

SOUTHEAST-PEACOCK FUELS PROJECT



Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District
Baldwin-White Cloud Ranger District
Huron-Manistee National Forests



Introduction

The Cadillac-Manistee and Baldwin-White Cloud Ranger Districts of the Huron-Manistee National Forests (HMNF) are preparing an Environmental Assessment for proposed management activities within the Southeast-Peacock Fuels Project Area (Project Area).

The proposed activities in the Southeast-Peacock Fuels Project Area encompass approximately 3,722 acres of vegetative treatments, including pine plantation thinning and shelterwood, seed tree, overstory removal, and clearcut harvesting. Approximately 366 acres of wildlife habitat improvement activities are proposed, including opening maintenance, opening creation, and aspen regeneration harvesting. Also, approximately 17 acres of non-native invasive species treatments are also proposed. Approximately 3,763 acres of fuel reduction projects are proposed including: low-intensity controlled burning, pile and burning, and fuelbreak construction.

The proposed activities in the Southeast-Peacock Fuels Project Area are located on the Cadillac-Manistee and Baldwin-White Cloud Ranger Districts in the following locations:

- T21N, R13W, Section 36 of Manistee County
- T21N, R12W, Sections 29-32 of Wexford County
- T20N, R13W, Sections 1-4,9,10,15,16,19-22, and 27-34 of Lake County
- T20N, R12W, Section 6 of Lake County
- T19N, R13W, Sections 3-5,8-10,15,16,21,22,27,28,32, and 33 of Lake County
- T18N, R13W, Sections 4,9,10,15,16 of Lake County

The attached maps show the Project Area vicinity and the location of the proposed treatments.

Purpose and Need

The Purpose and Need for a project is arrived at by addressing the differences between the existing condition and the desired future condition. All management activities that occur within the HMNF are directed by the objectives and guidelines of the Forests' Land and Resource Management Plan (Forests' Plan). This plan identifies how different areas of the HMNF are managed in distinct ways. The Purpose and Need of the Southeast-Peacock Fuels Project is primarily fuels management in the wildland-urban interface. Other goals of the project include sustaining forest health, conducting vegetative management activities, and meeting the goals and objectives of the Forests' Plan for Management Prescription

Areas (MA) 4.2 and 4.4 which make up the majority of the Project Area. There is a small area within MA 9.2.

MA 4.2 provides for vegetative age diversity in all vegetation classes; manage permanent openings and/or grasslands to meet species viability needs; and increase utilization of wood residues and other currently non-merchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.

MA 4.4 provides for maintenance or increase of wildlife habitat diversity; emphasis on hazardous fuels treatment in wildland urban interface and intermix areas; increase utilization of wood residues and other currently non-merchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products; manage permanent openings and/or grasslands to meet species viability needs; and manage for mesic grassland habitats.

MA 9.2 has no guidelines for fuels management.

Vegetative treatments are proposed to address the Purpose and Need and accomplish the following objectives:

Improve public safety and protect private property by reducing the potential of a wildfire to spread from National Forest System lands onto adjacent private property and from private property to public lands.

Current Condition: The majority of the Project Area is considered to be at moderate to high risk from wildfire. The jack pine and jack pine-oak stands in the Project Area are becoming over-mature and developing a mixed conifer and hardwood understory, are exhibiting reduced growth rates, are susceptible to disease and insect infestations, and are greater hazardous fuel risks than other stands in the Project Area. The presence of red and jack pine plantations in and around the Project Area contributes to the potential spread of wildfire to private property and adjacent resources. The canopies of these plantations are contiguous and the amount of fuel in these stands has been increasing. Wildfires occur in and around the area on a yearly basis. The majority of wildfires are human caused, and are associated with recreational users throughout the Project Area and permanent residences on adjacent private land. A wildfire occurring in or near the Project Area has the potential to threaten public and private property and safety.

The Project Area is a good example of Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The general definition of WUI is an area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels. The fragmented ownership pattern in the Project Area plays a large role in the potential for a damaging wildfire. The potential for a wildfire to start on private land and spread to public lands and the possibility of fires starting on public lands and spreading to private lands is a critical factor in managing the fuels in the Project Area.

Desired Condition: Wildfire intensity and rates of spread are reduced to a level that preserves and protects human life and property from wildfires in the area and minimize the likelihood of a wildfire entering or leaving NFS lands. Hazardous fuel types are treated to reduce the threat of a wildfire affecting private property and National Forest resources. Fuelbreaks are established and maintained. Blocks of pine plantations in and around the Project Area do not have contiguous crowns and their canopies are more open. Fine fuel loadings are reduced.

Need: There is a need to reduce fuels in the Project Areas. Specific vegetation treatments of over-mature jack pine and jack pine-oak stands would reduce the amount of hazardous fuels in the Project Area. Pine plantations would be thinned to open the canopies of these stands. Fuelbreaks, barrens, and wildlife openings would be created and maintained to slow the spread of wildfires. Broadcast burning and pile and burning would be used to eliminate fine fuels throughout the Project Area where practical. These activities would minimize the potential spread and damage as a result of a wildfire.

Sustain individual tree growth rates, vigor, and increase vegetative diversity in red and jack pine stands and improve ecosystem health.

Existing Condition: Overstocked red and jack pine stands are exhibiting reduced growth rates, are susceptible to insect and disease infestations, and represent plantation conditions established for reforestation purposes. The overall vegetative diversity in these stands is limited. Competition exists for sunlight, water, and nutrients, thus reducing the continued growth of the trees. Plantation red and jack pine stands in the Project Area are unnatural in appearance, have trees of approximately the same height and diameter, a pronounced row effect, and little horizontal and vertical diversity within each plantation. Non-native, invasive species of plants (NNIS) have been identified in the Project Area.

Desired Condition: Plantations contain more species and structural diversity. Individual red and jack pines grow at increased rates and native vegetation has the opportunity to become established in the understory, and promote long term vegetative and structural diversity. The red and jack pine plantations have a more natural appearance, native herbaceous and shrub vegetation in the understory is established, and the row effect is decreased to enhance visual quality. Snags, downed woody debris, and den trees are present in these stands. The presence and spread of NNIS is limited.

Need: There is a need to open the canopy in the red and jack pine stands in the Project Area to increase productivity and minimize insect and disease attacks, enhance vegetative diversity, improve wildlife habitat, and improve stand and visual quality. There is a need to reduce current infestations and future spread of NNIS.

Enhance and increase the variety of wildlife habitats, including aspen stands, waterholes, and wildlife openings.

Existing Condition: The aspen stands in the Project Area are over-mature and gradually converting towards later successional species. A variety of tree species are encroaching on the existing openings within the Project Area, leading to the gradual loss of early successional and upland opening species habitat.

Desired Condition: The aspen forest type and early successional habitat is maintained, and age classes are more evenly distributed within the Project Area. Upland openings maintain existing vegetative composition of grasses, forbs, and berry-producing shrubs.

Need: There is a need to provide a diversity of wildlife habitats for the viability of many game and non-game wildlife species. There is a need to maintain the aspen forest type and to improve aspen age class diversity and early successional habitat in the Project Area. There is a need to maintain upland openings to prevent the encroachment of tree species, and stimulate the growth of opening vegetation, berry-producing shrubs, and mast producing trees for wildlife habitat diversity.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action would:

Thin pine plantations to improve stand quality, reduce competition within these stands for sunlight, water, and soil nutrients, improve wildlife habitat, and reduce the row effect in the pine stands. Approximately 2,336 acres of red pine plantations are being considered for treatment.

Regenerate primarily mature jack pine-oak stands by shelterwood harvesting to create an open overstory in jack pine dominated stands and promote the establishment of oak regeneration. Site preparation for regeneration would be conducted if subsequent regeneration is inadequate. Approximately 826 acres of primarily jack pine-oak stands are being considered for shelterwood treatment.

Regenerate one mixed pine stand by seed tree harvesting to improve overall stand quality and health. Approximately 24 acres are being considered for treatment.

Regenerate primarily mature jack pine-dominated stands by overstory removal harvesting to improve overall stand quality and health and promote the establishment of oak regeneration. Site preparation for regeneration would be conducted if advanced regeneration becomes inadequate. Approximately 202 acres of primarily jack pine and jack pine-oak stands are being considered for treatment.

Regenerate mature jack pine-dominated stands by clearcut harvesting to improve overall stand quality and health. Site preparation for regeneration would be conducted if subsequent regeneration is inadequate. Approximately 384 acres of primarily jack pine and jack pine-oak stands are being considered for treatment.

Manage existing upland openings to provide vegetative diversity and promote improved plant and animal species viability and habitat diversity for species such as the eastern bluebird, wild turkeys, and various plant species. Create additional upland openings to improve wildlife habitat in areas with low wildlife habitat diversity. Approximately 211 acres of existing openings are being considered for treatment and an additional 107 acres of new openings would be created.

Create water sources for wildlife in areas that presently contain no sources on federal lands. Six water holes are being considered.

Regenerate mature aspen stands by clearcut harvesting for wildlife benefits. Approximately 48 acres are being considered for treatment.

Remove non-native tree species in the Project Area and treat other occurrences of non-native invasive herbaceous and grass species. Approximately 17 acres of non-native species are being considered for treatment.

Use controlled burns throughout the Project Area to reduce fine fuel loading, improve wildlife habitat, and increase the diversity of understory and herbaceous vegetation. Roads and trails in and adjacent to these treatment units may be temporarily closed during periods of implementation to ensure public safety. Approximately 3,167 acres are being considered for treatment.

Piling and burning of fuels would be conducted to reduce the fuel loading in the Project Area. This would be primarily accomplished using machinery with some limited hand piling, depending on site-specific characteristics. This treatment would occur on primarily jack pine and jack pine-oak stands. Approximately 253 acres of primarily jack pine and jack pine-oak stands are being considered for treatment.

Approximately 343 acres of fuelbreaks would be treated in the Project Area. These fuelbreaks would be managed predominantly along the private land boundaries and roads in primarily jack pine, jack-pine oak, and red pine stands.

There are additional stands within the Project Area; however, we have limited this project to the acres that would be reasonable to complete in the next three to five years. **The Proposed Action is only one approach to meeting the Purpose and Need objectives for this project.** Using the comments received in response to this document, we may develop additional alternatives to the one proposed. The 'Table of Proposed Treatments' at the end of this document condenses all the treatments, and acres of each activity, into one table.

Potential Issues and Existing Resources

The following issues and resources have been discussed and/or evaluated in past projects. Some may be determined to be minor because they would not be affected by the project design. Only issues and resources that would be impacted by an action alternative, or vary greatly between alternatives, would be used to evaluate the alternatives for this project.

Risk to Public Health, Safety, and Private Property from High Intensity Wildfire

The majority of the Project Area is considered to be in moderate to high risk from damaging wildfires and much of the area is in jack pine and red pine dominated stands. There is also large areas of wildland-urban interface and has a history of fire starts.

Management Indicator Species, Wildlife, and Fisheries

The effects of the proposed activities on Management Indicator Species, wildlife, and fisheries will be evaluated as part of the analysis.

Vegetative Composition

The current vegetative composition and the expected changes as a result of implementing the proposed vegetative treatments, including fuels reduction projects, will be evaluated as part of the analysis.

Soil Productivity and Air and Water Quality

Potential impacts to soil, water, and air resources will be evaluated as part of the analysis. Measures to minimize impacts to soil and water resources will be incorporated into the project.

Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive Species

A Biological Evaluation will be completed as part of the analysis to determine effects on endangered, threatened, and sensitive plant and animal species. There is no indication at this time that activities proposed in this project will impact endangered, threatened, or sensitive species.

Non-Native Invasive Plant Species

Invasive plants have been found throughout the Project Area.

Heritage Resources

The area has been surveyed for heritage resources. Any sites that were identified during the surveys that are within the Project Area will be protected.

Recreation and Visual Quality

Within the Project Area is the Old Grade campground and numerous trails used by off-road vehicles and horses. The analysis will evaluate how the proposed activities may affect recreation and visual quality within and adjacent to the Project Area.

Transportation

The road system of the area will be evaluated. At this time no new roads are planned and all authorized Forest System roads will be maintained.

Civil Rights and Environmental Justice

The analysis will address the civil rights and environmental justice impacts with the implementation of the project.

Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitment of Resources

The analysis will address any potential for irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources with the implementation of the project.

Analysis Process

This analysis will follow the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures and will be used to determine if there would be any significant environmental effects to the alternatives being considered. **The District Rangers, Jim A. Thompson and Leslie E. Russell, will use this analysis to decide whether or not to approve these activities on National Forest System lands or whether or not to prepare a more detailed Environmental Impact Statement.**

The following steps would be followed in developing the Environmental Assessment:

Step 1: Scoping December-January 2010-11
Public comment period. This is the time when people can comment on issues and concerns, and recommend opportunities and options to consider in the analysis. Forest Service develops issues based on comments received from the public. Forest Service develops alternatives based on issues raised.

Step 2: Analysis January-March 2011
Forest Service analyzes the effects of alternatives and publishes an Environmental Assessment. Forest Service analyzes comments and responds (changes to the Environmental Assessment may be based on comments).

Step 3: Decision June 2011
District Ranger makes Decision and notifies the public.
Formal 45-Day appeal period.

Step 4: Implementation 2011-2021
If the decision allows harvest activities to occur, timber sales would be prepared and sold over the next four to five years. Prescribed burning would occur over the next 2 to 8 years.

Step 5: Monitoring 2011 and beyond
Monitoring of project implementation and effectiveness would take place during and after the implementation stage.

Please take some time to look at the attached maps and write down any comments you might have on the project. If you have any questions, please call Mark A. Herberger at 231-723-2211 ext 3109.

From:

*Place
Postage
Here*

*TO: Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District
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Attention: Mark A. Herberger