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## Grouse Creek BMU Compliance – Fire, Fuels and Air Quality

### Description of the Proposed Action

The Grouse Creek BMU Compliance project proposes (Alternative 2) storage of approximately 28 miles of road. Stored roads would no longer be drivable; they would be blocked with an earthen berm or a short section would be recontoured to match the original slope of the land. Stored roads would remain part of the Idaho Panhandle's transportation system and could be reopened in the future. Roads stored to meet requirements for grizzly bear core habitat would remain stored for at least ten years.

Approximately 3.1 miles of undetermined roads would be closed. Proposed work would remove any resource risks associated with these routes, and the road prism would be in an impassable state to discourage illegal use. These undetermined roads are generally impassible and do not provide legal public access.

The re-route of a section of the Grouse Creek Road (Forest System Road 280) from the bridge over North Fork Grouse Creek to approximately the Wylie Knob trailhead is also proposed.

### Regulatory Framework

Both alternatives do not interfere with direction in the Forest Service Manual (FSM 5100). This direction includes the use fire in a safe, carefully planned and cost-effective manner, to alter fuel profiles so that public and firefighter safety is improved and communities, infrastructure and other values are less impacted from wildfire, to reduce future suppression costs and unwanted effects, and to achieve desired conditions and attain management objectives in the forest plan. The alternatives do not interfere with the goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy (Strategy) to reduce hazardous fuels and improving suppression. Also, the Alternatives do not interfere with the other objectives of fire management (FSM 5140) or the goals of the Strategy.

The 2015 Forest Plan forest wide direction includes desired conditions, objectives and guidelines for fire and air quality. The desired conditions for fire and air quality include:

- Public and firefighter safety is always recognized as the first priority for all fire management activities.
- Hazardous fuels are reduced within the WUI and other areas where values are at risk. Fire behavior characteristics and fuel conditions exist in these areas that allow for safe and effective fire management. Fire behavior is characterized by low-intensity surface fires with limited crown fire potential. Forest conditions, and the pattern of conditions across the landscape, exist in these areas such that the risk is low for epidemic levels of bark beetles, high levels of root disease, and large scale, stand replacement wildfires.
- The use of wildland fire (both planned and unplanned ignitions) increases in many areas across the Forest. Fire plays an increased role in helping to trend the vegetation towards the desired conditions while serving other important ecosystem functions. However, when necessary to protect life, property and key resources, many wildfires are still suppressed.
- The Forest meets applicable federal, state, or tribal air quality standards. Prescribed burning is planned to meet those standards, including areas classified as Class 1 airsheds (e.g., Cabinet Mountains Wilderness) and nonattainment areas.

The forest wide objectives for fire include:

- The outcome is the treatment of fuels on approximately 6,000 to 16,000 acres annually on NFS lands, primarily through planned ignitions, mechanical vegetation treatments (these acres are also included in FW-OBJ-VEG-01), and unplanned ignitions. NFS lands within the WUI are the highest priority for fuel treatment activities.
- Over the life of the Plan, manage natural, unplanned ignitions to meet resource objectives on at least 10 percent of the ignitions.

The forest wide guidelines for air quality include:

- The Forest should cooperate with the federal, state, tribal and local air quality agencies as appropriate in meeting applicable air quality requirements.

Forest plan management areas (MA) desired conditions:

- MA6 is that fuels are reduced, particularly within the wildland urban interface, to reduce the threat of wildland fire.

Forest plan Lower Kootenai Geographic Area desired condition:

- Threats of wildfire are reduced for the following specific areas: communities of Bonners Ferry, Moyie Springs, Naples, Eastport, Porthill, Copeland, and Moravia; the Kootenai Tribal community; outlying communities and structures, and Highway 2, Highway 95, and Highway 200 corridors.

Forest plan Pend Oreille Geographic Area desired condition:

- Forest health is improved and hazardous fuels are reduced in the wildland urban interface. Potential fire intensity and severity decrease in forested lands near the communities of Sandpoint, Hope, Sagle, Ponderay, and the rural residences around Lake Pend Oreille. Fire-adapted ecosystems beyond the wildland urban interface trend toward resilience to natural disturbance regimes.

### **Forest Plan Consistency**

Given that the proposed project was not designed to address forest fuels and hazards, fire suppression nor air quality, the following analysis focuses on addressing the question of whether or not the proposed action would have any impacts that would be inconsistent with direction in the Forest Plan concerning these resource topics. Following is a description of how each alternative meets these forest-wide, Management Area, and Geographic Area desired conditions, objectives and guidelines. There are no forestwide, Management Area, or Geographic Area standards related to fire and fuels and air quality.

#### *Alternative 1 (No Action)*

The no-action alternative would meet the forest plan desired condition of firefighter and public safety is the first priority. The project would not change this priority whether implemented or not. The no action alternative would be neutral toward the desired condition of reducing hazardous fuels within the WUI. The final forestwide desired condition of increasing wildland fire use would be neutral. This area is in areas of intermixed ownership, and thus is not high priority for the use of wildland fire. The forestwide objective does not contribute toward the attainment of treating hazardous fuels, but it does not prevent this objective from being attained. The second forestwide objective related to fuels includes managing unplanned ignitions to meet resource objectives. The no action alternative would not contribute to this objective but does not prevent it from being attained. The no action alternative meets the intent of the forestwide guideline in regards to air quality. The Forest will continue to cooperate with agencies in meeting air quality requirements. The management area desired condition is to reduce fuels, and the no action alternative is neutral in meeting this desired condition. The desired conditions for the geographic

areas is to reduce threat to communities and reduce hazardous fuels in the WUI. The no action alternative is neutral toward achieving the goals of these desired conditions.

#### *Alternative 2 - Proposed Action*

The proposed action would meet the forest plan desired condition of firefighter and public safety is the first priority. The project would not change this priority. The proposed action would be neutral toward the desired condition of reducing hazardous fuels within the WUI. Nothing is proposed that would reach or detract from this condition. The final forestwide desired condition of increasing wildland fire use would be neutral. This area is in areas of intermixed ownership, and thus is not high priority for the use of wildland fire. The forestwide objective does not contribute toward the attainment of treating hazardous fuels, but it does not prevent this objective from being attained. The second forestwide objective related to fuels includes managing unplanned ignitions to meet resource objectives. The proposed action would not contribute to this objective but does not prevent it from being attained. The proposed action meets the intent of the forestwide guideline in regards to air quality. The Forest will continue to cooperate with agencies in meeting air quality requirements. The management area desired condition is to reduce fuels, and the proposed action is neutral in meeting this desired condition. The desired conditions for the geographic areas is to reduce threat to communities and reduce hazardous fuels in the WUI. The proposed action is neutral toward achieving the goals of these desired conditions.

#### **Potential Impacts of the Alternatives on Wildfire Suppression Access and Response Time**

The Forest Plan does not contain any direction regarding fire suppression access and response time. However, because the proposed action could impact access and response time to at least a small degree, I decided to consider these potential effects.

#### *Alternative 1 - No Action*

The no-action alternative would allow continued access on the 28 miles of roads proposed for storage in the project area. Although, only a small portion of this 28 miles is drivable, and the additional 3.1 miles is undetermined road. In the event of a fire in the areas accessed by roads that are drivable (whether open to public use or not), response time by vehicle would remain faster than if the roads were closed. In turn this could result in suppression of a fire at a smaller size. A faster response time assumes that there is a fire that is only accessible by a drivable segment of road, and not by some other means.

#### *Alternative 2 - Proposed Action*

Under the proposed action storage of 28 miles of road and closure of 3.1 miles of undetermined roads could result in a slower response time in the event of a fire that could be accessed by these roads that are drivable. Again, only a small portion of the roads proposed for storage and closure are actually drivable, and could be used in the event of a fire. The ability to respond by air or by hiking remain viable options.

#### **Summary**

In summary, both the no action and the proposed action, would be consistent with all the Forest Plan direction related to fire, fuels and air quality.

While the proposed action (Alternative 2) could result in a slower response time by decreasing road access for fire engines and other ground resources, that impact would be very small. When evaluating the potential significance of that impact, I considered both the context as well as the ten factors of intensity included in 40 CFR 1508.27 (b). My conclusion is that the effect would not be significant.

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