

Notice of Proposed Action

Muddy Pass/Sheephorn Project

Eagle/Holy Cross Ranger District, White River National Forest
Eagle County, Colorado

Portions of sections 31, 32, 33; Township 2S, Range 81W
Portions of sections 14-16, 21-29, 33-36; Township 2S, Range 82W
Portions of sections 3-11, 15; Township 3S, Range 81W
Portions of sections 2, 3, 27-29, 32-35; Township 3S, Range 82W
Portions of sections 5, 7, 8, 17, 19, 28-34; Township 4S, Range 81W
Portions of sections 2-5, 7, 9-28; Township 4S, Range 82W
Portions of sections 3-6; Township 5S, Range 81W

6th Principal Meridian, Eagle County, Colorado

Comments Welcome

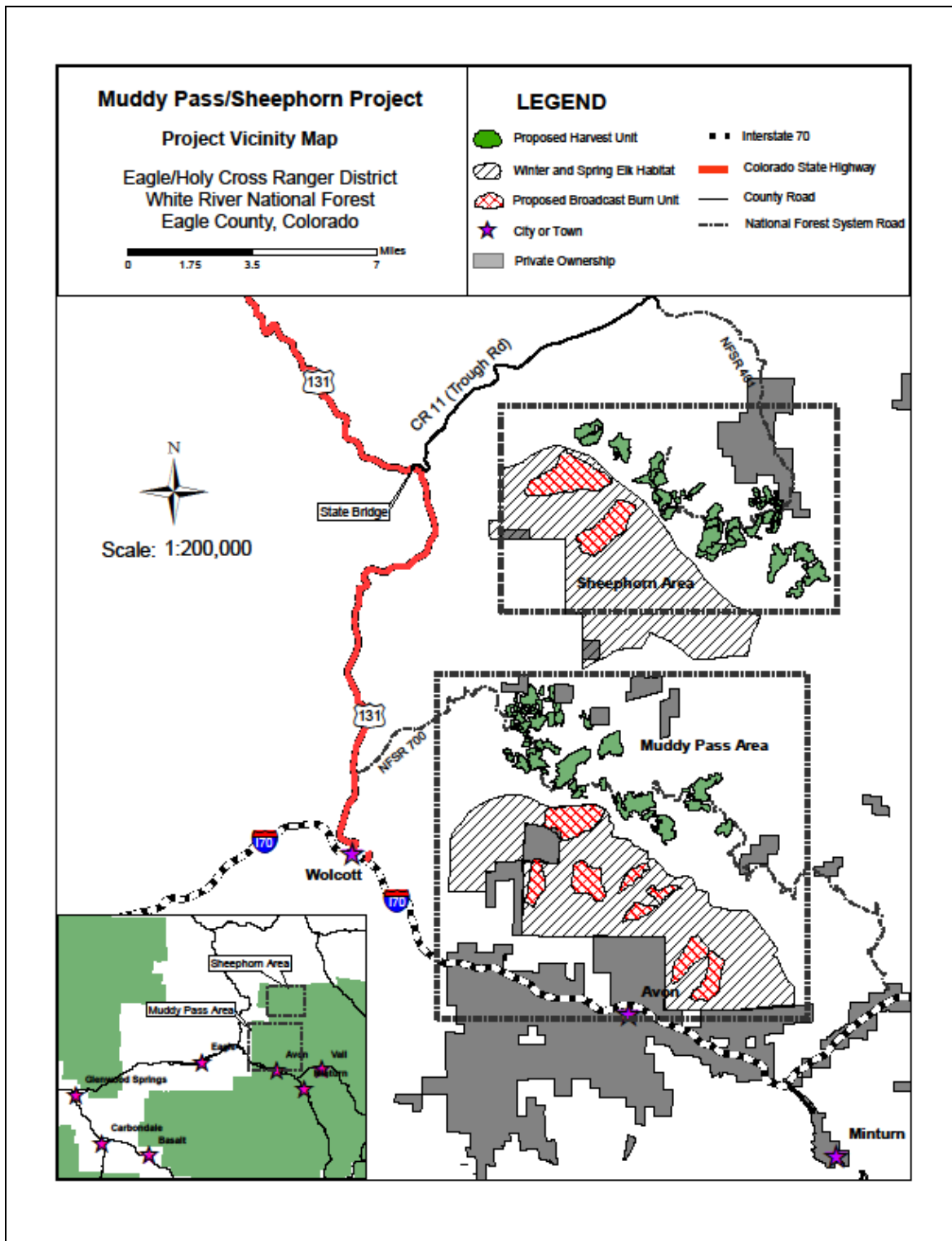
The Eagle/Holy Cross Ranger District of the White River National Forest welcomes your comments on its proposal to implement a variety of management activities in the vicinity of Muddy Pass and Sheephorn, in Eagle County, Colorado (Map 1). Your comments will help us further develop the proposed action, potential alternatives, and complete an environmental assessment. The assessment will be used to determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact. Instructions for submitting comments are described on the last page. Additional project information is available here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53148>

This Notice of Proposed Action (NOPA) is also requesting your comments under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (NHPA). Consultation under the NHPA seeks to consider the views about an undertaking and its effects on historic properties for the agency official to consider in decision making (36 CFR 800).

Background

The landscape containing the Muddy Pass/Sheephorn Project holds natural resources, wildlife habitat, scenic areas, and high quality recreation opportunities. During the summer of 2017, Forest Service resource specialists evaluated the landscape and developed potential projects that could benefit their respective resource areas. Proposed activities that were developed include timber harvest, broadcast burning, wildlife habitat improvement, a fish barrier, transportation improvements, range improvements, and converting a non-system route into a Forest System Route. All proposed timber harvest units are located within the White River National Forest's Suitable Timber Base. Portions of the Berry Creek, Buffer Mountain, and Lower Piney Colorado Roadless Areas are within the project area. However, broadcast burning to improve winter range for elk and deer, with incidental tree cutting to prepare the sites for burning, are the only activities being proposed within these Colorado Roadless Areas.

Map 1 – Muddy Pass/Sheephorn Project Vicinity Map



Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to:

1. Provide commercial forest products and/or biomass to local industries.
2. Increase tree age/size class diversity at the stand and landscape scales, thereby increasing forest resistance and resilience to disturbances, such as future bark beetle outbreaks, fires, and other climate-related mortality events.
3. Manage stand density in young (~25-30 year old) stands of lodgepole pine to remove dwarf mistletoe, reduce potential crown fire spread, accelerate tree growth rates and increase tree vigor.
4. Increase forage productivity for wildlife, such as elk and deer.

The proposed action is needed because:

1. Local and regional businesses exist that depend on a supply of forest products.
2. Maintaining young forests across landscapes can lessen the severity and extent of potential insect epidemics, sudden aspen decline, and wildfire.
3. Regeneration in past harvest units is considered overstocked and tree growth rates are expected to stagnate without reductions to stand density.
4. Elk and deer populations are declining in the project area. Increasing forage productivity would increase the probability of wildlife survival during critical times of the year (winter and spring).

Other benefits expected from the project include the maintenance and improvement of open forest system roads, the decommissioning of existing non-system roads, more effective management of livestock, isolating a population of green lineage cutthroat trout to prevent hybridization, and adopting a short segment of road to be responsive to the needs of local jeep outfitters and our recreating public.

Proposed Action

Vegetation Management

To address the purpose and need, the Eagle/Holy Cross Ranger District proposes to conduct approximately 10,000 acres of vegetation management activities located in Eagle County, Colorado. Proposed silvicultural activities include Clearcut with Leave Tree, Patch Clearcuts, Coppice Cuts, Overstory Removal Cuts, Salvage Harvests, Group Selection Harvests, Individual Tree Harvests, Pre-commercial Thinning, and broadcast burning.

Clearcut with Leave Tree

In units with a “clearcut with leave tree” prescription, all merchantable live and dead lodgepole pine trees (≥ 5 ” DBH) would be harvested. Mature lodgepole pine trees, typically over 100-years old or roughly the same age as the overstory, that are less than 5” DBH would also be harvested. Leave trees include Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, aspen, Douglas-fir, and seedlings (<5”DBH with >60% crown) of all species. In addition, merchantable live and dead lodgepole pine could be left on an individual tree basis to limit potential damage to other leave trees that could occur during harvesting. Leave trees of any species could be harvested to facilitate logging activities, such as clearing a landing area, or a skid trail. This

activity would result in lodgepole pine and aspen regeneration, while maintaining spruce and fir as a component of species composition.

Patch Clearcut

Patch Clearcutting would create small (~10-20 acre) clearcuts within larger units. Cumulatively, patch clearcuts within a unit would not exceed 35% of a unit's size. Patch clearcut openings would be dispersed throughout a given unit. Incidental harvesting could occur in areas outside of patch openings to facilitate yarding, decking, or other harvesting operations. This activity would create a new age class comprised of young aspen and conifer.

Coppice

Coppice cutting would require the harvesting of all merchantable trees (>5"DBH) within a unit, or broadcast burning to stimulate suckering. Following harvest, non-merchantable conifer trees (typically those <5"DBH) not removed during harvesting would be felled by chainsaw crews, or broadcast burning would be conducted to remove conifer seedlings and stimulate aspen suckering. For mechanical units, this activity would create an entire new age class comprised of young aspen. For broadcast burn units, pockets and stringers of mature aspen would be killed through burning, which would cause new aspen sprouting. In areas that burn at a lower intensity, mature aspen would survive the fire, with shrub and grasses being reinvigorated. This activity would lead to a mosaic of conditions that maintains mature aspen in places and stimulates new growth where the prescribed fire burns hotter or for a longer duration.

Overstory Removal Cut

Overstory Removal Cuts would harvest and remove overstory trees, while taking measures to minimize damage to existing regeneration. Overstory removal cuts are planned in areas that had Establishment Cuts that led to the development of a fully stocked understory. The Overstory Removal Cut is considered the final entry in the cutting cycle. Following this entry, the stand would be fully stocked with young trees that were established following the previous harvest, which typically occurred about 25-35 years ago.

Salvage Harvest

Salvage Harvests would remove trees that are dead, infested with pine or spruce beetle, or have dead tops. Some live trees could be harvested to facilitate logging operations, such as providing adequate space for landings, temporary roads, and skid trails. Salvage Harvests are not intended to be regeneration cuts, but rather maintain the existing dominant forest structure. Salvage Harvests allow the utilization of dead trees for forest products, without markedly changing forest structure or composition. Overall forest density is reduced, with some subsequent regeneration expected.

Group Selection

Group Selection prescriptions are being proposed in mixed conifer units that are dominated by Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and lodgepole pine. This prescription would create small openings, approximately a quarter acre to an acre in size, to create an environment suitable for conifer regeneration. Placement of openings would be dispersed throughout the

unit, with any given opening being more than two tree lengths from another opening on average. Openings would be placed adjacent to mature cone bearing spruce, to favor spruce regeneration over subalpine fir. Cumulatively, group openings would not exceed 25% - 35% of a unit's total size. This activity would lead to the development of multi-aged, multi-storied, conifer stands.

Individual Tree Selection

Individual Tree Selection is a silvicultural activity designed to create multi-aged, multi-storied, stand characteristics. Typically, this prescription is used in stands that are relatively open and harvesting operations are not expected to cause excessive damage to residual trees. Under this prescription, individual trees would be harvested throughout the unit, across all diameter size classes, with the objective of removing between 25% and 35% of the stand's basal area. This activity would create small openings that would provide suitable sites for the establishment of a new cohort of trees. Individual Tree Selection would also harvest and remove trees that are declining, infested with beetle or disease, or have poor form, while leaving those trees with the best phenotypes as seed trees.

Pre-commercial Thinning

Pre-commercial Thinning is an intermediate treatment used to reduce stand density to improve tree growth and vigor, reduce crown bulk density, remove trees infected with mistletoe or disease, and promote trees with the best phenotypes for retention. Typically, this prescription is applied in young stands that have relatively small diameter trees that are not yet merchantable (about 5"DBH or smaller). Within identified treatment areas, stands would be thinned to reduce stand stocking densities to a pre-determined number of trees per acre.

Slash

For all prescriptions, all felled merchantable timber would be removed from the forest, all non-merchantable material including tree tops, branches, and cull material would be lopped and scattered, machine piled and burned, or removed as biomass. Design features to leave minimum coarse woody debris for soils and wildlife will be met through site specific detailed prescriptions and contract provisions.

Mechanical Felling

Clearcut with Leave Tree, Patch Clearcut, Coppice Cut, Overstory Removal, Salvage, Group Selection, and Individual Tree Selection, would use conventional ground-based machinery to harvest trees and remove them from the stand. Conventional logging equipment typically includes harvesters, rubber tired and tracked skidders, stroke de-limiters, chip vans and log trucks. Trees could be processed (limbed and cut to length) in the forest or at a landing. However, the Forest Service would encourage the utilization of slash for biomass.

Table 1 – Summary of proposed vegetation management activities.

Unit Number	Prescription	Method	*Acres	**Purpose	MA
101	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	92	1, 2	5.13
102	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	156	1, 2	5.13
103	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	21	1, 2	5.13
104	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	17	1, 2	5.4
105	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	22	1, 2	5.4

Unit Number	Prescription	Method	*Acres	**Purpose	MA
106	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	11	1, 2	5.4
107	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	121	1, 2	5.4
108	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	17	1, 2	5.4
109	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	17	1, 2	5.4
110	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	33	1, 2	5.4
111	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	49	1, 2	5.4
112	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	27	1, 2	5.4
113	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	23	1, 2	5.4
114	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	7	1, 2	5.4
115	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	16	1, 2	5.4
116	Clearcut with Leave Tree	Ground Based Mechanized	179	1, 2	5.4
Total Acres Clearcut with Leave Tree			808		
201	Patch Clearcut	Ground Based Mechanized	136	1, 2	5.13
202	Patch Clearcut	Ground Based Mechanized	88	1, 2	5.4
* Total Acres Patch Clearcut			224		
301	Coppice Cut	Ground Based Mechanized	13	1, 2	5.4
302	Coppice Cut	Ground Based Mechanized	31	1, 2	5.4
303	Coppice Cut	Ground Based Mechanized	53	1, 2	5.4
304	Coppice Cut	Ground Based Mechanized	48	1, 2	5.4
Total Acres Coppice Cut			145		
401	Overstory Removal	Ground Based Mechanized	55	1	5.43
402	Overstory Removal	Ground Based Mechanized	10	1	5.43
403	Overstory Removal	Ground Based Mechanized	7	1	5.43
Total Acres Overstory Removal			72		
501	Salvage	Ground Based Mechanized	59	1	5.13, 5.43
502	Salvage	Ground Based Mechanized	11	1	5.13
503	Salvage	Ground Based Mechanized	8	1	5.13, 5.43
504	Salvage	Ground Based Mechanized	38	1	5.13
Total Acres Salvage			116		
601	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	271	1, 2	5.13
602	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	141	1, 2	5.13
603	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	8	1, 2	5.13
604	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	18	1, 2	5.13
605	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	4	1, 2	5.13
606	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	380	1, 2	5.43
607	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	81	1, 2	5.43
608	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	237	1, 2	5.43
609	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	84	1, 2	5.43
610	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	13	1, 2	5.43
611	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	20	1, 2	5.43
612	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	9	1, 2	5.43
613	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	17	1, 2	5.43
614	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	12	1, 2	5.43
615	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	11	1, 2	5.43
616	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	72	1, 2	5.43
617	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	29	1, 2	5.43
618	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	207	1, 2	5.43
619	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	155	1, 2	5.43
620	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	259	1, 2	5.43
621	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	33	1, 2	5.4

Unit Number	Prescription	Method	*Acres	**Purpose	MA
622	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	30	1, 2	5.4
623	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	49	1, 2	5.4
624	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	83	1, 2	5.4
625	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	113	1, 2	5.4
626	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	74	1, 2	5.4
627	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	15	1, 2	5.4
628	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	348	1, 2	5.4
629	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	30	1, 2	5.4
630	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	47	1, 2	5.4
631	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	33	1, 2	5.4
632	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	324	1, 2	5.4
633	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	12	1, 2	5.13, 5.4
634	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	7	1, 2	5.13
635	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	98	1, 2	5.13
636	Group Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	90	1, 2	5.13
Total Acres Group Selection			3,414		
701	Individual Tree Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	13	1, 2	5.43
702	Individual Tree Selection	Ground Based Mechanized	26	1, 2	5.43
Total Acres Individual Tree Selection			39		
801	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	10	3	5.4
802	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	8	3	5.4
803	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	29	3	5.4
804	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	16	3	5.4
805	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	10	3	5.4
806	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	12	3	5.4
807	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	6	3	5.4
808	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	5	3	5.4
809	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	3	3	5.4
810	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	5	3	5.4
811	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	20	3	5.4
812	Pre-commercial Thin	Hand Felling	203	3	5.13, 5.4
Total Acres Pre-commercial Thin			327		
901	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	1,046	2, 4	5.41, 5.4
902	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	748	2, 4	5.41, 5.4
903	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	762	2, 4	5.4
904	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	309	2, 4	5.41
905	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	459	2, 4	5.41, 5.4
906	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	163	2, 4	5.4
907	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	137	2, 4	5.4
908	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	164	2, 4	5.41, 5.4
909	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	382	2, 4	5.41, 5.4
910	Coppice	Broadcast Burn	407	2, 4	5.41, 5.4, 8.32
Total Acres Coppice through Broadcast Burning			4,577		
Total Acres Implementation			9,722		

* Acres are approximate (+/- 10%)

**Purpose references which Project Purpose the Activity is designed to accomplish (page 1).

Transportation

The Muddy Pass/Sheephorn analysis area contains approximately 37.30 miles of system roads that would be utilized for hauling activities (Table 2). In addition, there are approximately 27.74 miles of roads within the project analysis area that are identified in the 2012 Travel Management Plan Record of Decision to be closed to the public and or decommissioned. Of these roads, 24.87 miles are proposed for utilization as temporary haul roads, which would be decommissioned following use. The remaining 2.87 miles of road that are not proposed to be utilized as temporary haul roads could be closed while equipment is mobilized in the area.

Table 2 - Proposed Forest System Haul Routes.

Route Number	Route Name	Length (Miles)	Operational ML
401.1	Sheephorn	11.83	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
441.1	Three Licks Creek	0.20	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
442.1	Walters Lake	0.27	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	2.35	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
700.1	Red Sandstone- Muddy Pass	18.12	3 – Suitable for Passenger Cars
734.1	Red & White Mountain	0.95	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
744.1	Piney	3.58	2 – High Clearance Vehicles

Table 3 – Non System Haul Routes to be Decommissioned Following Hauling.

Route Number	Route Name	Length (Miles)	TMP Closure Distance	Operational ML
401.1C	Slate Creek	0.70	2.19	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
401.1D	Slate Creek	1.82	1.82	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
401.1E	Hat Trick	0.96	1.30	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
401.1F	Hat Trick	0.80	0.80	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
406.1	-----	0.88	1.00	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
429.1	Three Licks	1.61	1.61	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
434.1	Rock Creek Park	1.41	1.41	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
434.1A	Rock Park Spur	2.36	2.36	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
434W.1C	Rock Creek Park	0.87	0.87	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
434W.1D	Rock Creek Park	0.43	0.43	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
441.1	Three Licks Creek	2.07	2.07	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
451.1	Slough Grass Lake	1.14	1.14	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
451.1A	Slough Grass Spur	0.52	0.67	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
452.1	Slough Grass	0.53	0.53	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
452.1A	Lone Lick Creek	0.43	0.53	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
700.2D	Pine Creek Spur 1	0.61	0.61	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
700W.2B	Red Sandstone/ Muddy Creek	1.28	1.28	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
744.1A	Piney Spur	0.29	0.31	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
753W.1	Chimney Rock	3.63	3.75	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
988W.1	Lone Licks Way	0.78	1.08	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
990W.1A	George Lake Temp	0.95	1.18	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
990W.1C	Cottonwood Temp	0.50	0.50	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
990W.1D	George Lake Way	0.30	0.30	1 – Basic Custodial Care (Closed)
	Total Decommission Miles:	24.87	– 27.74	

Specified road reconstruction work is proposed in order to facilitate the conventional hauling of forest products. Proposed road reconstruction includes the creation and use of borrow

sources, roadway and ditch reconditioning, road re-alignment, curve reconstruction, and culvert installation/reinstallation. Table 4 provides a summary of proposed specified road reconstruction.

Borrow Sources – Borrow sources would allow the excavation of road base and/or subbase material along the side of an existing road, which would be used to support maintenance and road reconstruction work on the existing road where needed. Borrow sources are located in areas where material can be easily accessed, could support user safety such as to widen curves, would cause minimal erosional impacts, and/or could create improved function of the travel system such as with creating turnouts. For the purposes of this planning area, sources are needed to support maintenance and road reconstruction work for timber hauling as well as future needs on the road. The maximum quantity of material excavated at each borrow source location is not to exceed 250 cubic yards (CY). All borrow sources shall be restored upon exhaustion of the source.

Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning – Roadway and ditch reconditioning consists of removing slide material, sediment vegetation, and other debris from existing ditches and culvert inlets and outlets, shoulders, roadways, turnouts, parking areas and other areas. In addition, this work includes scarification, large rock removal, subgrade irregularity removal, and reshaping the existing roadbed and shoulders to provide a uniform, well-draining surface. The final step of this work is watering and compaction with at least a 16 ton smooth drum or sheep’s foot roller.

Curve Reconstruction – Curve reconstruction consists of establishing clearing limits, clearing and grubbing the area needed to effectively reconstruct the existing roadway alignment, excavation and backfill, reshaping the existing road prism in order to achieve the construction of a 50’ (foot) minimum radius curve.

Culvert Installation/ Reinstallation – This work consists of installing a new culvert or removing and reinstalling an existing culvert. Site dewatering, stream channel diversions, fish/ aquatic species removal, and erosion control may be necessary to accommodate this work. Excavation, backfill and compaction are necessary to complete this work.

Table 4 - Summary of the proposed specified road reconstruction activities.

Road Number	Road Name	Reconstruction Activity	Location (Mile Post)
401.1	Sheephorn	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	13.43
734.1	Red & White Mountain	Begin Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning	13.10
734.1	Red & White Mountain	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	13.53
734.1	Red & White Mountain	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	14.00
734.1	Red & White Mountain	End Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning	14.05
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Begin Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning	0.00
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Install 18” x 30’ Culvert	0.12
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	0.66
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	1.52
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	1.94
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	2.25
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	Road Realignment to Avoid Spring	2.80
444.1	Cottonwood Basin	End Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning	2.34

Road Number	Road Name	Reconstruction Activity	Location (Mile Post)
744.1	Piney	Begin Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning	0.00
744.1	Piney	Reconstruct curve to 50' minimum radius	2.54
744.1	Piney	Excavate and reinstall existing 24" Culvert	2.98
744.1	Piney	Reconstruct curve to 50' minimum radius	3.53
744.1	Piney	End Roadway and Ditch Reconditioning	3.58
700.1	Red Sandstone-Muddy Pass	Borrow Source (NTE 250 CY)	23.52

Temporary Roads

It is estimated that at least thirty six temporary roads would be needed to access cutting units. During harvesting operations additional temporary roads could be used if deemed necessary to facilitate logging activities. The location of all temporary roads would be approved by a Forest Service Timber Sale Administrator, Contracting Officers Representative, or Forest Service Representative and would be located in areas that cause the least amount of resource damage while still providing for harvesting feasibility. Following hauling activities, these temporary roads would be obliterated.

Wildlife Habitat Improvement

The landscape between Interstate 70 and the Red and White Road (Map 8 of 9), and the Lower Piney River Valley (Map 9 of 9), contain deer and elk winter range, severe winter range, and winter concentration areas. Much of this habitat is dominated by aspen, which provides high quality forage for elk and deer. The Proposed Action includes regenerating approximately 25% to 30% (~4,577 acres) of the aspen within this landscape to increase forage productivity by stimulating aspen suckering and forb and grass production. Aspen regeneration would be accomplished through broadcast burning. Incidental cutting of trees using hand-crews may occur when preparing the fire line. Sagebrush at the lower portion of the burn areas, and conifer (lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, Douglas-fir) at the upper portion of burn units, would likely experience some incidental burning during implementation. This activity would also be expected to reduce fuels within the Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI).

Fisheries Habitat Improvement

The Proposed Action includes the creation of a fish barrier on Three Licks Creek, where NFSR 401 crosses Three Licks Creek (Map 3 of 7). This barrier would likely be created by replacing the existing culvert with a longer culvert that would have an exit drop of sufficient height to prevent fish from traveling upstream. Other methods could be employed if they are determined to be more cost effective. This action is needed to isolate a local population of genetically pure green lineage cutthroat trout.

Range Improvements

The Proposed Action includes the relocation of one range allotment boundary fence between the Sheephorn C&H and Lone Lick/East Sheephorn C&H cattle grazing allotments. This

relocation is located within the Gutzler Fire’s burn perimeter and needed to prevent excessive fence damage and maintenance from falling snags. The Proposed Action also includes the installation of three new sections of fence to create a southern boundary between the South Piney C&H and Red and White S&G grazing allotments. These three new sections of fence are needed to prevent cattle from traveling from the South Piney C&H cattle allotment south onto the Red and White S&G sheep allotment.

Recreation

The White River National Forest Travel Management Plan (2011) designated a system of roads and trails forest-wide that addressed all modes of travel. The Muddy Pass/Sheephorn Project’s Proposed Action includes an amendment to the Travel Management Plan to designate 993.W1 as level II road open to all motorized wheeled use following the Motor Vehicle Use Map season of dates for the surrounding area (Map 6 of 9). Prior to the 2011 TMP, this route was used administratively but not available for public use. Motorized use of 993.W1 is authorized under an existing range permit for the placement of herder camps and weekly motorized vehicle supply trips. Together, range and recreation staff have tried to prohibit public motorized use of this permitted route, however enforcement has proven ineffective and unmanageable due to its popularity. Designating 993.W1 for all motorized use, which includes non-motorized access, provides a desired recreation opportunity that people seek. This route serves as a destination overlook with outstanding scenic views. Physical barriers may be placed around the scenic overlook and along 993.W1 to prevent motorized recreation beyond the overlook. Winter management of the area would remain the same as shown on the winter Over the Snow Map.

Management Direction

The proposed action aligns with goals, objectives, and strategies from the 2002 White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) specifically;

Goal 1 Ecosystem Health – “Promote ecosystem health and conservation using a collaborative approach to sustain the nation’s forests, grasslands, and watersheds”.

Objective 1a – “Improve and protect watershed conditions to provide the water quality and quantity and soil productivity necessary to support ecological functions and intended beneficial uses.

Strategy 1a.6 – “Over the life of the plan, use collaboration with State and local governments and other interested parties, available tools, authorities, and strategies that appropriately consider state law and the interests of holders of existing water rights to achieve desired conditions for aquatic and stream-based resources. Prioritize needs based on resource values, risks, and opportunities.

Objective 1d – “Increase the amount of forest and rangelands restored to or maintained in a healthy condition with reduced risk and damage from fires, insects, disease, and invasive species”.

Strategy 1d.7 – “Implement management practices, including prescribed fire, that will move landscapes towards desired vegetation composition and structure as described in the management area description and the Historic Range of Variability”.

Strategy 1d.9 – “Over the life of the plan, management practices that mimic ecological processes, such as fire, insect and disease, and other disturbances, will operate on forest and grassland landscapes in a manner consistent with desired conditions and management area direction”.

Strategy 1d10 – “Over the life of the plan continue to work cooperatively with grazing permittees and other interested individuals to design and implement grazing systems that maintain or enhance ecosystem function”.

Goal 2 Multiple Benefits to People – “Provide a variety of uses, products, and services for present and future generations by managing within the capability of sustainable ecosystems”.

Objective 2a – “Improve the capability of the national forests and grasslands to provide diverse, high quality outdoor recreation opportunities”.

Objective 2c – “Improve the capability of national forests and rangelands to sustain desired uses, values, products, and services”.

Strategy 2c.1 – “By the end of the plan period, offer for sale the allowable timber sale quantity”.

Goal 4 Effective Public Service – “Ensure the acquisition and use of an appropriate corporate infrastructure to enable the efficient delivery of a variety of uses”.

Objective 4a – “Improve the safety and economy of Forest Service roads, trails, facilities, and operations and provide greater security for the public and employees.

Strategy 4a.2 – “Decommission an average of 22 miles of Forest Development Transportation System roads each year”.

Goal 5 Public Collaboration – “Engage the American public, interested organizations, private landowners, state and local governments, federal agencies, and others in the stewardship of National Forest System lands”.

Objective 5a – “Work cooperatively with individuals and organizations, local, state, tribal, and federal governments to promote ecological, economic, and social health and sustainability across landscapes”.

Strategy 5a.2 – “Provide opportunities for local governmental jurisdictions and other interested parties to participate in planning and management of National Forest System lands, especially where local governmental jurisdictions or other landowners are contiguous to or may be affected by the management of these lands”.

The project area is located within the following Forest Plan-designated management areas:

5.13 Resource Production Forest Products – These lands are managed to provide commercial wood products. In addition, they provide for forage production, other commercial products, scenic quality, diversity of wildlife, and a variety of other goods and services. Numerous open roads provide commercial access and roaded recreational opportunities, while closed roads provide non-motorized opportunities.

Applicable Desired Condition – “The desired condition of this management area prescription is to maintain suitable forested areas with commercially valuable species at ages, densities, and sizes that allow growth rates and stand health conducive to providing a sustained yield of forest products. To achieve this objective, a full array

of silvicultural systems will be used that will produce a range of successional stages from seedlings to late-successional stands”.

5.4 Forested Flora and Fauna Habitats – These areas are primarily forested ecosystems intermingled with grassland and shrub communities, and are managed to provide a mix of ecological and human needs. These needs include wildlife and aquatic habitats, livestock forage, and forest products. These areas also provide for recreational opportunities, scenic quality, and a variety of other miscellaneous goods and services.

Applicable Desired Condition – “These areas provide for a variety of forest and non-forest plant communities and successional stages, over the long term, through a combination of human manipulation and natural processes. Management activities are influenced by biological processes found in the area, and strive to replicate local natural vegetation patterns and patch size (HRV). Vegetation management is designed to simulate natural disturbances, thus silvicultural treatments may be larger than 40 acres in size. Vegetation composition and structure exist in a range of successional stages to meet wildlife and aquatic habitat, livestock forage, and forest product objectives....

A full range of silvicultural prescriptions may be employed that includes timber harvest and prescribed fire management, in which both focus on long-term desired conditions”.

5.43 Elk Habitat – These areas are managed for elk. Low road densities and optimum forage and cover ratios characterize this management area prescription.

Applicable Desired Condition – “Vegetation is managed to provide healthy plant communities with a variety of species present for food and cover. Forested areas may appear managed without much evidence of damage by insects and disease. Natural and created openings or meadows of various sizes and shapes occur as well”.

Nature of Decision to be Made

For this project, the responsible official is the Eagle/Holy Cross District Ranger. Given the purpose and need, the responsible official will review the environmental analysis of the proposed action, other alternatives, and any public comments in order to make the following decisions:

1. Whether the proposed action will proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all.
2. If it proceeds:
 - a.) Whether to prepare an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement
 - b.) What design features/mitigation measures and monitoring requirements should be applied to the proposed action
 - c.) Whether the project requires any Forest Plan amendments

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

No Action

The EA will document consideration of a no-action alternative through the effects analysis by contrasting the impacts of the proposed action and any alternative(s) with the current condition and expected future condition if the proposed action were not implemented (36 CFR 220.7(b)(2)(ii)). Under the No Action Alternative, vegetation management activities and road improvements associated with the proposed action would not occur. The area would continue to be used for summer and winter recreation, hunting, firewood gathering, grazing and routine maintenance of roads would continue.

Effects and Issues to Consider

The environmental assessment will address the effects of the proposed action and alternatives to key issues identified during internal and external scoping. The assessment will be issue-driven and contain detail commensurate to the degree to which a resource may be affected.

Issues are cause and effect relationships that arise as a result of the proposed action. The Forest Service will use information gathered from this comment period to identify additional issues to be addressed. Issues raised in response to this notice of proposed action will be considered and addressed in the environmental analysis. Some issues may be addressed through modification of the proposed action, development of a new alternative, or mitigation measures.

Comment Process

The proposed project is an activity implementing a land management plan and subject to the objection process described in 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. The Forest Service is combining scoping with the legal notice and opportunity to comment, as described in §218.24. The public is encouraged to provide specific written comments on this proposal, including supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider. Specific written comments should be within the scope of and have a direct relationship to the proposed action.

The proposed action includes openings greater than 40 acres. The mountain pine beetle epidemic caused extensive mortality in lodgepole pine stands in the project area from about the years 2002 to 2011. Therefore, openings greater than 40 acres in the lodgepole pine component (clearcut with leave tree) of this project are the result of natural catastrophic conditions and not subject to a 60-day public review, or Regional Forester approval. Proposed Coppice Cuts in aspen stands, however, are not the result of natural catastrophic conditions. Instead, harvesting units larger than 40 acres are proposed to maximize sprouting to help ensure these units fully regenerate and withstand browse. Coppice units greater than 40 acres in size will require approval by the Regional Forester after a 60-day public review. In accordance with this standard, specific written comments on the proposed project will be accepted for 60 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the *Vail Daily*. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

Written comments must be submitted via mail, fax, electronically, or in person (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays) to: Richard Truex Acting District Ranger c/o Brett Crary, PO Box 190, Minturn, CO 81645, FAX: (970) 827-9343. Electronic comments including attachments can be submitted here: <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public//CommentInput?Project=53148>.

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Only those who submit timely and specific written comments will have eligibility to file an objection under §218.8. For objection eligibility, each individual or representative from each entity submitting timely and specific written comments must either sign the comment or verify identity upon request. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to object must meet the information requirements in §218.25(a)(3). Names and contact information submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

If the agency determines there are no significant impacts, that finding along with the EA and a draft decision notice will be published for a 45-day objection period. If no specific written comments are received during the designated opportunity for comment, the project will not be subject to objection. If the EA concludes there is potential for significant impacts, then an environmental impact statement will need to be prepared.

This Notice of Proposed Action also is requesting your comments under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (NHPA). Consultation under the NHPA seeks to consider the views about an undertaking and its effects on historic properties for the agency official to consider in decision making (36 CFR 800).

Additional information regarding this action can be obtained from: Brett Crary, (970) 328-5899, bcrary@fs.fed.us

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