

Idaho Panhandle Fire Recovery Reforestation Project

The Idaho Panhandle National Forests is proposing to plant trees in areas burned on the Forest by wildland fire in 2015. The proposed reforestation activities would occur in existing plantations and high elevation whitebark pine stands that were severely and experienced considerable mortality from the 2015 fires. The proposed planting units are located within Bonner, Boundary, Kootenai, and Shoshone counties in Idaho, and Pend Oreille County, Washington. The area proposed for reforestation comprises about 1,114 acres of the Priest Lake, Sandpoint and Bonners Ferry Ranger Districts, 3,283 acres of the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, and 1,328 acres of the St. Joe Ranger District. The project encompasses those high priority areas burned in the fires of 2015 but not analyzed for replanting as part of the salvage effort undertaken in 2016 and 2017. The included maps display the areas proposed for planting.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to reforest areas burned in 2015. Reforestation would expedite the re-establishment of a forested landscape with early seral tree species as described in the 2015 Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF) Management Plan. The desired condition in the forest plan is for more of the forest dominated by western white pine, ponderosa pine, western larch, and whitebark pine (FW-DC-VEG-01). Reforesting the burned areas with these native tree species (including blister rust-resistant western white pine) would hasten and enhance the overall recovery process, meet restoration objectives and trend the native vegetation toward the desired conditions found in the IPNF forest plan. The current conditions of most of the targeted area is severely burned with no remaining or desirable seed source for natural regeneration.

The current composition of the forest, at the landscape level, deviates from desired conditions identified in the forest plan. This is because, prior to the 2015 fires, instead of being comprised of mainly western white pine, ponderosa pine, and western larch (FW-DC-VEG-01), which are more resistant and resilient to drought, fire, disease and insects; the project area was dominated by less resilient western hemlock, grand fir and Douglas-fir. If planting is not undertaken, the most likely result would be re-establishment of brush fields and hemlock/fir stands.

If no action is taken, natural regeneration from whatever on-site seed sources that are left would include little to no western white pine or larch. Based on current and expected composition, and supported by evidence from nearby stands, there is a need to plant seedlings in the project area in order to move toward desired conditions.

Proposed Action

Fire areas and corresponding acreage proposed for reforestation activities include the following:

Fire Name	General Planting Acres	Whitebark Pine Planting Acres	Total Planting Acres
Breezy	554.1		554.1
Chicadee	165.6		165.6
Downey	20.9		20.9
Grassy Mountain	272.5		272.5
Last Inch	296.0		296.0
Lower Flat	1,555.1		1,555.1
Marble Creek	312.2		312.2
North Grizzly	792.4	15.7	808.1
Parker Ridge		206.0	206.0
South Bobtail	625.7		625.7
Tower	772.6	135.8	908.3
Total Acres	5,367.0	357.4	5,724.4

Planting would be done with hand crews using hand tools (mechanical planting would not occur). This would minimize the impact of planting on the soil. Vehicles would not be allowed to drive off road at any time during project implementation, which would also minimize the impact to soils and existing vegetation. Closed, decommissioned or stored roads would not be reopened but are available for walk-in by crews. Restricted roads would be available for motorized access, provided road work (other than removal of downfall) is not necessary for facilitating vehicle use and current use restrictions are followed.

Access to the Parker Ridge whitebark pine planting areas could include use of a helicopter. Selection of helispots, if needed, would be limited to areas devoid of trees, with adequate clearance for take-off and landing. No trees would be cut.

This project would start in the fall of 2018 and take up to ten years to complete.

Design Features

The following design features would serve to reduce or eliminate the potential effects of the project proposal:

Aquatics

- If equipment is used to clear snow, appropriate drainage would be maintained and the road surface would be protected. Blades on heavy equipment would be equipped with shoes or runners to keep the plow blade a minimum of two inches above the road surface. The goal is to minimize amount of road surface material sidecast or placed in snow berms. Do not side cast snow containing significant amounts of dirt or debris into floodplains or streams.
- Drainage holes would be opened and maintained in snow berms on road shoulders. They would be spaced for satisfactory surface drainage and avoid discharging onto erodible road fills.

Cultural

- If cultural resources are discovered in a planting area, work would stop and a Forest Service archaeologist would be notified immediately.

Sensitive Plants

- If the crews are camping on roads behind closed gates, the respective zone botanist would be consulted to ensure that there are no sensitive plant occurrences located within the proposed campsite(s).
- If sensitive plants are encountered or there are questions related to the tentative identification of a sensitive plant at a planting site, the respective zone botanist would be notified prior to continuing with planting activities at that site.

Invasive plants

To reduce the risk of accidental spread of invasive species:

- Crews would effectively clean clothes, tools, equipment, and vehicles prior to beginning work on National Forest System lands, after working in one part of the project area and before moving to another part of the project area.
- Weed-free project staging areas and campsites would be located and used.
- Travel through weed-infested parts of the project area would be avoided or minimized.

Wildlife

- Permission to use restricted roads would be coordinated with the districts. Travel on restricted roads would have to adhere to the administrative use restrictions within BMUs (bear management units) and BORZ areas (bears outside the recovery zone).
- Contractors would be provided a copy of the Grizzly Bear Management and Protection Plan and the IPNF Food Storage Order. Requirements in these documents would be adhered to when working within BMUs or BORZ areas.
- Contractors and subcontractors would not be permitted to hunt, transport hunters, discharge firearms, or transport big game animals with vehicles in any areas that are otherwise closed to motorized vehicles.
- To limit potential impacts to grizzly bear, helicopter use would not exceed more than two trips per planting unit per year.
- If camping occurs, camp size should not exceed 20 individuals
- Grizzly bear sightings and or incidents shall be reported to the appropriate Forest Service office within 48 hours.
- If any threatened, endangered or sensitive species were located during implementation of the proposed action, management activities would be altered, if necessary, so that proper protection measures could be taken.

Authority

Preliminary analysis indicates that the IPNF Fire Recovery Reforestation Project would meet requirements to be categorically excluded from further analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment under 36 CFR 220.6(e)(5) – *Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation that does not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion*. This assessment found that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would preclude the use of 36 CFR 220.6 (e)(5).

Project Timing and Implementation

Subject to any limitations identified in the project’s design features, activities would take place over the next ten years, in the spring summer, and fall seasons when weather and soil moisture conditions are favorable to meeting project objectives.

Your Opportunity to Comment

I am inviting your comments about this proposal. We can best use your comments if they are received no later than August 31, 2018. Specific comments should be focused on the proposed action and include rationale to help us understand your concern.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including the names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record, and will be available for public inspection.

I am the responsible official for this project. Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, and electronic comments will be accepted. Please submit your comments to:

Kim Pierson, Deputy Forest Supervisor
Idaho Panhandle National Forests
Attn: Idaho Panhandle Fire Recovery Reforestation Project
3815 Schreiber Way
Coeur d’Alene, ID 83815

If you would rather hand-deliver your comments, they can be delivered to the Forest Supervisor’s office at the address shown above. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Or comments can be faxed to 208-765-7426. Please include in the subject line the name of the project for which you are submitting comments (Idaho Panhandle Fire Recovery Reforestation Project).

Comments may also be submitted electronically to the following email address: comments-northern-idpanhandle@fs.fed.us in one of the following formats: Microsoft Word, Adobe pdf or as a rich text format (.rtf) file or other format that can be read with optical character recognition software. The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments (Idaho Panhandle Fire Recovery Reforestation Project). For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender’s responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

Per the Section 431 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-76, 128 Stat. 5 (2014), my decision on this project is not subject to objection under the Forest Service pre-decisional objection process found at 36 CFR §218.

If you are interested in hearing more about this project, or you would just like more information, contact Project Leader Karl Dekome (208-765-7479) or kdekome@fs.fed.us.