

# Derby Mesa Project

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

Portions of Sections 13, 14, 23, 24, 25, 26, and 36  
Township 2 South, Range 86 West  
6<sup>th</sup> 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 conduct forest restoration and habitat improvement activities on Derby Mesa, located in Eagle County, Colorado (Map 1). Your comments will help us further develop the proposed action, potential alternatives, and identify issues associated with proposed activities. Additional and updated project information will be available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56829>

This project is currently being considered for categorical exclusion from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement under one or both of the following authorities:

36 CFR 220.6 (e) (6) – Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 miles of low standard road construction.

Sections 605 of HFRA (16 U.S.C.6591d) – Wildfire Resilience. Hazardous fuels reduction projects in designated areas on National Forest System lands.

## Background

Derby Mesa contains one of the few landscapes on the White River National Forest comprised of ponderosa pine forests. Historically, ponderosa pine would have been maintained through frequent (0-25 year) fire return intervals with low-intensity fires that naturally thinned forests and reduced fuel accumulations. However, fire suppression has allowed seedlings to grow unchecked, leading to an increase in forest density, and Douglas-fir has been able to become more prevalent due to its higher shade tolerance. Historic logging may have also modified forest structure and composition and a bark beetle outbreak in the mid to late 2000's reduced the prevalence of larger pine trees within the project area.

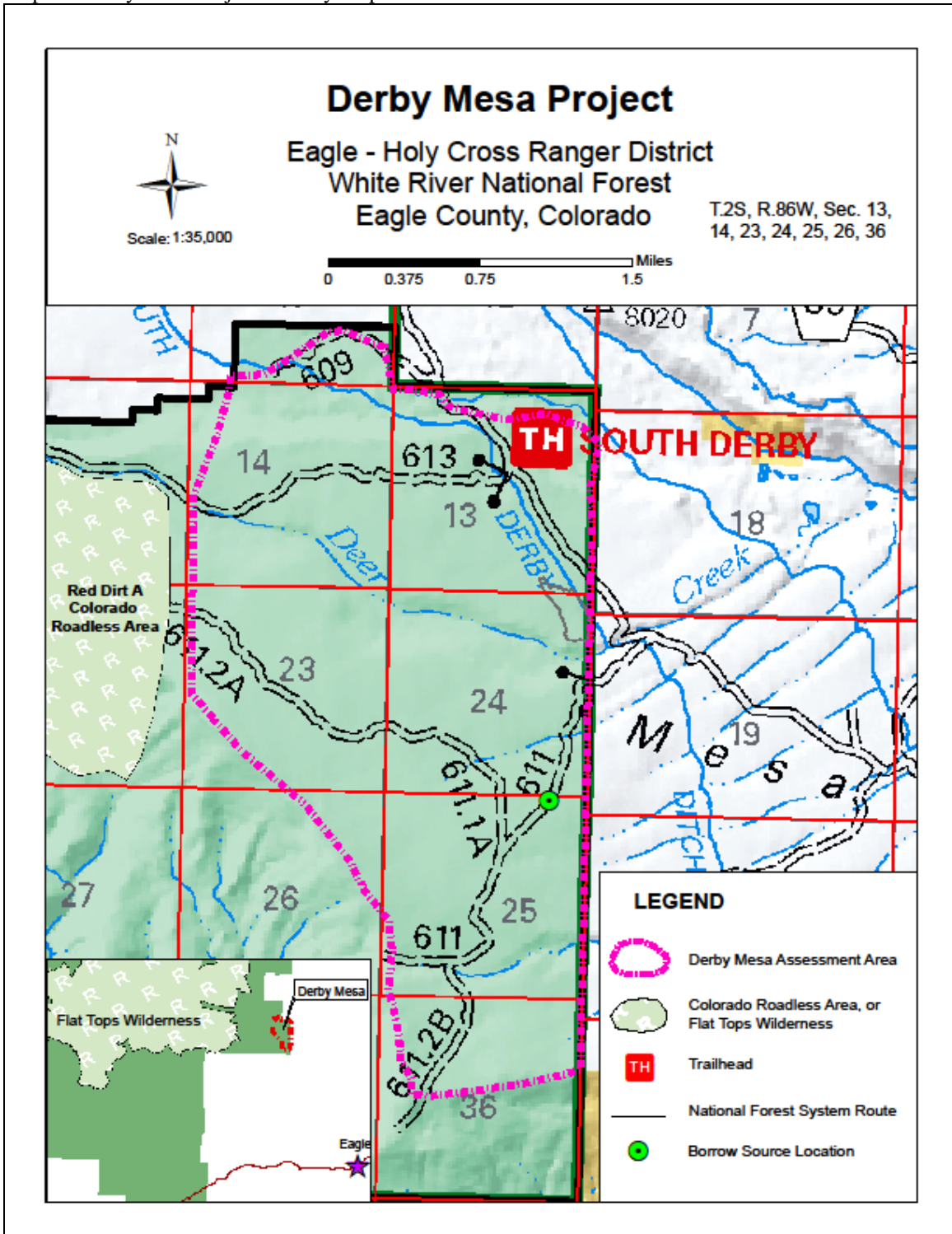
As a result of these changes, current forest structure and composition in the project area is generally outside the historic range of variability. In many areas, forests in the project area are categorized as Fire Regime Group<sup>1</sup> I and III, Fire Regime Condition Class<sup>2</sup> 2 and 3. These condition classes are at risk of high severity fire. In addition, high quality habitat for species that are strongly associated with ponderosa pine forests, including the goshawk and flammulated owl, is also at risk of high severity fire.

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<sup>1</sup> Fire Regime Group – A natural fire regime is a general classification of the role fire would play across a landscape in the absence of modern human mechanical intervention, but including the influence of aboriginal burning.

<sup>2</sup> Fire Regime Condition Class – A classification of the amount of departure from the natural fire regime.

Map 1 – Derby Mesa Project Vicinity Map



## Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to:

- Restore ponderosa pine as the primary cover type where this species occurs.
- Restore and maintain dry mixed conifer (ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir) fire regime condition class 1.
- Improve flammulated owl nesting and foraging habitat, and Brewer's sparrow nesting habitat.
- Provide forest products to local industries and businesses.

The proposed action is needed to:

- Restore ecosystem function, composition, structure, and natural processes to a condition that is more closely aligned with its natural (historical) range of variability.
- Retain and create favorable growing conditions for large trees.
- Reduce the risk of high severity fire.
- Contribute towards the White River National Forest's Allowable Sale Quantity of forest products, including timber and biomass.

## Proposed Action

The Eagle-Holy Cross Ranger District proposes to manage vegetation in the vicinity of Derby Mesa to accomplish hazardous fuels reduction and wildlife habitat improvement. Vegetation management would include up to 3,000 acres of conventional mechanized treatments and broadcast burning. Mechanized harvesting and prescribed fire would be designed to maintain existing ponderosa pine, establish ponderosa pine regeneration, reduce the density of Douglas-fir, sub-alpine fir and lodgepole pine, and regenerate aspen.

### Fire Regime Condition Class 1

*Broadcast burning* – Broadcast burning would be conducted to maintain fire regime condition class 1. Within broadcast burn blocks, whip (trees generally <5"DBH<sup>3</sup>) felling may be conducted to prepare an adequate fuel bed and to remove small-diameter trees that could potentially scorch large, adjacent trees, during burning operations. Broadcast burning would be conducted on a 5 – 15 year entry cycle to maintain this condition class.

### Fire Regime Condition Class 2 and 3

*Improvement Cut* – Retain all existing ponderosa pine trees. Other conifers species ( $\geq 5$ "DBH) within 30 to 50 feet of ponderosa pine trees ( $\geq 5$ "DBH) will be harvested. This treatment is intended to maintain existing ponderosa pine by removing competition from more shade-tolerant trees, remove potential ladder fuels, and favor ponderosa pine regeneration.

*Group Selection* – Small group openings, 1 to 2 acres in size, would be established adjacent to ponderosa pine trees, or in areas with evidence of historic ponderosa pine. Within these

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<sup>3</sup> DBH – Diameter at Breast Height, the diameter of the stem of a tree measured at breast height (4.5 ft) from the ground.

groups, all trees other than ponderosa pine would be harvested. Following harvesting and broadcast burn operations, natural regeneration of ponderosa pine is expected. If natural regeneration is below Forest Plan stocking standards five years following entry, openings created by group selection would be planted with ponderosa pine seedlings. Openings would be dispersed across the project area. Cumulatively, openings would not exceed 15% of the overall treatment area. This activity is designed to restore ponderosa pine composition within the landscape in areas it has been lost from competition and bark beetles.

*Commercial Thin* – In areas not included in an improvement cut or group selection, commercial thinning would be conducted to reduce densities in Douglas-fir stands. Thinning would reduce stocking to between 20-60 BA/Ac (basal area/acre). Commercial thinning would remove trees from any conifer species (Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, subalpine fir) across all diameter classes. Douglas-fir would be preferentially retained over other conifer species, where other species are present. Tree selection would be irregular, or free, with the intent of maintaining some groups (1/4 to 1/2 acre) and clumps (2-10 trees) of trees with interlocking crowns across the landscape rather than an even spacing.

*Broadcast burning* – Broadcast burning would be conducted following harvesting activities, and repeated every 5-15 years, to maintain fire regime condition class 1.

#### Wildlife Habitat

*Brewer's sparrow habitat: Harvest without Regeneration* – Conifers that are encroaching on sagebrush parks would be removed by harvesting, felling with chainsaws, or masticating. This would improve habitat for the Brewer's sparrow, a Rocky Mountain Region 2 sensitive species.

*Flammulated owl habitat: Snag retention* – In areas identified as flammulated owl habitat, prescriptions would be the same as those described under Fire Regime Condition Class 2 and 3. In addition, all snags and broken-top trees greater than 9 inches in diameter would be retained. Recruit (create) one large snag (greater than 20 inches in diameter) per acre (where feasible) where snags don't currently exist.

#### Roads/Temporary Roads

Existing Forest System Routes and County Roads would be used to access treatment areas and remove forest products from the project area. Temporary roads would be established as-needed to facilitate harvesting activities during project implementation and decommissioned when silvicultural treatments have been completed. 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. Temporary roads would utilize existing non-system routes to the extent possible.

Road reconstruction work is proposed for existing system roads in order to facilitate the conventional hauling of forest products. Reconstruction involves the improvement or realignment of National Forest system roads to enhance safety, service, and environmental

standards. Road reconstruction activities could occur on any National Forest system road that is used for access to the project area.

Table 1 - Proposed Forest System Haul Routes.

Route Number	Route Name	Length (Miles)	Operational ML
609.1	Derby Road	1.22	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
611.1	Red Dirt Basin	2.5	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
611.1A	Unnamed Road	0.57	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
611.2A	Pennsylvania Creek	1.75	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
611.2B	Red Dirt Rim	0.75	2 – High Clearance Vehicles
613.1	South Derby	1.78	2 – High Clearance Vehicles

Table 2 – Non-System Haul Routes to be Decommissioned Following Hauling if Used.

Route Number	Route Name	Length (Miles)	TMP Closure Distance
611.1A	NA	0.31	0.31
611.2A	DEER CREEK	0.36	0.36
611.2C	NA	1.74	1.74
611.2D	NA	1.03	1.03
613.1C	NA	1.48	1.48
N238.1	NA	0.39	0.39
N239.1	NA	0.73	0.73
N242.1	NA	0.17	0.17
N243.1	NA	0.55	0.55

### 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:

5.4 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 (Historic Range of Variability). 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”.

## **Nature of Decision to be Made**

The Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations allow Federal agencies to exclude from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) categories of actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Based on the Agency’s experience and knowledge, the responsible official can conclude that if the action fits within an identified category, and analysis shows there are no extraordinary circumstances, then the action would not have significant effects. Preliminary review indicates this project may fall within a category of actions established for wildlife habitat improvement and/or hazardous fuels reduction. These categories are described under 36 CFR 220.6 (e) (6) and Section 605 of HFRA (16 U.S.C.6591d). Resources that should be considered when determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to a proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS are:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;
2. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;
3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;
4. Colorado Roadless Areas or potential wilderness areas;
5. Research natural areas;
6. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; and
7. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

For this project, the responsible official is the Eagle – Holy Cross District Ranger. The responsible official will review resource input and public comments in order to make the following decisions:

1. If extraordinary circumstances exist that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement.
2. If the proposed action will proceed as proposed, or as modified. In addition, the District Ranger will determine the design features and monitoring requirements that will be applied to the proposed action.

## **Public Involvement**

The project was first listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in October, 2019 and updates are provided quarterly. During the initial development of the proposed action, Forest Service

staff reached out to local ranching permittees, met with representatives from Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and met with representatives from Wilderness Workshop.

**Comment Process**

The Eagle – Holy Cross Ranger District is now soliciting comments on the proposed action. Your feedback on this proposal will assist in refining design features and identifying potential issues. Comments specific to the proposed action that identify a cause-effect relationship are most helpful.

The following options are available for submitting comments:

Electronic comments including attachments can be submitted to:

<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=56829>

Hard copy comments can be mailed, or hand-delivered to:

**Mail**

Eagle-Holy Cross Ranger District  
Attn: Brett Crary  
PO Box 190  
Minturn, CO 81645

**Hand Deliver**

Eagle-Holy Cross Ranger District  
Attn: Brett Crary  
24747 US Hwy 24  
Minturn, CO 81645

Comments will be accepted any time, but are most helpful if submitted prior to March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Names and contact information submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act. Decisions that are categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are not subject to an administrative review process (pre-decision objection process) (Agriculture Act of 2014, Subtitle A. Sec. 8006).

Additional information regarding this project can be obtained from: Brett Crary, (970) 328-5899, [brett.crary@usda.gov](mailto:brett.crary@usda.gov)

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