



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

April 2004



# *Forest-wide Ecosystem Restoration and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project*

## **Decision Memo**

**Prepared By  
White Mountain National Forest**



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**White Mountain National Forest**  
**Forest-wide Ecosystem Restoration and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project**

**Decision Memo**  
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## **I. Summary**

As Forest Supervisor of the White Mountain National Forest, I have decided to implement a project to promote, enhance or maintain under-represented vegetative communities (ecosystem restoration) on 13 different sites totaling 347 acres over the next five years. These sites are located on the Saco and Androscoggin Ranger Districts, within Carroll and Coos Counties in New Hampshire, and Oxford County in Maine. To achieve the objective of ecosystem restoration, I plan to use prescribed broadcast burning to reduce competition and promote understory regeneration. Some sites will require mechanical treatment (chain saw, brush cutter, excavator-mounted brush hog) prior to burning to reduce ladder fuels or make the burn more effective. I have also decided to not implement ecosystem restoration activities at this time on 8 additional sites, totaling 336 acres, which had also been proposed for this project. This Decision Memo documents the rationale for my decision, the reasons for categorically excluding the decision, and the relationship to extraordinary circumstances.

## **II. Decision**

### **A. Background**

#### ***A1. How We Got to Here***

In June 2003, the White Mountain National Forest proposed a 5-year Forest-wide project to promote under-represented vegetative communities (ecosystem restoration) as part of a larger project that included wildlife opening and vista maintenance, and fuels reduction. These ecosystem restoration sites have been separated from the larger project and are being addressed in this separate Decision Memo, because the activities proposed here are intended to initiate a site condition rather than to maintain a site condition. Of the 21 sites originally proposed for ecosystem restoration, 8 have been deferred, and 13 are addressed in this Decision Memo.

On June 16, 2003, the White Mountain National Forest initiated an environmental analysis process for a proposed 5-year Forest-wide project to maintain wildlife openings and vistas, reduce hazardous fuels and promote under-represented vegetative communities (ecosystem restoration). On this date, a scoping report detailing this project proposal, and providing background information on how and why the proposal was developed, was mailed to over 750 interested and neighboring parties. The scoping report proposed to perform work within a 5-year period on 258 specific sites totaling approximately 1,597 acres across the National Forest.

The intent and the methods of the work to be performed are the primary similarities of the activities proposed on the 258 sites. The intent is to remove brush to promote understory growth. In the case of wildlife openings and vistas, the intent is to maintain the forest opening and promote the growth of grasses and forbs. In the case of ecosystem restoration, the intent is to promote regeneration of a desired understory species. The methods proposed to perform the work include a combination of mowing (tractor-pulled brush hog), mechanical treatment (chain saw, brush cutter, excavator-mounted brush hog), piling and burning of slash, and prescribed broadcast burning.

The resource management goals and objectives for the White Mountain National Forest are established by the 1986 Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), as amended.

- The White Mountain National Forest maintains upland wildlife openings, including abandoned or wild apple orchards, as relatively small components of the overall forest composition. There are many wildlife species that utilize openings as an integral part of their home range requirements (LRMP, Page VII-B-8).
- The White Mountain National Forest maintains scenic vistas as a component of the Forest Plan Visual Management System. Vistas are typically adjacent to roads and trails at key viewpoints, and maintenance of these vistas is part of ongoing management activities (LRMP, Page III-8).
- The White Mountain National Forest features northern hardwood management over softwood while maintaining the necessary habitat diversity for viable wildlife populations. This includes retaining or increasing some of the less common components needed for habitat diversity, such as oak and pine (LRMP, Appendix B).
- The White Mountain National Forest protects the forest land base from wildfires. Part of this effort includes reducing the potential for wildfire in high risk locations by reducing the fuels that might ignite or spread a wildfire.

After receiving 14 scoping responses and initiating the interdisciplinary analysis of environmental consequences for the proposed action, some modifications to the original proposal were made:

1. ***Two Separate Decisions:*** On those sites identified as wildlife openings and vistas, the intent of the proposed action is to maintain the existing management objective (maintain or enhance open conditions where they already exist, using methods that have most likely been performed successfully on these sites in the past). On those sites identified for ecosystem restoration, the intent of the proposed action is to introduce a new management objective (promote under-represented ecosystems by introducing treatment methods to sites where they may not have used in the past). Given these separate intents, there is also potential for different kinds of effects. As such, there will be two separate analyses and two separate decisions:
  - a. Wildlife Opening and Vista Maintenance, and
  - b. Ecosystem Restoration.
2. ***Deferred Sites:*** Based on a more detailed field review of the 258 proposed sites, 30 sites – totaling 383 acres - were deferred. These sites were deferred because they needed more extensive work (thinning or some other treatment requiring timber harvest) or more site-specific analysis than that proposed in this project; because they had specific resource protection concerns; because they were no longer viable for the intended objective, or because they were not consistent with Management Area goals and objectives. Any further analysis of these sites for future treatments is deferred to some other time. The deferred sites included:
  - a. Eight sites, totaling 336 acres, planned for ecosystem restoration, and
  - b. Twenty-two sites, totaling 47 acres, planned for wildlife opening maintenance.

- 3. Fuels Reduction:** Fuels reduction continues to be a secondary objective on some of the ecosystem restoration sites, but it is not a primary objective on any of the sites analyzed for this Decision Memo.

The remaining 13 sites proposed for ecosystem restoration prescribe the use of mechanical treatment to clear brush (potential ladder fuels) where necessary, followed by a managed “underburn”. To prepare for a prescribed underburn, fuel breaks that are free of vegetation may need to be established for each site.

The White Mountain National Forest has successfully conducted prescribed burning on over 770 acres since 1989. These prescribed fires have helped to create and maintain wildlife habitat, and reduce heavy fuel loadings in certain areas to reduce the risk of future wildfires.

Prescribed fire is a treatment or “tool” used to achieve certain resource management goals. A prescribed fire is typically “broadcast”, or intentionally ignited and designed to spread at a set rate within a predetermined area, with boundaries established and maintained by a combination of mechanical equipment and hand crews.

A broadcast burn may be used to clear brush or small trees from a field to maintain an open, grassy condition; or it may be used to remove the understory from a stand of timber to reduce competition among the regenerating trees. This latter is referred to as an “underburn”. In either case, the removal of brush or understory also reduces potential wildfire fuels. Fire may also be used to reduce brush piles generated by mechanical treatment of an opening.

The first priority of any prescribed burn is the safety of firefighting personnel and the public. Personnel who have met strict training and experience standards ignite and manage the burns under “prescribed” conditions. These conditions are site specific and are analyzed and documented in a separate prescribed burn plan for each area to be burned. The plan details certain ranges of temperature, relative humidity, fuel conditions, and wind speed under which a burn can be safely conducted. It also describes the number of personnel and types of equipment needed to complete the work. If the correct weather conditions do not fall within the prescribed parameters, the burn will not be ignited. If the right conditions do exist for a burn, then the unit is ignited, usually in narrow strips. Crews hold the fire within the unit boundary by means of a barrier (or fuel break) that could include a road, trail, stream or dug fire line (scraped to mineral soil). It may also include snow still remaining under the forest canopy. Crew resources include various types of pumps to deliver water, and hand tools such as Pulaskis, shovels, and fire rakes.

Prescribed burning may typically be accomplished in the spring or the late summer and early fall. Opportunities for prescribed burning start in the spring when the snow cover has melted and usually end by May 15<sup>th</sup>, the beginning of the non-hibernation season for Indiana Bat. In some instances, the season may be extended to May 30<sup>th</sup>, if the burning conditions are appropriate. The late summer/early fall burning season begins on or around August 30<sup>th</sup>, the end of the Indiana Bat non-hibernation season, and continues until temperatures or snow cover make burning all but impossible.

## ***A2. Purpose and Need***

The White Mountain National Forest has a need to accomplish the following resource management objectives over the next five years:

- 1) Promote, enhance or maintain certain vegetative communities that are currently under-represented on the White Mountain National Forest (ecosystem restoration)
- 2) Reduce fuels in locations where the potential for wildfire presents a hazard to communities, adjacent landowners, or resource values on the White Mountain National Forest

The purpose of these resource management objectives is to meet the general direction for the White Mountain National Forest, as established in the 1986 Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP).

### ***Promote, Enhance or Maintain Under-Represented Vegetative Communities (Ecosystem Restoration)***

The species composition and age distribution objectives for the suitable land base of the White Mountain National Forest include promoting, enhancing, or maintaining some habitat communities that are poorly represented, unique to the region, or in decline. For the purpose of this project, the promotion, enhancement, or maintenance of these communities shall be referred to as “ecosystem restoration”. In some of these habitat communities, fire can help to regenerate stands or remove competing species. The oak, pine and oak/pine habitat communities are particular examples of these ecosystems. Prescribed burning can be an effective tool for promoting or enhancing a community (oak), or maintaining an existing community (pine).

Page III-13 of the 1986 Forest Plan specifies that, in an ideal 4,000 acre Habitat Management Unit, 2% of the suitable lands managed for even-aged growth would be in an oak/pine habitat community. For suitable lands managed for uneven-aged growth, 1% would be in an oak/pine habitat community. There are currently approximately 340,000 acres of suitable lands (Management Area 2.1 and 3.1 lands) within the White Mountain National Forest. Of these suitable lands, approximately 5,700 acres are typed as oak/pine. This amounts to 1.7% of the suitable land base.

There is a need to maintain the oak/pine habitat community within the suitable land base of the White Mountain National Forest by promoting regeneration in existing stands. There is also a need to increase the acres of oak/pine where feasible in the suitable land base to meet the Desired Future Condition for this habitat community established by the 1986 Forest Plan.

### ***Reduce Hazardous Fuels***

Page III-27 of the 1986 Plan describes the general direction for fire management on the White Mountain National Forest: “Fire management will provide well planned and executed fire protection and prescribed fire programs that are cost efficient and responsive to land and resource management goals and objectives.”

Part of the strategy for implementing this direction is to identify habitat communities and specific sites within the National Forest that are influenced by fire or that present a wildfire

hazard due to a build-up of fuels. In most cases where a wildfire hazard due to fuels build-up has been identified, the reduction of these fuels contributes to another resource management objective.

There is a need to reduce hazardous fuels in particular sites where ladder fuels or stand conditions present a wildfire risk to National Forest resources or to adjacent private lands. There is also a need to reduce hazardous fuels where they present an impediment to the use of prescribed burning as a management tool. By reducing these hazardous fuels prior to burning, the prescribed fire can be better managed to achieve the desired objective.

## **B. Description of Decision**

To meet the Purpose and Need, my decision is to implement a project to promote, enhance or maintain under-represented vegetative communities (ecosystem restoration) on 13 different sites totaling 347 acres over the next five years. One of these sites, the 7-acre Androscoggin Office site, has a secondary objective of hazardous fuels reduction. To achieve these objectives, I propose to use mechanical treatment (chain saw, brush cutter, excavator-mounted brush hog) to prepare some of the sites, and prescribed broadcast burning to reduce competition and promote understory regeneration. Concurrent with this decision to implement a project to restore ecosystems on these 13 sites, I am deferring to another time the analysis for any potential ecosystem restoration activities on 8 additional sites, totaling 336 acres, identified in the June 16, 2003 scoping report. This decision does not preclude the White Mountain National Forest from proposing additional ecosystem restoration or hazardous fuels reduction projects during the 5-year implementation period for this project.

I am deciding to implement an ecosystem restoration project on 13 sites totaling 347 acres within the White Mountain National Forest. These sites are located on the Saco and Androscoggin Ranger Districts, within Carroll and Coos Counties in New Hampshire, and Oxford County in Maine. I believe that these 13 sites provide some of our best opportunities to meet the need for restoring habitat communities that are poorly represented, unique to the region, or in decline across the White Mountain National Forest, particularly pine and oak communities. Treatment for each of these 13 sites will include prescribed broadcast burning.

I am deciding to implement this ecosystem restoration project over a five year period to provide the White Mountain National Forest with the flexibility to manage an annual prescribed burning program, and to modify or adjust site prescriptions depending on existing conditions and the success of any one treatment in achieving the desired results. This decision does not preclude the White Mountain National Forest from proposing additional ecosystem restoration or hazardous fuels reduction projects during the 5-year implementation period for this project

A prescribed burn plan will be developed for each site that will include site-specific mitigations for resource protection (see Section II-B3), fire management, and the safety of fire fighters. Each plan will include an analysis of fuel loading and arrangement to determine if any pretreatment would be required that had not previously been anticipated to reduce fire behavior risks. The risk of escaped fire or excessive smoke impact is reduced by using stringent guidelines in the burn plans that allow burning only under a narrow range of conditions. Fire

crews are well trained. Crews use fuel breaks to contain prescribed burns. This can include natural or human-made features such as a road, trail, or stream; or it may require a dug fire line (scraped to mineral soil). The duration of burning will depend on the size of each unit, and could range from approximately 4 to 10 hours per unit.

Flexibility in managing a prescribed burning program is vital to its success. We may plan a burn program for a given year, only to find that funds are not available, suitable weather for burning does not materialize, or a burn – when implemented – is not effective in meeting the objective for a site. In such cases, we may need to defer a burn to the next funding cycle or the next burning season, or mechanically treat a site in one year to prepare it for a burn the following year. Forest and weather conditions change continuously, and they are evaluated close to the time of project implementation. If conditions will not permit a safe and effective burn, there needs to be flexibility to apply another treatment option, within the limits of this analysis. If thinning or some other timber activity is indicated prior to burning a specific site, then a separate analysis and decision-making process will need to be initiated for that site.

Each burn unit is dependent on the site-specific conditions, and multiple treatments may be necessary before the desired results take hold. Factors that influence the success of a burn include the time of year an initial burn takes place, the type of vegetation on site, the elevation and aspect of the site, the weather at the time of the burn, and the microclimate of the site. Any one of these factors may limit the effectiveness of a burn, and necessitate subsequent burns to achieve the management objective.

### ***BI. Selected Sites for Ecosystem Restoration***

Table 1 summarizes by District and acreage the 13 sites I have selected for ecosystem restoration treatment. These selected sites are discussed individually below. The average site is 26.7 acres, with size ranging from 5 acres to 120 acres. Only one of the selected sites (the 11-acre Back-A-Pickering site on the Saco District) has had a mechanical treatment or prescribed fire in the past to promote, enhance or maintain a specific vegetative community. The other 12 sites will be receiving their initial mechanical treatment and/or prescribed fire for ecosystem restoration. The acres listed for these sites have been rounded to the nearest whole unit. Actual size may vary by 0.5 acre from the size listed, but effects are within those analyzed in this document.

**TABLE 1: Number and Acres of Selected Ecosystem Restoration Sites, by District.**

<b>Ammo/Pemi RD</b>	<b>Andro RD</b>	<b>Saco RD</b>	<b>Forest Totals</b>
0 sites 0 acres	11 sites 196 acres	2 sites 151 acres	13 sites 347 acres

***Saco Ranger District***

- Moat Pitch Pine Site**

<i>Town</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Map</i>	<i>Acres</i>
Conway	Carroll	NH	S18	3	120

Located in Compartment 64 (Stands 26, 36 and 37), this site is typed as well-stocked red pine pole timber with moderately- to well-stocked red pine saw timber. Historically the site has supported pitch pine that is now being degraded by competing red pine with a northern hardwoods understory. In some locations, the red pine has been planted at the expense of the pitch pine. In other locations, northern hardwoods are beginning to occupy parts of the overstory. The pitch pine component of these stands is primarily intermixed saw timber in the overstory. Since pitch pine often regenerates following a disturbance, and disturbance has not been a major factor in these stands, the pitch pine is not regenerating. The site also includes one of the few locations on the White Mountain National Forest where scrub oak regeneration is present. This site is also part of an exemplary natural community identified by the New Hampshire Natural Heritage Bureau as New England Pitch Pine/Scrub Oak Barrens. The objective on this site is to encourage pitch pine and scrub oak regeneration.

The prescribed treatment is to mechanically down the northern hardwoods sapling understory (using a brush cutter or brush hog) where possible, and burn the residual to open space in the understory for the desired natural regeneration. The underburn would introduce a level of disturbance to this site that favors scrub oak and pitch pine regeneration, and possibly burn hot enough to reduce the northern hardwoods pole timber from parts of the overstory. This may take several treatments before the pitch pine and scrub oak regeneration becomes re-established.

Hand lines would be constructed prior to the prescribed burns to contain the spread of the fire. The lines would typically be scarified to mineral soil. In those locations where the stands abut private property, additional brush may be cleared on either side of the hand lines.

- Back-A-Pickering Site**

<i>Town</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Map</i>	<i>Acres</i>
Bartlett	Carroll	NH	S23	3	15

Located in Compartment 15 (Stand 37), this site is typed as moderately-stocked (40-69%) northern hardwoods pole timber. There is sufficient oak in the stand to manage the site for oak regeneration. The prescribed treatment is to mechanically down the northern hardwoods understory (using a brush cutter or brush hog), and then burn the residual to open space in the understory for the desired natural regeneration. Hand lines would be constructed prior to the prescribed burns to contain the spread of the fire. The lines would typically be scarified to mineral soil.

***Androscoggin Ranger District***

- **War Camp Site**

<i>Town</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Map</i>	<i>Acres</i>
Stark	Coos	NH	AN114	3	15

Located in Compartment 1 (Stand 25), this site is typed a well-stocked (> 70%) white pine stand. The objective on this site is to encourage white pine regeneration. The prescribed treatment is a two-stage burn. The first burn would remove the northern hardwoods understory. The second burn would remove a portion of the duff layer on the forest floor, enhancing the conditions conducive to white pine regeneration. Hand lines would be constructed prior to the prescribed burns to contain the spread of the fire. The lines would typically be scarified to mineral soil.

- **Androscoggin Office Site**

<i>Town</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Map</i>	<i>Acres</i>
Gorham	Coos	NH	AN119	3	7

This is the site of the Androscoggin Ranger District Office. This site is typed as an opening, but it contains several small patches of aspen, spruce, pine and northern hardwoods, as well as individual conifers adjacent to the office building itself. The objective on this site is to reduce hazardous fuels adjacent to the office while retaining some of the aspen, pine and conifer component within the stand. The prescribed treatment involves some pruning of conifers adjacent to the office building, followed by a prescribed burn across the site. Hand lines would be constructed prior to the prescribed burns to contain the spread of the fire. The lines would typically be scarified to mineral soil.

- **Maine Sites**

<i>Site</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Map</i>	<i>Stand</i>	<i>Acres</i>
Crocker Pond	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN104	2	331/1	14
Crocker Pond	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN105	2	331/4	8
New England Brook	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN106	2	327/6	9
Donahue	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN107	2	328/36	40
Donahue	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN108	2	328/26	27
Donahue	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN109	2	328/30	27
Harriman	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN110	2	328/24	36
Harriman	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN111	2	328/65	6
Harriman	Albany	Oxford	ME	AN112	2	328/41	7

Located in Compartment 331, the two Crocker Pond sites are typed as white pine, with Unit 104 a moderately-stocked (40-69%) stand, and Unit 105 a well-stocked (> 70%) stand. Located in stand 6 of Compartment 327, the New England Brook site is typed as a moderately-stocked white pine stand. Located in Compartment 328, the six Donahue and Harriman sites include poorly-stocked (16-39%) white pine stands (Units 107, 111, 112),

moderately-stocked white pine stands (Unit 109), and well-stocked white pine stands (Units 108 and 110). In all 9 of these units in Maine, northern hardwoods in the understory are limiting the ability of the white pine to regenerate. The objective on all of these sites is to encourage white pine regeneration. The prescribed treatment is a two-stage burn. The first burn would remove the northern hardwoods understory. The second burn would remove a portion of the duff layer on the forest floor, enhancing the conditions conducive to white pine regeneration. All but the Crocker Pond sites have been thinned in recent years. Hand lines would be constructed prior to the prescribed burns to contain the spread of the fire. The lines would typically be scarified to mineral soil.

## ***B2. Deferred Sites***

Of the 21 sites originally proposed for treatment as part of this project, I am deferring analysis to determine the potential for ecosystem restoration or any other management activity on 8 sites until some time in the future. These 8 sites are listed in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: Deferred Sites.** Analysis to determine the potential of these sites for ecosystem restoration is deferred to another time.

<i>Site</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Reason for Deferral</i>
Welch/Dickey Jack Pine	Waterville Valley	Grafton	NH	AP87	15	Stand lies within MA 6.2
Benton Red Pine	Benton	Grafton	NH	AP88	50	Stand lies within MA 6.3
Mt. Stanton Red Pine	Bartlett	Carroll	NH	S29	150	Stands lie within MA 6.2
War Camp	Stark	Coos	NH	AN113	7	Stand better managed as Aspen type
One Mile	Berlin	Coos	NH	AN115	56	Stand requires thinning
Trestle West	Berlin	Coos	NH	AN116	7	Stand requires thinning
Portal	Berlin	Coos	NH	AN117	5	Stand requires thinning
Trestle West	Berlin	Coos	NH	AN118	46	Stand requires thinning

My reasons for deferring these sites include:

- Mechanical treatment and prescribed fire is not consistent with the Management Area designation for three of the sites.** The Welch/Dickey Jack Pine site on the Ammo/Pemi District (Unit AP87) and the Mt. Stanton Red Pine site on the Saco District (Unit S29) are within Management Area 6.2. The 1986 Forest Plan (Chapter III, Pages 51-53) states that the goal for MA 6.2 is to “establish large expanses of relatively undisturbed landscapes.” The General Direction for timber and wildlife in MA 6.2 states that there will be “no timber management” and “habitat will be a result of natural processes only.” The Benton Red Pine site on the Ammo/Pemi District (Unit AP88) is within Management Area 6.3. The Forest Plan’s General Direction for timber and wildlife in this MA (Chapter III, Pages 54-56) is similar to that stated for MA 6.2. Although neither MA 6.2 nor 6.3 specifically prohibits the use of prescribed burning for

ecosystem restoration, the Forest Plan direction for these MAs is in marked contrast to that for MA 6.1. The Standards and Guidelines for MA 6.1 (Forest Plan, Chapter III, Pages 47-50) provide for “incidental timber harvesting activities”, and state that “mechanical, chemical, prescribed fire, or manual methods will be employed to insure protection of resource values.” Since the Forest Plan does not provide such specific direction for MA 6.2 or 6.3, I am deciding to not implement any mechanical treatment or prescribed fire on these three sites.

- **One site is better managed for a forest type that will not require treatment for ecosystem restoration or fuels reduction.** The War Camp site (Unit AN113) on the Androscoggin District was initially identified as providing a good opportunity to promote conifer regeneration. However, field verification determined that this site should be typed as a well-stocked aspen pole timber stand. This site is best managed for aspen. I am deciding to not implement any mechanical treatment or prescribed fire to promote conifer or oak regeneration or forest type conversion in this stand.
- **Four sites will require timber management prior to any other mechanical treatment or prescribed fire.** These four sites, all located on the Androscoggin District within the Town of Berlin (AN Units 115-118), are conifer or mixed stands that require thinning to reduce the basal area before any attempts at prescribed burning to promote regeneration. These stands are closely stocked pole and saw timber with ladder fuels that could develop into a crown fire if burning is attempted without prior thinning. Mechanical treatment to cut understory brush is also impractical without prior thinning. These sites will need more comprehensive and site-specific management plans to reduce hazardous fuels and promote regeneration. Since thinning is not an activity included in this analysis and the treatments covered by this analysis will be ineffective without thinning, I am deciding to not implement any mechanical treatment or prescribed fire on these four sites at this time.

### ***B3. Mitigation Measures***

All applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines, and Best Management Practices will be employed during implementation of this decision. In addition, the following mitigation measures will be employed during implementation of this decision:

- Known cultural sites will be clearly marked on burn plans and maps, and protected by a fuel break where necessary prior to any prescribed burn.
- Workers clearing fire lines or mechanically treating a site will be directed to cease operations in a particular spot if they should uncover previously unknown cultural sites or artifacts, and contact the District Paraprofessional Heritage Resource Specialist and Forest Archaeologist to evaluate the artifacts or sites and determine protection measures.
- Unit An104, Crocker Pond: Because part of the unit perimeter abuts Sunken Pond, the Forest Archaeologist will be on site during the prescribed burn on this unit to respond immediately should the fire uncover any artifacts. WMNF heritage staff will conduct a Shovel Test Pit (STP) survey following the burn.
- Units An106 (New England Brook), An111 (Harriman) and An112 (Harriman) are near Crocker Pond. A Paraprofessional Heritage Resource Specialist will be on site during these burns to respond immediately should the fire uncover any cultural sites.

- Plant surveys will be conducted on Units An104 & An105 (Crocker Pond), An114 (War Camp), An119 (Andro Office), S18 (Moat Pitch Pine) and S23 (Back-A-Pickering) prior to any management activities. If TES or RFSS species are found on site, then protective measures will be determined and implemented prior to management activities.
- Notify adjacent landowners and local officials prior to a prescribed burn.

### **III. Reasons for Categorically Excluding This Decision**

#### **A. Category of Exclusion**

This project is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement under FSH 1909.15, Chapter 31.2-6, Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56). The ecosystem restoration activities to be implemented by this decision are intended to improve timber stands by promoting regeneration of under-represented forest types and retaining these types in the suitable land base of the White Mountain National Forest. No road construction, reconstruction or maintenance is required to implement this project. No herbicides will be used to implement this project. Under the new regulations for “Notice, Comment, and Appeal Procedures for National Forest System Projects and Activities; Final Rule (36 CFR 215, Code of Federal Regulations)” published June 4, 2003 in the Federal Register, projects that qualify for this categorical exclusion are not eligible for comment and/or appeal following publication of a Decision Memo.

#### **B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances**

##### ***B1. Threatened, Endangered, Proposed or Sensitive Species (TES) and/or Their Critical Habitat***

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. A Biological Evaluation (Appendix B of this document) has analyzed and documented the potential effects of this decision on listed species and their habitat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reviewed the Biological Evaluation and has concurred that this project “will comply with the reasonable and prudent measures and associated terms and conditions applicable to fire management” as outlined in the programmatic Biological Opinion on the Effects of the Land and Resource Forest Management Plan and Other Activities on Threatened and Endangered Species in the White Mountain National Forest and Incidental Take Statement (see Project File).

Based on the Biological Evaluation, with concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I have determined that gray wolf, eastern cougar, bald eagle and small-whorled pogonia are not documented or suspected to occur within the project area; and that this decision:

- Will have no effect on Canada lynx
- May affect but would not likely adversely affect the Indiana bat, and is consistent with the Terms and Conditions for Indiana bat outlined in the Biological Opinion

## ***B2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds***

### ***Floodplains***

This decision may include burning activities within floodplains (examples: New England Brook, Moat Brook, Patte Brook). In all cases, Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and Best Management Practices will be used to assure that floodplain-related impacts are minimized. This decision should not result in significant floodplain-related impacts. Experience with prescribed burning on the WMNF validates acceptable resource effects from similar activities.

### ***Wetlands***

There are no delineated wetlands within the project area. A map review of delineated wetlands shows that two units are adjacent to wetlands. Unit AN106, New England Brook, is adjacent to a 1.2-acre open water wetland in the riparian zone of the brook. Unit AN110, Harriman, is adjacent to a 5-acre alder wetland that is separated from the site by a road. In both cases, Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and Best Management Practices will be used to assure that wetland-related impacts are minimized. Experience with prescribed burning on the WMNF has shown that ground fires rarely, if ever, penetrate a saturated wetland. This decision should not result in significant wetlands-related impacts.

### ***Municipal Watersheds***

There are no municipal watersheds, public surface water supplies, or groundwater protection areas within the project area. This decision will not affect any of such designated areas.

## ***B3. Congressionally Designated Areas***

The 13 project sites are not located within or in close proximity to Congressionally-designated Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas or National Recreation Areas.

## ***B4. Inventoried Roadless Areas***

The 13 project sites are not located within or adjacent to Inventoried Roadless Areas, including either RARE II areas or Forest Plan Revision Roadless Areas.

## ***B5. Research Natural Areas***

The 13 project sites are not located within or adjacent to Research Natural Areas.

## ***B6. Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas***

This decision complies with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act; the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (see Project Record for Cultural Resource Reconnaissance Reports, see Section II-B3 of this document for mitigations). A “no properties affected” determination was made. Consultation on this finding occurred with the State Historic Preservation Officers in Maine and New Hampshire, with each providing concurrence with the measures for cultural resource management for this project (see Project Record for letters of concurrence).

## **IV. Public Involvement**

On June 16, 2003, the White Mountain National Forest mailed a scoping report detailing a proposed 5-year Forest-wide project to maintain wildlife openings and vistas, reduce hazardous fuels and promote under-represented vegetative communities (ecosystem restoration) to over 750 interested and neighboring parties. This scoping report proposed to perform work within a 5-year period on 258 specific sites totaling approximately 1,597 acres across the National Forest.

The White Mountain National Forest received 14 responses to the scoping report, from which 39 comments were generated. Appendix A of this document lists these comments and how they were used in the analysis of this project.

## **V. Findings Required By and/or Related to Other Laws and Regulations**

### **A. Finding of Legal Compliance**

See Section III-B (Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances) for a discussion of compliance with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, The Archaeological Resources Protection Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and Executive Orders 11990 (Wetlands) and 11988 (Floodplains).

#### ***A1. Forest Plan Consistency***

The White Mountain National Forest Plan was approved in 1986, as required by this Act. It has since been amended 8 times. The amended Plan provides guidance for all natural resource management activities on the Forest. This Act requires that all projects and activities be consistent with the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan has been reviewed in consideration of this project. This decision is responsive to guiding direction and is consistent with the standards and guidelines contained in the Forest Plan (see Sections I, II and III of this document).

## ***A2. National Forest Management Act***

This Act and its implementing regulations require that vegetation manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the following seven requirements found at 36 CFR 219.27(b). The overall direction and Standards and Guidelines contained in the Forest Plan are designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on the resource values

- 1) ***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 and best suited to meet those goals.
- 2) ***Assure that technology and knowledge exists to adequately restock lands within five years after final harvest.*** Restocking is not applicable; the area treated will remain fully stocked after treatment.
- 3) ***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 not primarily chosen for its expected dollar return.
- 4) ***Be chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.*** Adjacent stands and residual trees are protected by natural or constructed fuel breaks, and burning only takes place within the prescribed conditions outlined in the burn plans. This decision is consistent with the Forest Plan and provides the desired effect on residual trees and adjacent stands.
- 5) ***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. Prescribed burn plans limit potential temperature damage to soils and productivity by assuring that burning takes place only when conditions are favorable for achieving the management objective. The project objectives, prescribed burn plan, and use of Best Management Practices will protect soil and water resources.
- 6) ***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.*** This decision is consistent with the Forest Plan and provides the desired effect on the above resources.
- 7) ***Be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration.*** No new permanent or temporary roads are necessary to implement this decision. No logging is proposed in this project.

## ***A3. 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.

#### ***A4. Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670)***

The Biological Evaluation (Appendix B of this document) has analyzed and documented the potential effects of this decision on Regional Forester Sensitive Species (RFSS) and their habitat. The Biological Evaluation identifies three RFSS that are suspected to occur within the project area. Based on the Biological Evaluation, I have determined that this decision:

- May impact individual wood turtles but is not likely to cause a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability,
- May impact individual eastern small-footed myotis but is not likely to cause a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability,
- May impact individual northern bog lemmings but is not likely to cause a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability.

Adherence to Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, as well as the use of Best Management Practices, should protect riparian habitat and seeps. Past experience with prescribed burning indicates that wet areas (including seeps, riparian areas, vernal pools, etc.) are minimally disturbed by slow moving ground fires, and individual animals associated with these areas would also be minimally disturbed.

The scoping report for this project was reviewed in detail by both the Maine Department of Conservation's Natural Areas Program and the New Hampshire Natural Heritage Bureau. The Maine Natural Areas Program did not note the presence of any rare plants or exemplary communities within or adjacent to the 9 Maine sites. The New Hampshire Natural Heritage Bureau (NHNHB) noted that S18 (Moat Pitch Pine site) lies within an exemplary community, but the proposed treatment is consistent with maintaining that community. NHNHB also noted the presence of two exemplary communities and one rare plant (Douglas' knotweed, *Polygonum douglasii*, a State-listed threatened species and a WMNF Species with Potential Viability Concerns) in proximity to S23 (Back-A-Pickering site). However, these latter are actually within the Mt. Stanton Red Pine site, over ½ mile from S23; and they will not be affected by management activities within the Back-A-Pickering site.

The White Mountain National Forest has conducted updated plant surveys on An sites 106-112 in Maine. No Threatened, Endangered or RFSS plant species were found on these sites. Prior to implementing any planned activities, the WMNF will update plant surveys on the remaining project sites. For any Threatened, Endangered or RFSS plant species found on these sites, the WMNF will adhere to Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines directing that "management activities will be conducted in a manner that will avoid disturbance conflicts and/or deterioration or loss of habitat" for these species.

#### ***A5. Clean Water Act***

The White Mountain National Forest complies with the Clean Water Act through Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and the use of Best Management Practices to ensure protection of soil and water resources. None of the project sites include or impact "impaired state waters".

## ***A6. Clean Air Act***

Management activities on the White Mountain National Forest are conducted in a manner that does not result in a significant contribution to (1) a violation of National Ambient Air Quality Standards or (2) a violation of applicable provisions in the State Implementation Plan.

Lands designated as Class I Areas under the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 and 1990 are afforded the highest level of protection from air pollutants in the nation. The White Mountain National Forest manages two Class I areas, the Great Gulf Wilderness Area and the Presidential-Dry River Wilderness Area. All other lands within the National Forest are designated Class II. The Prevention of Significant Deterioration section of the Clean Air Act (CAA) requires Federal Land Managers to identify Air Quality Related Values (AQRVs) for Class I areas. AQRVs are resources in Class I areas that might be affected by air pollution. One example of an AQRV is visibility. Prevention of Significant Deterioration (PSD) is the process of responding to applications for new source emissions in regards to their effects on AQRVs in the Class I wilderness areas. The IMPROVE (Interagency Monitoring of Protected Visual Environments) or similar substitute technology site at Camp Dodge is maintained to monitor air quality in Class I Wilderness Areas on the WMNF.

Two of the 13 units comprising this project are within 5 miles of a Class I area. Unit S23 (Back-A-Pickering) is approximately 3 miles from the southern boundary of the Presidential-Dry River Wilderness. Unit AN119 (Androscoggin Office) is approximately 5 miles from the northern boundary of the Great Gulf Wilderness. Cumulatively, these sites are not expected to impact the AQRVs for these Class I areas since they occur individually and they are of short duration (in accordance with the prescribed burn plan for each site). The Maine sites are all within 5 miles of the Caribou-Speckled Mountain Wilderness, but this area is not a Class I designation.

The use of prescribed burning on the WMNF since 1989 has varied from about 0-120 acres each year. Burn plans for prescribed fires include modeling for expected emissions and impact areas. Wildfires have averaged at 6 fires annually burning a total of 25 acres each year based on records from the last 20 years. Prescribed fire does have the potential to exceed standards for short periods of time when burning lasts more than a day. The burn plan includes smoke management information, state air quality coordination, and emission estimates. Mitigations are also used in these plans that include notifying adjacent landowners and local populations.

## ***A7. Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)***

This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income population. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

## **VI. Administrative Review or Appeal**

This decision is not subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal, pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8.

## **VII. Implementation Date**

This decision may be implemented immediately

## **VIII. Contact Person**

The Responsible Official for the Forest-wide Ecosystem Restoration and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project is Tom Wagner, Forest Supervisor for the White Mountain National Forest. Tom is located at 719 Main St., Laconia, NH 03246 (phone: 603-528-8774).

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Tom Brady at 719 Main St., Laconia, NH 03246 (phone: 603-528-8746), or by FAX (603-528-8783).

## **IX. Signature and Date**

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment, as it is 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 environmental effect. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the Project Record.

**/s/ Thomas G. Wagner**

**4/15/2004**

**THOMAS G. WAGNER**  
**Forest Supervisor**

**DATE**