



January 6, 2020

**United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service**

Zone Aspen Project Scoping Document

**Baldwin-White Cloud and Cadillac-Manistee Ranger Districts
Huron-Manistee National Forests
Lake, Manistee, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo,
Oceana, and Wexford Counties, Michigan**

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Who?

The USDA Forest Service, Huron-Manistee National Forests (HMNF), Baldwin-White Cloud and Cadillac-Manistee Ranger Districts (the West Zone) are initiating an environmental analysis that includes the following activity: even-aged regeneration harvesting of aspen and aspen-dominated stands on *National Forest System lands*.

What?

Proposed Activities

The Proposed Action (Table 1) is a set of activities designed to accomplish the objectives described by management direction in the Forest Plan and the Purpose and Need for the project (see below).

The goal of this project is to manage the aspen forest resource of the West Zone of the HMNF to: improve the growth and vigor of aspen stands; achieve a diversity of age-classes; provide a healthier ecosystem; and, improve wildlife habitat. The project would ensure future timber availability and utilization, and improve forest conditions for wildlife.

The aspen forest types that would be treated under this project are: bigtooth aspen, quaking aspen, oak-aspen, northern white cedar-aspen/paper birch, and balsam fir-aspen/paper birch.

We are proposing management activities to:

1) promote desired vegetation distribution, composition, and age classes of aspen-dominated stands by:

- Treating the unbalanced age class of aspen by harvesting stands that are beyond rotation age as a priority;
- Sustaining the aspen cover type especially where aspen is beyond rotation age;
- Managing aspen-dominated stands to increase the amount of aspen present in these stands;

and, 2) enhance existing wildlife habitat by:

- Sustaining a forest type critical to many important species, such as American woodcock, ruffed grouse, white-tailed deer, and golden-winged warbler;
- Distributing early successional habitat critical to the above species across the West Zone of the HMNF;
- Emphasizing treatment in grouse management areas;
- Providing a diversity of habitats related to age class distribution of treated aspen stands.

Table 1 describes the proposed activities and the estimated amount of aspen to be treated.

Successful management of the aspen stands identified in this project would typically involve a single-entry treatment and would be implemented over an approximately 15-year time-period. Exceptions to this would be: 1) in some of the larger stands to be treated, two entries would be planned eight to ten years apart to create greater age class diversity; and, 2) stands treated manually may involve multiple entries in the same area over the same 15-year time period.

**Description of Proposed Activities in the Zone Aspen Project Area
Table 1**

Proposed Activity	Amount ¹
<p align="center"><u>Aspen regeneration (mechanical)</u></p> <p>Clearcut aspen (harvest existing mature trees to reestablish a new forest). Scattered non-aspen overstory (large, mature) trees and clumps of trees will be left to provide mast, snags, and edge habitat for wildlife. Natural regeneration (sprouting) of aspen is the objective. Portions of aspen stands that cannot be treated mechanically may be handcut.</p>	Up to 25,000 acres
<p align="center"><u>Aspen regeneration (manual)</u></p> <p>Regenerate aspen by manually (chainsaws) cutting portions of stands and leaving the cut trees on site. Scattered non-aspen overstory trees and clumps of trees will be left to provide mast, snags and edge habitat for wildlife. Natural regeneration (sprouting) and age class diversity of aspen are the objectives.</p>	Up to 4,500 acres

¹All acres are approximate based on GIS analyses

It is anticipated that the amount of aspen to be harvested annually would vary from no acres treated up to 4,000 acres treated. The majority of the aspen stands to be treated would not exceed 40 contiguous acres. However, aspen regeneration harvests may occasionally involve harvest units up to 100 acres, with rare exceptions of up to 250-acre harvest units. The size of any particular aspen harvest unit would depend on site-specific considerations such as: size and continuity of aspen stands, age of stands, and silvicultural or wildlife resource requirements. In deer, grouse and wildlife emphasis areas, aspen cuts would be designed to maximize the diversity in structure, age class, and edge habitat of treated stands.

The Planning Rule requires a 60-day public notice for projects that will result in temporary openings created by even-aged management which exceed the 40-acre limit in the National Forest Management Act. This 30-day project scoping period plus the 30-day public comment period would fulfill this 60-day public notice requirement. A letter of support from the Regional Forester will be sought annually as the aspen management harvesting is planned for out years.

Actions would include construction, and subsequent closure and revegetation, of temporary roads and landings, as well as the reconstruction of existing roads needed for timber removal. Stands adjacent to harvest areas may be used for landings, skid trails, or location of road improvements. Pre-existing infrastructure would be used to the greatest extent practical. Incidental harvest, felling, or treatment of other tree species would occur to facilitate harvest operations. These actions may change administrative classification of existing roads but would not result in changes to public access or the Motor Vehicle Use Map.

As part of this proposal, the Zone Aspen Project Interdisciplinary Team will develop mitigation measures to guide management activities to achieve timber management and other resource objectives and minimize or eliminate any potential effects to natural and cultural resources in the treatment stands. These will include habitat improvements for wildlife; measures to reduce the spread of invasive species, and a number of conservation measures for rare plants and animals, riparian areas, fisheries, soil resources, visual quality objectives, recreation opportunities, and cultural resources.

This project implements the Huron-Manistee National Forests' Land and Resource Management Plan as Amended (2012). These proposed management activities would occur *only on National*

Forest System lands. The project is subject to pre-decisional objection consistent with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-74) as implemented by subparts A and B of 36 C.F.R. Part 218.

Where?

The Zone Aspen Project is located on National Forest System lands across the nine counties that encompass the West Zone of the HMNF. Those counties are Lake, Manistee, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, and Wexford.

The Project Area is the entire 540,322 acres of the Manistee National Forest which includes both the Baldwin-White Cloud and Cadillac-Manistee Ranger Districts. The maximum number of acres to be treated (approximately 29,500 acres) represents approximately 6% of the land base of the West Zone of the HMNF.

The Zone Aspen Project would occur *only on National Forest System lands*. An interactive map showing all of the aspen stands being considered can be found online at:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0b7607e6430f4b58b3168547bd3a4d51>

However, not all of the aspen stands identified in the above map will necessarily be treated in this project.

Alternatively, electronic copies can be obtained by contacting the interdisciplinary team leader and requesting copies. That contact information is: Mark Herberger, NEPA Coordinator, 412 Red Apple Road, Manistee, MI 49660; (231) 723-2211 ext. 3109; or, mark.herberger@usda.gov.

Why?

Forest Plan Management Direction

The Huron-Manistee Land and Resource Management Plan as Amended (Forest Plan) provides direction on the management goals and objectives for the entire Forest and for individual management areas. National Forest System lands are divided into management areas with identifiable goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines to accomplish the desired future condition for each management area. The Zone Aspen Project occurs within Management Areas (MA) 2.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 6.2, 8.3, and 8.4. Management direction for these areas is described in the Forest Plan's Chapter III - Management Area Direction (available on the Huron-Manistee National Forests' website).

The objective of the Zone Aspen Project is that the proposed treatment activities would address both Forest Plan Forest-wide goals and objectives as well as the goals and objectives of specific management areas.

Forest-wide Goals and Objectives

The purpose and need for aspen management within the project area is to:

- Sustain the aspen forest cover type and provide for a diversity of habitats;
- Improve the growth and vigor of aspen stands by harvesting aspen stands and increase the age class diversity of this forest type;

- Meet the Forest Plan objective of maintaining 10-16% of the Manistee National Forest acres in the aspen-birch forest type (Forest Plan page II-7);
- Manage aspen with the Forest Plan's identified rotation age of 40-60 years with an expected age of 50 (Forest Plan page II-17);
- Meet the Forest Plan objective of managing wildlife and fisheries habitats and plant communities to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native species (Forest Plan page II-4);
- Meet ruffed grouse habitat and population objectives; provide an interspersed of young and older aged aspen stands to provide the proper combination of food and cover; activities are incorporated into the Forest Plan composition objectives and rotation ages for the aspen forest type (Forest Plan II-33).

In addition, the Zone Aspen Project would follow the standards and guidelines identified in the Forest Plan for all management areas (Forest Plan pp. II-7 through II-41).

Management Area Direction

The management areas are described in the Forest Plan, and include the following:

Management Area 2.1 - Roaded Natural Rolling Plains and Morainal Hills - Management activities provide high volumes of quality hardwood timber products and firewood with special consideration for enhancing wildlife habitats. Emphasis is given to managing deer, grouse, and wildlife emphasis areas.

- Management will strive to increase utilization of wood residues and other currently nonmerchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.
- Quality sites and opportunities for intensive timber management practices will be identified commensurate with the site's ecological capabilities.
- Maintain or increase the acres of aspen/birch in grouse management areas.
- Desired Future Condition - Timber stands are dominated by red oak, sugar and red maples, beech, ash, black cherry and aspen, with conifer inclusions of red and white pines. The dominant trees in stands are the same age and about the same size. Stands differ in age and are irregular in size and shape, giving the landscape a mosaic appearance.

Management Area 4.2 - Roaded Natural Sandy Plains and Hills - Management activities enhance and increase the variety of wildlife habitats with emphasis given to managing deer, grouse, and wildlife essential habitat. High volumes of timber products are produced.

- In grouse emphasis areas, aspen is managed intensively to provide quality grouse habitat.
- Provide vegetative age diversity in all vegetation classes.
- Management will strive to increase utilization of wood residues and other currently nonmerchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.
- Quality sites and opportunities for intensive timber management practices will be identified commensurate with the site's ecological capabilities.
- Desired Future Condition - Timber stands are dominated by red, white and jack pines; red, white and black oaks; and aspen. The dominant trees in stands are the same age and about the same size. Stands differ in age and are irregular in size and shape, giving the landscape a mosaic appearance.

Management Area 4.3 - Roaded Natural Wetlands - Management activities in these areas provide a variety of forest views and scenes. Wildlife is abundant, and efforts are made to increase and

enhance various habitats. Emphasis is given to managing deer, grouse and wildlife emphasis areas.

- Manage intensively to provide quality grouse habitat.
- Provides low volumes of timber products.
- Management will strive to increase utilization of wood residues and other currently nonmerchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.
- Quality sites and opportunities for intensive timber management practices will be identified commensurate with the site's ecological capabilities.
- Desired Future Condition - Extensive stands of softwood and hardwood species occur throughout the area and create a natural forest appearance. The dominant tree species are aspen, cedar, hemlock, red maple, elm, black ash, and paper birch.

Management Area 4.4 - Rural - Wildlife management is coordinated with adjacent non-National Forest land management with emphasis on deer, grouse and wildlife management.

- Manage intensively to provide quality grouse habitat.
- Maintain or increase the acres of aspen/birch in grouse management areas.
- Management will strive to increase utilization of wood residues and other currently nonmerchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns, such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.
- Quality sites and opportunities for intensive timber management practices will be identified commensurate with the site's ecological capabilities.
- Desired Future Condition - Red, white, and jack pine are the dominant tree species, although aspen and other hardwoods are present. The trees within each stand are about the same age and size.

Management Area 6.2 - Semiprimitive Motorized Areas - These areas provide high visual diversity, enhance and increase wildlife habitats, will reduce damaging wildfire potential, and provide moderate amounts of quality timber products from appropriate areas.

- Provide high visual variety by providing vegetative diversity.
- Provide low to moderate volumes of forest products.
- Management will strive to increase utilization of wood residues and other currently nonmerchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.
- Desired Future Condition - Dominant forest types are variable depending on the area and will range from northern hardwoods on morainal hills and plains to aspen, oaks, and red and white pines on dry sandy plains. Low, wet areas will be characterized by aspen, black ash, cedar, fir and hemlock. Stand distribution by age and size, across the landscape, is natural in appearance and dominated by old-growth characteristics.

Management Area 8.3 - Experimental Forests - Management of designated Experimental Forests will provide a land base for research activities.

- The Huron-Manistee National Forests and North Central Research Station shall encourage appropriate use of experimental forests by scientists, educators and managers.

Management Area 8.4 - Special Areas - Management of special areas will protect areas that have scientific, biological, geological, historical, social, or recreational characteristics of local, regional, or national significance.

- Provides visual variety by providing vegetative diversity.
- Produces low to moderate volumes of forest products.

- Management will strive to increase utilization of wood residues and other currently nonmerchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat.
- Quality sites and opportunities for intensive timber management practices will be identified commensurate with the site's ecological capabilities.
- Desired Future Condition - Dominant forest types are variable depending on the area and will range from northern hardwoods on morainal hills and plains to aspen, oaks and red and white pines on dry sandy plains. Low, wet areas will be characterized by aspen, black ash, cedar, fir and hemlock. Stand distribution by age and size, across the landscape, is natural in appearance and dominated by old-growth characteristics.

Aspen treatments would not occur on lands designated as old growth by the HMNF. In addition, activities would not take place in MA 5.1 (wilderness), MA 7.1 (concentrated recreation areas), MA 8.1 (wild and scenic rivers), MA 8.2 (research natural areas), MA 9.1 (candidate research natural areas), and MA 9.2 (study wild and scenic rivers).

If you would like to see the full descriptions of the management areas identified above, including maps, purpose, landscape description, goals and objectives, desired future condition, and standards and guidelines, go to the HMNF's website at:
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/hmnf/landmanagement/planning>.

Alternatively, contact Mark Herberger at (231) 723-2211 ext. 3109 or at mark.herberger@usda.gov for a paper or electronic copy.

Purpose for the Proposal

The purpose of Zone Aspen Project is meet the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan and the objectives of the MAs being managed and to move the area toward the desired future conditions described in the Forest Plan for MAs 2.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 6.2, 8.3, and 8.4 described above. The focus is on sustaining forest health; providing commercial timber products; promoting vegetation distribution, composition and age class diversity; and, managing early seral habitats for desired wildlife species, including endangered species.

Need for the Proposal

Currently, the West Zone of the HMNF has approximately 12.6% of National Forest System lands in the aspen/birch forest type, within the desired range specified in the Forest Plan and described above (Forest Plan page II-7). However, without disturbance or management, it is likely that the acres of the aspen forest type on the HMNF will decrease. Aspen is a shade-intolerant, early-successional, and relatively short-lived species that would be succeeded by more shade-tolerant and longer-lived forest types that would greatly reduce the amount of the aspen forest type found on the Forest.

As noted above, the Forest Plan identifies a rotation age of 40-60 years with an expected age of 50 (Forest Plan page II-17) for aspen forest types. On the West Zone of the HMNF, aspen stands greater than 60 years old (i.e. beyond the expected rotation age of 50) accounts for approximately 23% of all the aspen found on the Zone (approximately 12,863 acres out of 55,561 acres identified). In addition, 38% of aspen stands are currently in the 40-60-year old age class (approximately 21,096 acres) and would therefore surpass the expected rotation age in the next 10 to 20 years. As the above data suggests, approximately 61% of the aspen forest type on the West Zone of the HMNF is either above the expected rotation or will move past that point in the next

10-20 years. The total aspen acres at threat of succeeding to other species totals approximately 33,959 acres.

According to the Forest Plan, even aged harvesting is an acceptable cutting method for all management areas to be treated in this project (Forest Plan - Management Prescription Summaries pages B-1 through B-4). As stated on page B-7 of the Forest Plan concerning the clearcut method: Clearcutting is used to create conditions necessary to regenerate early successional vegetation, such as aspen and jack pine. Without man-made or natural disturbances, the forest would move toward a condition dominated by late successional vegetation, such as sugar maple. Clearcutting favors species of wildlife that utilize open and young-growth habitat conditions, such as the white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, chestnut-sided warbler and Lincoln's sparrow. Finally, on page B-9 of the Forest Plan in Table B-1: Common Harvest Methods by Vegetation Type, even-aged harvesting (i.e. clearcutting) is the preferred method of regenerating the aspen/birch forest type.

The HMNF's Forest Plan proposed the total acres by forest type to be harvested for the first and second decades of the projected lifespan of the plan. On page D-4 of the Forest Plan in Table D-4: Acres of Proposed and Probable Silvicultural Methods in the First and Second Decades from Lands Suitable for Timber Production, for the entire HMNF it was proposed that 24,100 acres in the first decade and 28,000 acres in the second decade should be harvested. To date, the HMNF has fallen short of those acres by 84% (i.e. we have accomplished 16% of our aspen harvesting target). According to the numbers outlined in Table D-4, the HMNF should have managed about 2,400 acres a year for the first ten years and increased that number to 2,800 acres per year in the second decade. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the HMNF was harvesting around 1,500 acres a year (still well below the level anticipated in Table D-4 above). In about the year 2000, aspen harvest levels dropped to less than 500 acres a year and has stayed at that level to date.

When?

A decision on the proposed action, or an alternative to the proposed action, is expected by September 2020. While initial activities may commence immediately following the final decision, project activities are expected to occur over a 15-year period.

How You Can Participate

We invite you to comment on the specific proposed activities of the Zone Aspen Project. We will review all your comments and determine whether we need to refine the proposed action or develop alternative ways to accomplish our objectives. Comments related specifically to the proposed activities should be submitted in writing on or before **February 5, 2020**.

In addition, a series of three open houses will be held to further discuss the project with anyone interested in the project. The open houses will be held on the following dates, locations, and times:

- Baldwin-White Cloud Ranger Station Conference Room, Baldwin, MI, January 9, from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm.
- Norman Township Hall, Wellston, MI, January 15, from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm.
- Newaygo County Board of Commissioners Room, White Cloud, MI, January 16, from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm.

The comment period serves as both a scoping opportunity and as a designated period for public comment. If you would like to be eligible to object based on scoping comments, you must submit comments no later than **February 5, 2020**, and the comments submitted must meet the requirements identified in 36 C.F.R. Part 218. We welcome comments received after this date; they will be considered in the development of project alternatives, but they will be outside the designated comment timeframe.

Please review the proposal and respond with written comments that relate specifically to the proposed activities, and include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider.

Only those who submit timely and specific written comments about this proposed project or activity during this or another public comment period established by the responsible official will be eligible to file an objection. There will be an additional public comment period, in which you can establish eligibility to object, following analysis of the project alternatives in an environmental assessment.

Submit comments electronically to: comments-eastern-huron-manistee-manistee@usda.gov. E-mail attachments must be readable by Microsoft Office 2000 or Adobe. Please reference Zone Aspen Project in the subject line. Written comments can be sent to: Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District, 412 Red Apple Road, Manistee, MI 49660. A comment form is attached for your convenience. It is the responsibility of the sender to ensure timely receipt of any comments submitted.

Questions regarding the proposed project can be directed to Mark Herberger at (231) 723-2211 ext. 3109 or at mark.herberger@usda.gov. We look forward to having you engaged in this process. Your participation now will ensure that you receive all future mailings regarding this project.

Sincerely,



Jacob Lubera
District Ranger
Baldwin-White Cloud Ranger District



Scott Peedle
District Ranger
Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District

FROM:

Place
Postage
Here

TO: Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District
Huron-Manistee National Forests
412 Red Apple Road
Manistee, MI 49660

Attention: Mark Herberger