to determine whether diameter limits need to be assigned to treatment areas. I also intend to use the monitoring results to assure that design features intended to discourage illegal off-road vehicle use are effective.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The selected alternative will be implemented consistent with the intent of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan's long-term goals and objectives. The project was designed in conformance with the Forest Plan standards and incorporates appropriate Forest Plan guidelines for vegetation, soils and water quality, fish and wildlife, sensitive plants, noxious weeds, air quality, scenery management, recreation, economics, and heritage resources.

Consistency With The National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act, at 16 U.S.C. 1604(m)(2), allows exceptions to the general prohibition on harvesting trees prior to the culmination of mean annual increment for a given timber stand. This decision will create exceptions consistent with the law at part (m)(2) for the thinning treatment.

Executive Orders 11988 and 11990

No harvest activities will occur in riparian areas and no adverse effects to wetlands or to the integrity of floodplains due to project activities are anticipated.

Endangered Species Act

Effects on species listed under the Endangered Species Act are fully addressed in the FEIS and associated documents. Bald eagle is the only listed species that may be affected by the project. The US Fish and Wildlife Service documented their concurrence with the finding of "Not Likely to Adversely Affect" for bald eagle on this project (May 14, 2003).

National Historic Preservation Act

Heritage resource inventories have been conducted in the project area, and potential effects on heritage resources have been considered. Sites determined to be eligible to the National Register of Historic Places will be protected through avoidance. This will slightly reduce the acreage available for treatment, but will not affect the overall project effectiveness in reducing crown fire potential. The Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer has concurred in the determination of no effect and the Section 106 compliance process is complete. The Forest Service also consulted with many tribes regarding the project.

Implementation

Implementation Date

I will begin to secure funding and personnel to implement the project immediately. Implementation is expected to begin FY 2004 or later.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215. Written appeals must be postmarked within 45 days of the date legal notice of this decision is published in the Pueblo Chieftain.

Appeals must be addressed to:

USDA, Forest Service, Region 2
Attn: Appeal Deciding Officer
POB 25127
Lakewood, Colorado 80225-25127

Appeals must meet the following requirements:

1. State that the document is an appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215.
2. List the name and address of the appellant and, if possible, a telephone number.
3. Identify the decision document by title and subject, date of the decision, and name and title of the Responsible Official.
4. Identify the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks or portion of the decision to which the appellant objects.
5. State how the Responsible Official's decision fails to consider comments previously provided, either before or during the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6 and, if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

The appellant is responsible for submitting an appeal on or before the last day of the appeal filing period. Where there is a question about timeliness, the U.S. Postal Service postmark on a mailed appeal or the time and date imprint on a facsimile appeal will be used to determine timeliness.

Pursuant to 36 CFR Sec. 215.10(a), if no appeal is filed, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five (5) business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of the appeal disposition (36 CFR 215.10(b)).

Contact Person

A copy of the FEIS and Appendices are available for public review at the Pikes Peak Ranger District office and on the Internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/spl/twest.htm>. Please direct questions about this project to Rochelle Desser, Project Leader, at 541-592-4075 (rdesser@fs.fed.us).



ROBERT J. LEAVERTON
Pike-San Isabel National Forest Supervisor

July 11, 2003
DATE

Map “2” Proposed Action

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