



## Forest Service News Release

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### Spruce Vegetation Management Project

*Opportunity to Comment*

**Rapid City, SD; February 22, 2022** –The Black Hills National Forest will be preparing an environmental assessment for the Spruce Vegetation Management Project. The project proposes implementing treatments on up to 25,000 acres of spruce stands across the Black Hills National Forest. The Black Hills National Forest is inviting you to comment on this project.

“The purpose of the Spruce Vegetation Management Project is to reduce the number of acres dominated by white spruce (*Picea glauca*) and increase the number of acres of pine and aspen forest-wide with the objective of increasing overall forest resiliency,” said Jerry Krueger, Deputy Forest Supervisor for the Black Hills National Forest. “This project will also reduce undesirable future fire behavior across the Black Hills National Forest landscape.”

Proposed activities include regeneration harvests with reserve trees, overstory removal, group selection, machine piling, pile burning, and prescribed fire using a condition-based management approach. Follow up maintenance treatments are proposed to ensure regeneration requirements are met and to encourage pine and aspen seedlings and saplings over spruce.

Additional information is available in the scoping letter and supporting documents, which can be accessed on the project webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>.

Comments can be submitted through the electronic comment form located on the project webpage. Comments may also be submitted by means of written comment via the U.S. Postal Service to: Jeff Underhill, 1019 N. 5th Street, Custer, SD 57730. Comments should include: 1) your name and postal address, 2) project title (Spruce Vegetation Management), and 3) signature or other verification of identity upon request (36 CFR 218.25(a)(3)).

Comments received in response to this initial request, including names, addresses, and any other information provided with the comments, will be considered a part of the public record. Please submit any comments by March 24, 2022.

For more information on the Black Hills National Forest, visit [www.fs.usda.gov/blackhills](http://www.fs.usda.gov/blackhills).

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*USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.*

Greetings from your Black Hills National Forest:

The USDA Forest Service acknowledges its 2019 Memorandum of Understanding with Lawrence County on government-to-government coordination for cooperating status for National Environmental Policy Act environmental documents. In that capacity, I would like to notify you in advance of public scoping that we are proposing a forest-wide project to treat white spruce (*Picea glauca*) stands called the Spruce Vegetation Management Project. I am also providing you with advanced access to the scoping material.

You may recall in March 2021, the Forest Service requested public input for the Pine and Aspen Restoration Project (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=59737>) to use commercial and non-commercial treatments on 2,800 acres of mixed conifer and ponderosa pine stands with a major spruce component. Following public feedback, it was decided to withdraw the project because a more comprehensive planning effort and project was needed which led to this new proposal. Public input received for Pine and Aspen Restoration Project was considered when developing this proposal.

The purpose of the Spruce Vegetation Management Project is to reduce the number of acres dominated by white spruce (*Picea glauca*) and increase the number of acres of pine and aspen forest-wide with the objective of increasing overall forest resiliency and reducing undesirable fire behavior across the Black Hills National Forest landscape.

Treatments would occur on up to 25,000 acres. Proposed activities include regeneration harvests with reserve trees, overstory removal, group selection, machine piling, pile burning, and prescribed fire using a condition-based management approach. Follow up maintenance treatments are proposed to ensure regeneration requirements are met and to encourage pine and aspen seedlings and saplings over spruce.

Please visit the project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>) or see the enclosed Scoping Package document for more information on the proposal including the detailed purpose and need, proposed action, decision framework, and map.

Our preliminary assessment is to evaluate this proposal as an environmental assessment (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Deputy Forest Supervisor will be the Responsible Official.

My staff and I are willing and available to meet on any issues or concerns. Requests for further information or meetings can be accomplished by phone or email to Jerome Krueger, Deputy Forest Supervisor, at (605) 440-0262 or [jerome.krueger@usda.gov](mailto:jerome.krueger@usda.gov).

### **Public Scoping Comment Period**

The 30-day public scoping comment period is expected to begin on Tuesday, February 22, 2022. Electronic comments can be submitted through the electronic comment form located on the project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>) through the "Comment/Object on Project" link found on the right-hand side of the page. This form allows for electronic attachments to comments (e.g., .doc, .txt, .rtf or .pdf) if desired.

Comments may also be submitted by means of written or printed comment via the U.S. Postal Service or hand delivery to: Jeff Underhill, 1019 N. 5th Street, Custer, SD 57730. Comments should include: 1) your name and postal address, 2) project title (Spruce Vegetation Management), and 3) signature or other verification of identity upon request (36 CFR 218.25(a)(3)). Comments received in response to this initial request, including names, addresses, and any other information provided with the comments, will be considered a part of the public record.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jeff Tomac  
Forest Supervisor



# Spruce Vegetation Management Project Scoping Package

The USDA Forest Service is seeking your input regarding a vegetation management proposal on the Black Hills National Forest. The Black Hills National Forest is proposing vegetation management in white spruce (*Picea glauca*) stands forest-wide. This letter and attached map provide you with detailed information about the purpose and need, the proposed action, and the decision framework. Comments or suggestions concerning this proposal would be most helpful if received by March 24, 2022. Please refer to the “How to Comment” section of this package for additional information about submitting comments.

The Black Hills National Forest is in western South Dakota and northeastern Wyoming and consists of 1.5 million acres of forested hills and mountains (Figure 1). The Forest encompasses portions of Custer, Fall River, Lawrence, Meade, and Pennington counties in South Dakota and Crook and Weston counties in Wyoming. The area being considered for treatment encompasses approximately 49,000 acres located on suitable timber lands primarily within Management Area 4.1 – Limited Motorized Use and Product Emphasis and Management Area 5.1. – Resource Production Emphasis. Management Areas 5.4 – Big Game Winter Range Emphasis and Management Area 5.6 - Forest Products, Recreation, and Big Game Emphasis will also be evaluated. These management areas emphasize active management and commodity production to meet multiple use goals. Other management areas that permit forest management and timber harvest will also be evaluated for critical fuels reduction needs in WUI only (4.2A – Spearfish Canyon).

White spruce in the Black Hills occurs at the higher elevations, northerly aspects, and in cool canyon bottoms. In the white spruce habitat type series for the Black Hills, there are only two white spruce habitat types described (Hoffman and Alexander 1987)<sup>1</sup> and both types are being considered for treatment (Figure 1). The first type includes stands that have always been dominated by spruce and are described as “pure spruce.” These stands currently have amounts of spruce greater than or equal to 80 percent of a stand’s basal area. Ponderosa pine and aspen occur sporadically throughout these types of stands. Historically, these pure spruce stands have always been present in the area. These stands are found on the northern, moister aspects and can be described as a white spruce/grouse whortleberry habitat type<sup>2</sup> (Hoffman and Alexander, 1987). Pure spruce stands are typically in proximity to other spruce dominated stands that once contained a much larger amount of pine and aspen as associates.

The second stand type includes stands dominated by spruce, but in the pre-settlement era were dominated by pine and aspen, and can be described as “mixed conifer”. These types of stands are best described as currently having greater than 50 but less than 80 percent of their basal area in spruce.

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<sup>1</sup> Hoffman, G.R. and R.R. Alexander. 1987. Forest vegetation of the Black Hills National Forest of South Dakota and Wyoming: A habitat type classification. Research Paper RM-276. Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station. Fort Collins, CO 80526.

<sup>2</sup> PIGL/VASC (*Picea glauca/Vaccinium scoparium*) habitat type.

These stands still have some individual or groups of pine and aspen represented within the stands. Historically, these stands were more “mixed conifer” (i.e., much higher percentage of pine and aspen) than they currently are.

These mixed conifer stands were very well represented across the landscape of the Black Hills. These stands can occur across all aspects, are slightly drier, and generally have gentler topography than the pure spruce stands. While these stands are spruce habitat types, with disturbance, they would not be dominated by spruce. This change in species dominance is attributed to past management practices such as selective logging and fire exclusion. These types of stands are characterized as being a white spruce/twinflower habitat type<sup>3</sup> (Hoffman and Alexander, 1987). Refer to Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6 for the estimated acres by spruce stand types.

**Purpose and Need for Action**

The purpose and need for this project is derived from the differences between the existing forest vegetation conditions and the desired forest vegetation conditions, as defined by the Black Hills National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Forest-wide and Management Area specific goals and objectives are provided for Management Area 4.1, Management Area 4.2A, Management Area 5.1, Management Area 5.4, and Management Area 5.6 designated lands (Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6, respectively).

**Table 1. Forest-wide objectives**

Landscape Vegetative Diversity (LVD) – 201 (LRMP, page I-7)	Manage for a minimum of 92,000 acres of aspen (double current aspen acres), and 16,000 acres of bur oak (approximately 33 percent increase) in current bur oak during the life of the Plan. The highest priority for hardwood restoration is where conifers (e.g., spruce and pine) have out-competed aspen adjacent to riparian systems that once supported beaver.
Landscape Vegetative Diversity (LVD) – 239 (LRMP, page I-8)	Manage for 20,000 acres of spruce across the Forest using active management to achieve multiple-use objectives. Treat spruce within 200 feet of buildings, where spruce has encroached into hardwoods, and for emphasis species management.

**Table 2. Management Area 4.1 – Limited Motorized Use and Forest Products Emphasis - Desired future conditions, goals and objectives**

Desired Future Condition (LRMP, page III-47)-).	An extensive road system is present, which is usually closed to motorized vehicles. Some main Forest Development Roads may be open most of the time for vegetation management activities. Most roads have native surfacing, which often includes grasses or other vegetation, unless they have been recently used by logging traffic. In such a case, the vegetation is likely worn down, and there may be disturbed areas due to maintaining drainage structures. Ponderosa pine is likely to be the most conspicuous tree species. Areas of white spruce, aspen and other hardwoods also occur. Natural and created openings and meadows of various sizes and shapes interrupt the forested landscape in places. The overall appearance of this management area is reminiscent of a managed forest, and few signs of damage to trees by insects or diseases should be visible. Tree groups of different sizes and heights are likely observed. Some recently cut areas show tree stumps, slash and disturbed soil, but within a few years, the forest floor is covered with grasses and forbs. A full range of slash treatment options including management ignited prescribed burning are used to maintain forest health and productivity of the area. Other recently cut areas still have a partial canopy of older trees. The boundaries of these cut areas are designed to follow natural landscape patterns. Less recently cut areas have tree saplings, poles, or young trees 35 to 45 feet in height. Here the forest floor shows only minimal signs of disturbance. Occasionally,
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<sup>3</sup> PIGL/LIBO (*Picea glauca/Linnaea borealis*) habitat type.

	small patches of old trees of various heights can be found. Scattered dead trees are visible in openings and in older tree stands.
Goal 4.1-201 (LRMP, page III-48)	Emphasize wood-fiber production, wildlife habitat, and visual quality.
Goal 4.1-202 (LRMP, page III-48)	Manage forest cover types to provide variety in stand sizes, shape, crown closure, age structure, and interspersed.

**Table 3. Management Area 4.2A – Spearfish Canyon - Desired future conditions, goals and objectives**

Desired Future Condition (LRMP, page III-53)	<p>Landscapes adjacent to the road corridors appear natural. Existing facilities, such as powerlines and roads, may be obvious to the casual observer. Management activities are likely to be less evident, be of short duration, and be more natural in appearance than in many other areas of the forest.</p> <p>While ponderosa pine is usually the most conspicuous tree species, visitors may see large areas of white spruce, aspen, birch, bur oak and other hardwoods. Overall, the forest vegetation is diverse. Interpretation and signing of scenic and historic attributes are provided along the Byway and describe the Spearfish Canyon environment. Many pull-over areas are provided along the shoulder of the Byway. Day-use facilities, such as picnic grounds, are provided along the Byway. Hiking trails curl into the woods and above the creek. Opportunities for scenic photography and bird watching exist. Other wildlife representative of the Black Hills may be seen in Spearfish Canyon. Projects to enhance wildlife habitat may be conducted in and along the creek or in forested portions of the byway. Areas of botanical interest will be conserved or enhanced. Areas of botanical interest within the canyon may be studied to try to identify what factors have led to the area's characteristic habitat.</p>
Standard 4.2A-4101.	Manage fire and fuels through various methods to protect the biological and scenic values, but in the wildland-urban interface the priority will be fuel reduction.

**Table 4. Management Area 5.1 - Resource Production Emphasis - Desired future conditions, goals and objectives**

Desired Future Condition (LRMP, page III-66)	<p>The forest is largely a mosaic of tree groups of different ages and heights. Cut areas show tree stumps, slash and disturbed soil. The appearance of disturbed soil usually disappears in a short period of time due to grass, shrub, and tree regeneration. Fuel treatment emphasis is on maintaining forest health and the protection of management investments in the interest of sustained productivity of the area. Areas disturbed through management activities are quickly revegetated. Other recently cut areas still have a partial canopy of older trees. The boundaries of these cut areas appear to follow natural landscape patterns.</p> <p>Ponderosa pine is the most frequently observed tree species. White spruce, aspen, and other hardwood tree species also occur. Few areas show evidence of decadence or old trees. Trees of all ages are present. Evidence of insect and disease outbreaks is infrequent. There are some natural openings or meadows of various sizes and shapes, and these areas are enlarged as appropriate.</p> <p>Older cut areas show tree saplings, poles or young trees up to 35 to 45 feet in height. The forest floor in these areas shows few signs of disturbance. A variety of forest structures is apparent with mature trees dominating the landscape. Scattered trees in older cut areas are likely found throughout this management area. Many silviculture treatments are designed to increase water yield, given proper climatic conditions. Management of riparian areas may lengthen the season of water flow. Insect and disease populations are at endemic population levels.</p> <p>Activities such as hunting, hiking and biking occur along roads closed to vehicle traffic. Some roads and nearby areas are available for year-round motorized vehicle use. Some motorized vehicle use may be restricted for management area purposes.</p> <p>Trees in this management area are managed to produce forest products while providing forage production, visual quality, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, as well as other goods and services. Logging traffic may be encountered throughout the year. Piles of slash may be seen burning on hillsides when conditions make such burning safe.</p>
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Goal 5.1-201 (LRMP, page III-67)	Manage tree stands to emphasize timber products, forage production, and water yield.
Objective 5.1-202 (LRMP, page III-67)	While meeting other objectives for this management area, provide variety in stand sizes, shape, crown closure, age structure and interspersion.
Objective 5.1-203 (LRMP, page III-67)	Maintain or enhance hardwood shrub communities where biologically feasible, and within management objectives.

**Table 5. Management Area 5.4 – Big Game Winter Range Emphasis - Desired future conditions, goals and objectives**

Desired Future Condition (LRMP, page III-91)	<p>The area is managed to provide big game winter range while maintaining healthy plant communities and recreational opportunities. All activities, including recreation, are managed so that deer and elk can effectively use the area during winter and other critical time periods. The full range of management practices occur.</p> <p>High quality winter habitat is in part maintained by reducing vehicle access to key areas. Vehicle traffic is limited to only a portion of the total road network. Off-road motorized travel is limited in certain areas. Low-standard roads are visible, but may be permanently closed by barriers or seasonally closed by gates.</p> <p>Management emphasizes a vegetative mosaic, with natural and created openings and diverse sizes and ages of tree stands. Species diversity is evident, including aspen, bur oak and mountain mahogany, as well as ponderosa pine and white spruce.</p> <p>Timber harvesting and prescribed burning are the primary management tools used to stimulate browse production and to improve habitat within these key wildlife areas. Hiding and thermal cover and late-successional areas are provided.</p> <p>Vegetation is managed to provide healthy plant communities with a variety of species for food and cover.</p> <p>Appropriate habitat effectiveness is maintained to provide deer and elk with cover, forage and solitude. As such, the landscape is composed of a variety of forest conditions, including openings, and high- and low-density stands. Some dense, mature forest stands are conserved for thermal cover. Motorized road and off-road closures may be implemented, especially during the winter months, particularly to minimize stress to wildlife, especially deer and elk.</p> <p>Mining and livestock grazing may be seen. Hunters and hikers, as well as other recreationists, may frequent these areas.</p> <p>By creating or maintaining big game habitat on the National Forest, the time spent by these animals on private lands may be reduced.</p>
Goal 5.4-201 (LRMP, page III-92)	Manage tree stands for wildlife habitat and vegetative diversity.

**Table 6. Management Area 5.6 – Forest Products, Recreation, and Big Game Emphasis - Desired future conditions, goals and objectives**

Desired Future Condition (LRMP, page III-113)	<p>An extensive road system is present; except for major routes, motorized travel is restricted. Most roads have native surfaces. Most of the local road surfaces are covered with grasses or other vegetation, unless they have been recently used to haul logs. In such a case, the vegetation may be worn down. Snowmobiles use some routes.</p> <p>Ponderosa pine is probably the most conspicuous tree species, although areas of white spruce, aspen and other hardwoods occur. Natural and created openings or meadows of various sizes and shapes occur as well. Many areas consist of mature to over mature trees, particularly when compared to more intensely managed areas on the forest. There may be many areas that are open and park-like, with large diameter trees. Forested areas appear managed, without much evidence of damage by insects and diseases.</p> <p>Timber harvesting and prescribed burning are primary management tools used to improve habitat for wildlife in the area. Tree groups of different ages and heights are present. Some recently cut areas exhibit stumps, slash and disturbed soil. Disturbed soil is only evident for a few years after timber harvests. Vegetation</p>
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	<p>quickly reclaims the areas. Other recently cut areas still have a partial canopy of older trees. The boundaries of these cut areas appear to follow natural landscape patterns.</p> <p>Older cut areas show tree saplings, poles or young trees up to 45 feet tall and show little disturbance to the forest floor. Occasionally, large patches of late-successional trees occur. Scattered dead trees appear in openings and in older tree stands. Vegetation is managed to provide healthy plant communities with a variety of species present for food and cover.</p> <p>Non-motorized recreational opportunities are provided, such as hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, hunting and cross-country skiing. Wildlife representative of the Black Hills may be seen. Livestock may also be encountered in the summer and fall.</p>
Goal 5.6-202 (LRMP, page III-114)	Manage forest cover types to provide variety in stand sizes, shape, crown closure, age structure and interspersion.

Current conditions are represented by large, uninterrupted blocks of over-mature spruce dominated stands that have increasing fuel loads and ladder fuels. Historically, mixed conifer, pine, and aspen stands were more prevalent. These stands are succeeding to spruce in the absence of fire. Between 1897 and 1987, the total area of forestland considered as white spruce has significantly expanded from an estimated 15,000-20,000 acres forest-wide to approximately 50,000 acres.

The most recent Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) 2017-2019 inventory data indicates that the total white spruce forest type area now occurs on 52,000 acres. The forest inventory database (FSVeg) estimates that there is 33,600 to 51,000 acres of white spruce forest depending upon the sampling methods considered. FSVeg database forest type classifications can be derived from common stand exam data, field walk-through surveys, aerial photo interpretation, or a combination of these methods. The current level of aspen forest-wide, ranges from 45,000 to 70,000 depending upon these same considerations. The results of all inventory methods indicate that the current level of white spruce is well above the forest plan objective to manage for 20,000 acres and that aspen is well below the forest plan objective to manage for 92,000 acres. All available inventory data is currently being evaluated for accuracy.

Total treatment acres will be based on both the actual white spruce area in implementation planning areas per pre-treatment surveys and the amount of white spruce that is desirable to reserve to meet other resource objectives in addition to the project needs discussed below. Of the approximate 50,000 acres of spruce dominated stands forest-wide, a review of recently collected common stand exam data 2016-2018 (forest stand level sampling intensity) indicates that there are approximately 30,000 acres of pure spruce and mixed conifer stands, both within and outside of the wildland urban interface (WUI), that would be assessed for management designed to align current conditions with forest plan direction.

It is well documented that dense, over-stocked, even-age, closed canopy stands are more susceptible to insect outbreaks and stand replacing fire events. It is also well documented that a lack of structural diversity corresponds directly to a reduction in forest resiliency and consequently long-term resistance to detrimental natural and human-caused disturbance events. Based on management direction within the spruce and aspen forest types as well as direction for fire behavior, the following needs have been identified:

- The need to increase the occurrence of ponderosa pine and aspen in mixed conifer stands that are now dominated by spruce;
- The need to increase the structural heterogeneity in those stands that were always spruce dominated;
- The need to create openings in over-mature spruce dominated stands that



- have increasing fuel loads and ladder fuels, and;
- The need to provide economic support to local communities by providing wood fiber and creating jobs in a sustainable manner.

The purpose of the proposal is to reduce the number of acres dominated by white spruce and increase the number of acres of pine and aspen forest-wide with the objective of increasing overall forest resiliency and reducing undesirable fire behavior across the Black Hills National Forest landscape.

### **Proposed Action**

This proposal takes a condition-based management approach. For purposes of this proposal, condition-based management is defined as applying a suite of management prescriptions in combination with a specified set of design elements based on the conditions on the ground at the time of implementation in order to meet intended outcomes. This management approach is being proposed to respond to dynamic and unpredictable conditions on the ground (i.e., beetle outbreaks, fire risk, drought). Condition-based management is an appropriate management approach since there are generally uniform vegetation conditions within the vegetative types being proposed for treatment, a relatively simple and easily defined suite of management action are being proposed in response to specific set of conditions, and the effects of the proposed management actions are predictable, all of which allows for more predictable outcomes.

Treatments are proposed on up to 25,000 acres of spruce dominated forest stands on National Forest System Lands in the Black Hills in Custer, Lawrence, Meade, and Pennington counties. The location and type of treatments would be based on a pre-analyzed set of conditions as described above. (Table 7, Table 8, and Table 9).

In pure spruce stands: silvicultural methods such as regeneration harvests<sup>4</sup> with reserve trees<sup>5</sup>, over-story removal, and group selection are being proposed. In pure spruce stands within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)<sup>6</sup>, regeneration silvicultural treatments will only be employed in areas that have a demonstrated need for treatment due to WUI concerns. Regeneration treatments larger than 40 acres are anticipated.

In pure spruce stands outside of the wildland urban interface, we are proposing group selection treatments to decrease homogeneity within stands. All treatments in pure spruce will be followed with a timber stand improvement (TSI) treatment to treat spruce less than 7 inches diameter breast height (DBH) and then by machine piling, pile burning, and/or prescribed fire.

In mixed conifer stands: a regeneration with reserve trees silvicultural method will be utilized. These are the stands that were historically dominated by ponderosa pine and aspen, but through selective logging and the exclusion of fire, are currently dominated by white spruce and do not meet Forest Plan goals and objectives. All ponderosa pine and aspen will be retained.<sup>7</sup> Regeneration treatments larger than 40 acres are anticipated.

All treatments in mixed-conifer stands will be followed with TSI treatment to treat spruce less than 7

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<sup>4</sup> Regeneration harvests in spruce dominated stands will occur in WUI areas to protect private property, critical infrastructure, public ingress and egress routes, and along POD boundaries.

<sup>5</sup> Reserve trees in spruce dominated areas will be ponderosa pine and aspen.

<sup>6</sup> WUI is defined as ½ mile from private property and critical infrastructure and 300' from ingress and egress routes for the public and Potential Operational Delineation (POD) boundaries.

<sup>7</sup> In mixed conifer stands, some areas of stands may still be dominated by ponderosa. In these instances, spruce will still be removed, and the residual ponderosa will be thinned.

inches diameter breast height (DBH) and then by machine piling, pile burning and/or prescribed fire. Planting of ponderosa pine seedlings may occur when existing, established regeneration or anticipated natural regeneration will not meet minimum stocking standards due the lack of an optimal seed source or competition with other vegetation.

Treatments in all stands would remove spruce sawtimber and pole sized material. Follow-up maintenance treatments would be implemented to ensure regeneration requirements are met and to release pine and aspen seedlings and saplings from competition with spruce.

**Table 7. Proposed treatments for pure spruce stands within wildland urban interface (WUI)**

<b>Opportunity Treatment Acres.</b> 6,500
<b>Forest Type Description.</b> These stands are located within the WUI and are dominated by white spruce. Ponderosa pine is a minor component. Aspen, if present, occurs in pockets, often suppressed in the understory, in openings, or along edges. Most stands are mature timber (larger diameter), but a few are in the younger stem exclusion phase (smaller diameter).
<b>Treatment Prescriptions.</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Regeneration with reserve trees is a silvicultural method will be the primary method to regenerate stands and leave some trees that meet management objectives. Spruce would be removed throughout these stands. Ponderosa pine and aspen would be retained. Treatment would remove sawtimber size spruce (9.0 inches DBH or larger) and pole sized spruce (7.0 - 8.9 inches DBH) to favor the regeneration of ponderosa pine and aspen. Regeneration treatments over 40 acres are anticipated.</li> <li>2) Overstory removal with reserve trees- In areas that have sufficient numbers of existing, established regeneration post treatment, the spruce would be removed throughout these stands. Ponderosa pine and aspen would be retained. Treatment would remove sawtimber size spruce (9.0 inches DBH or larger) and pole sized spruce (7.0 - 8.9 inches DBH) to favor the regeneration of ponderosa pine and aspen.</li> <li>3) Group selection will be used in pure spruce stands within the WUI that are comprised of younger, small diameter trees. This will increase stand resiliency. Spruce would be removed from groups ranging in size from 3-5 acres on up to 40 percent of the total stand area, provided that a minimum average of 50 percent canopy cover is maintained across each treated stand. Treatment would remove pole sized spruce (7.0 - 8.9 inches DBH).</li> </ol>
<b>Follow-up Treatments.</b> Stand improvement work would be implemented that would cut spruce saplings and seedlings less than 7.0 inches in diameter at breast height to remove competition with pine and aspen regeneration. Dependent on conditions, treated areas would be machine piled and pile burned and/or prescribed burned. Ponderosa pine seedlings would be planted in stands where existing, established ponderosa pine regeneration or anticipated ponderosa pine natural regeneration is below desired levels. Stocking surveys would be conducted to ensure that adequate levels of ponderosa pine natural regeneration are present within five years of commercial treatments.

**Table 8. Proposed treatments for pure spruce stands outside of wildland urban interface (WUI)**

<b>Opportunity Treatment Acres.</b> 4,000
<b>Forest Type Description.</b> These stands are the same type of stand described above. The only difference is that these stands are located outside of the wildland urban interface.
<b>Treatment Prescriptions.</b> Group selection with reserve trees is a silvicultural method intended to regenerate uneven-aged stands in which trees are removed, and new age classes are established in small groups. This is needed to increase heterogeneity within stands and across the landscape. Spruce would be removed from groups ranging in size from 3-5 acres on up to 40 percent of the total stand area provided that a minimum average of 50 percent canopy cover is maintained across each treated stand. Treatment would remove sawtimber size spruce (9.0 inches DBH or larger) and pole sized spruce (7.0 - 8.9 inches DBH).
<b>Follow-up Treatments.</b> Stand improvement work would be implemented that would cut spruce saplings less than 7.0 inches DBH. Stocking surveys would be conducted to ensure that adequate levels of natural regeneration are present within five years of commercial treatments. Dependent on conditions, treated areas

would be machine piled and pile burned and/or prescribed burned. Prescribed burning would only occur in areas operationally large enough to effectively do so.

**Table 9. Proposed treatments for mixed conifer stands**

<p><b>Opportunity Treatment Acres.</b> 19,500</p>
<p><b>Forest Type Description.</b> White spruce is still the dominant species in these stands; however, ponderosa pine is a major associate. Aspen may be present in greater numbers than in pure spruce stands, but is still a minor component. Most stands are mature timber, but a few are in the younger stem exclusion phase (smaller diameter). Stands are located within and without the wildland urban interface.</p>
<p><b>Treatment Prescriptions.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Regeneration with reserve trees is a silvicultural method intended to regenerate stands and leave some trees that meet management objectives. Spruce would be removed throughout these stands. Ponderosa pine and aspen would be retained. Treatment would remove sawtimber size spruce (9.0 inches DBH or larger) and pole sized spruce (7.0 - 8.9 inches DBH) to favor the regeneration of ponderosa pine and aspen. Regeneration treatments over 40 acres are anticipated.</li> <li>2) Overstory removal with reserve trees- In areas that have sufficient numbers of existing, established pine and/or aspen regeneration post treatment, the spruce would be removed throughout these stands. Ponderosa pine and aspen would be retained. Treatment would remove sawtimber size spruce (9.0 inches DBH or larger) and pole sized spruce (7.0 - 8.9 inches DBH) to favor the regeneration of ponderosa pine and aspen.</li> <li>3) Younger, small diameter stands would be thinned from below to 80 basal area. Species biasing against spruce would occur in favor of retaining ponderosa pine and aspen.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Follow-up Treatments.</b> Stand improvement work would be implemented that would cut spruce saplings and seedlings less than 7.0 inches in diameter at breast height to remove competition with pine and aspen regeneration. Dependent on conditions, treated areas would be machine piled and pile burned and/or prescribed burned. Ponderosa pine seedlings would be planted in stands where existing, established ponderosa pine regeneration or anticipated ponderosa pine natural regeneration is below desired levels. Stocking surveys would be conducted to ensure that adequate levels of ponderosa pine natural regeneration are present within five years of commercial treatments.</p>

**Resource Protection Measures**

Resource protection measures that meet or exceed LRMP standards and guidelines would be applied. Resource protection measures are a fundamental component of the proposed action and would be implemented as part of the proposed action. Protection measures would be applied to minimize or eliminate potential adverse impacts from the proposed actions on other resources such as soils, aquatics, fisheries, wildlife, rare plants, cultural resources, and recreation.

**Public Involvement**

Your questions, comments, and suggestions regarding this proposal are an integral part of the environmental analysis process. This opportunity to provide feedback serves two main purposes: 1) to fulfill the public involvement and scoping for this project as required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and 2) to gather constructive ideas that will be used to identify issues, develop alternative approaches to this proposal or to formulate design features. After receiving your comments, the Forest Service will identify and analyze the issues raised, finalize a proposed action and design criteria, and if necessary, develop alternative approaches to the proposed action. A draft environmental assessment will be published in the future with an additional opportunity to provide comments. We intend to complete the NEPA analysis in July 2022 and make a decision whether or not to implement the proposed action or another alternative in October 2022. Implementation could then begin during the fall of 2022. Those people responding to this scoping letter will be included on the mailing list for future information related to this project.

## Decision Framework

At this time, the Forest Service plans to document and disclose any environmental effects of this proposal in an environmental assessment. The Deputy Forest Supervisor will be the Responsible Official. The decision will be detailed in a decision notice after the environmental assessment and finding of no significant impact are completed. Given the stated purpose and need of the project, the Responsible Official will review the proposed action, any alternative approaches, and/or design features in order to make the following decisions:

1. Whether or not to implement the proposed action or an alternative approach and conduct other related activities to address the purposes stated above.
2. If the proposed action or an alternative approach is selected, under what conditions and by which methods would the activities be conducted.

The decision framework of this project does not include reanalyzing existing management area prescriptions, standards or guidelines already specified in the existing Forest Plan, nor will it seek to re-examine federal regulations or Forest Service policy regarding timber harvest on National Forest System lands.

## Objection Regulations That Apply to this Project

This project is authorized under 36 CFR 218 subparts A and B. This rule provides for a pre-decisional objection process, whereby the public is provided an opportunity to comment and express concerns on projects before decisions are made, rather than after. Following preparation and distribution of the draft environmental assessment, a 30-day comment period will be available for you to provide additional comments prior to completion of a final environmental assessment and draft decision notice. Only those persons that comment during this scoping opportunity or the 30-day formal comment period will have standing to participate in the objection process. Following the 30-day comment period, a draft decision will be published, and this will begin a 45-day objection period. If no objections are received during that period, the final decision will be signed and may be implemented after five business days. If objections are received on this project, there will be a 45-day period for resolutions of the identified issues prior to signature of the final decision and implementation.

## How to comment

The 30-day public scoping comment period is expected to begin on Tuesday, February 22, 2022. Electronic comments can be submitted through the electronic comment form located on the project webpage found here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599> through the "Comment/Object on Project" link found on the right-hand side of the page. This form allows for electronic attachments to comments (e.g., .doc, .txt, .rtf or .pdf) if desired.

Comments may also be submitted by means of written comment via the U.S. Postal Service to: Jeff Underhill, 1019 N. 5th Street, Custer, SD 57730. Comments should include: 1) your name and postal address, 2) project title (Spruce Vegetation Management), and 3) signature or other verification of identity upon request (36 CFR 218.25(a)(3)). Comments received in response to this initial request, including names, addresses, and any other information provided with the comments, will be considered a part of the public record.

Questions concerning the project can be submitted to Jeff Underhill at [jeffrey.underhill@usda.gov](mailto:jeffrey.underhill@usda.gov) or by phone at (605) 673-9200.

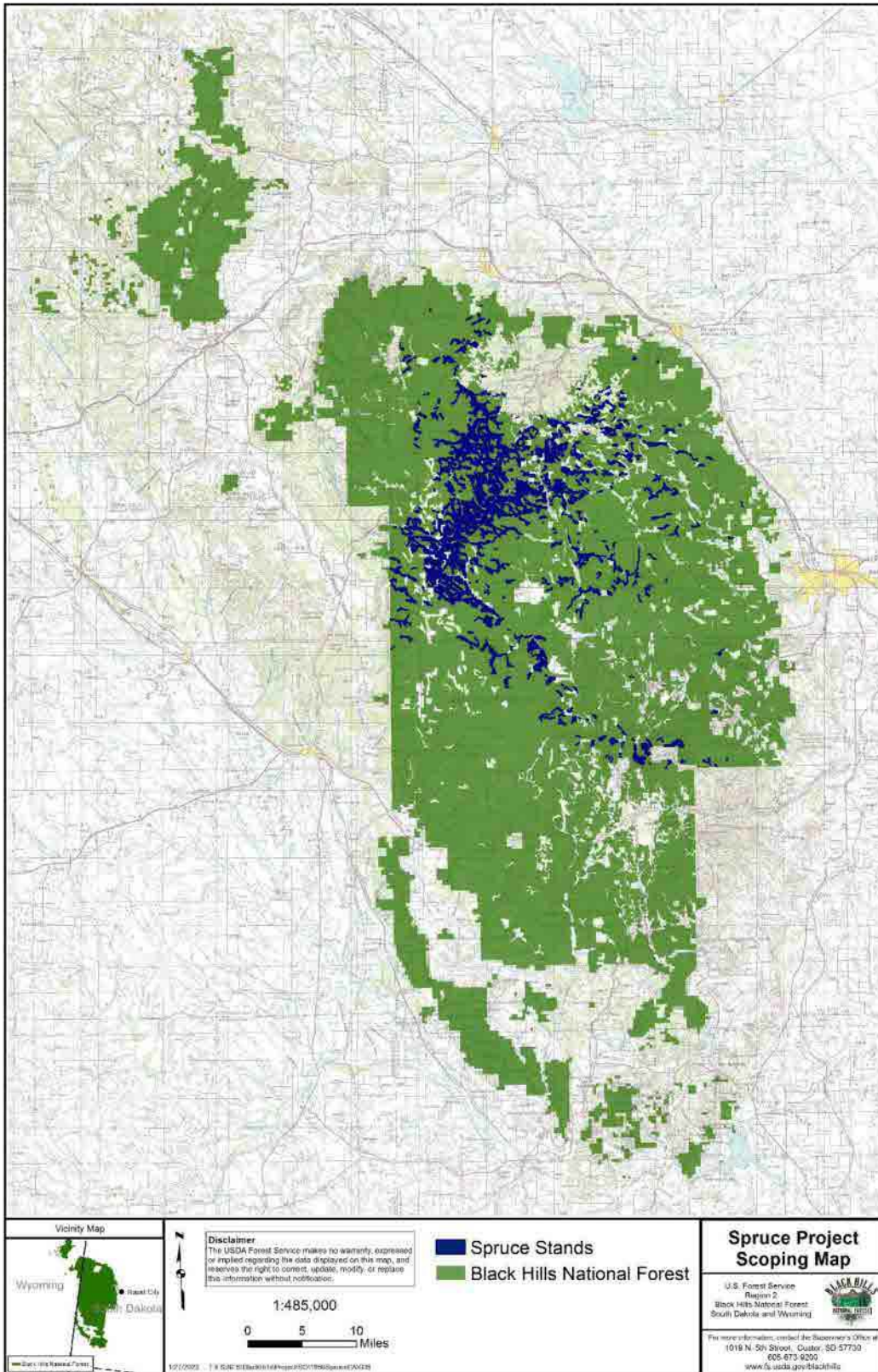
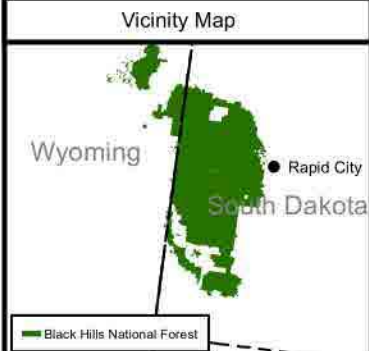
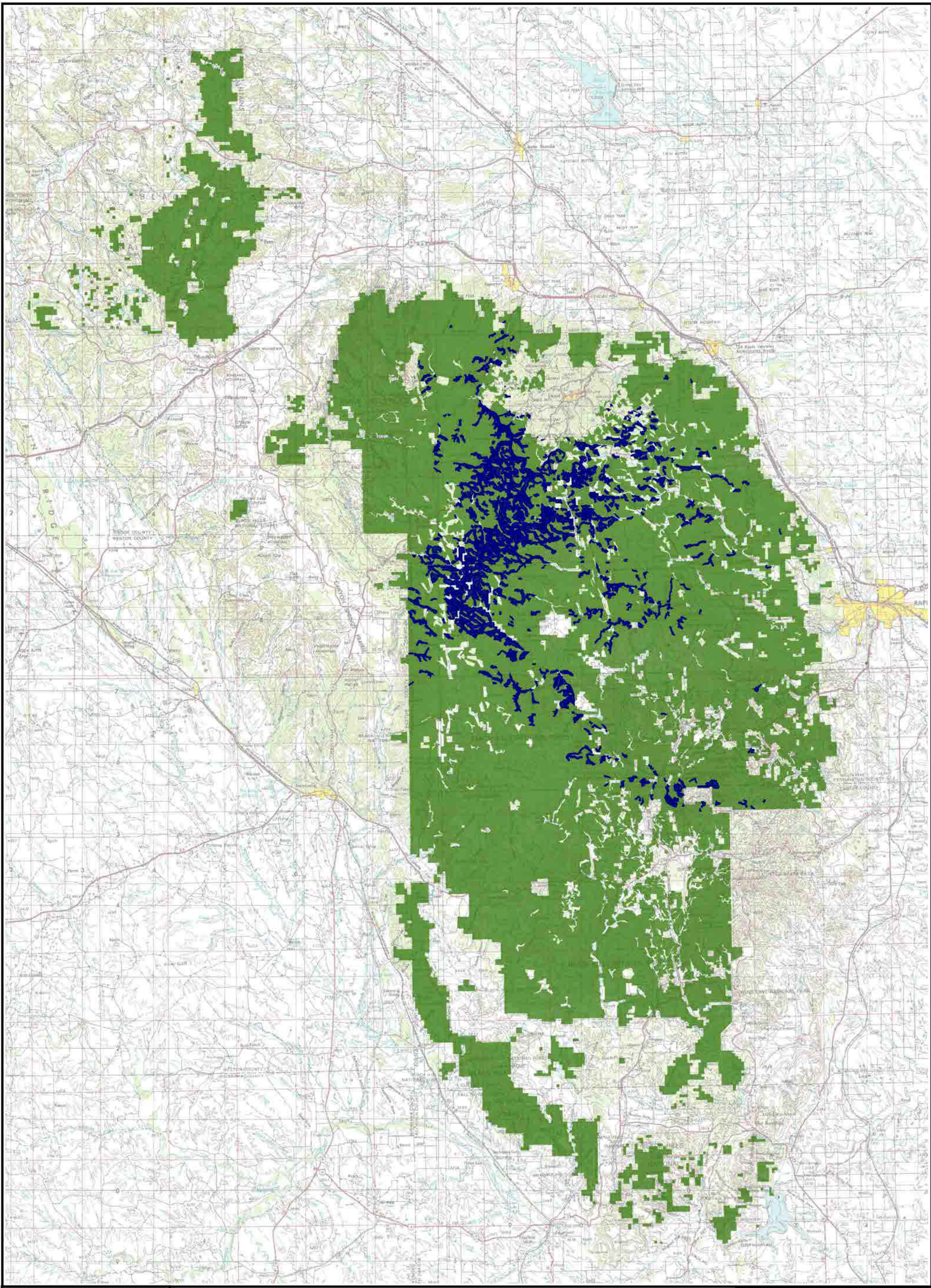


Figure 1. Occurrence of white spruce (*Picea glauca*) habitat types on the Black Hills National Forest



**Disclaimer**  
 The USDA Forest Service makes no warranty, expressed or implied regarding the data displayed on this map, and reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace this information without notification.

1:485,000

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1/27/2022 : T:\FS\NFS\BlackHills\Project\SO\1950SpruceEA\GIS

■ Spruce Stands

■ Black Hills National Forest

**Spruce Project Scoping Map**

U.S. Forest Service  
 Region 2  
 Black Hills National Forest  
 South Dakota and Wyoming

For more information, contact the Supervisor's Office at:  
 1019 N. 5th Street, Custer, SD 57730  
 605-673-9200  
[www.fs.usda.gov/blackhills](http://www.fs.usda.gov/blackhills)



**File Code:** 1950  
**Date:** February 22, 2022

Greeting from your Black Hills National Forest,

The USDA Forest Service welcomes your review and comments on the Spruce Vegetation Management Project, a forest-wide project to treat white spruce (*Picea glauca*) stands. In March 2021, the Forest Service requested public input for the Pine and Aspen Restoration Project (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=59737>) to use commercial and non-commercial treatments on 2,800 acres of mixed conifer and ponderosa pine stands with a major spruce component. Following public feedback, it was decided to withdraw the project because a more comprehensive planning effort and project was needed which led to this new proposal. Public input received for Pine and Aspen Restoration Project was considered when developing this proposal.

The purpose of the Spruce Vegetation Management Project is to reduce the number of acres dominated by white spruce (*Picea glauca*) and increase the number of acres of pine and aspen forest-wide with the objective of increasing overall forest resiliency and reducing undesirable fire behavior across the Black Hills National Forest landscape.

Treatments would occur on up to 25,000 acres. Proposed activities include regeneration harvests with reserve trees, overstory removal, group selection, machine piling, pile burning, and prescribed fire using a condition-based management approach. Follow up maintenance treatments are proposed to ensure regeneration requirements are met and to encourage pine and aspen seedlings and saplings over spruce.

Please visit the project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>) for more detailed information on the purpose and need, proposed action, public involvement, decision framework, objection regulations, and a map. Paper copies of this information are available on request.

Our preliminary assessment is to evaluate this proposal as an environmental assessment (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Deputy Forest Supervisor will be the Responsible Official.

A separate 30-day comment period will occur following analysis providing interested parties an opportunity to review the draft environmental assessment.

#### **National Environmental Policy Act**

Our preliminary assessment is to evaluate this proposal as an environmental assessment (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Deputy Forest Supervisor will be the Responsible Official.



This letter initiates the public scoping process (40 CFR 1501.9), which help guide the development of the environmental assessment. It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such manner that they are useful to the agency's preparation of the EA. Therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the 30-day scoping period (March 24, 2022) and should clearly articulate the reviewer's concerns of or feedback on the project, including the purpose and need, the proposed action or other information associated with the project.

A separate 30-day comment period will occur following analysis providing interested parties an opportunity to review the draft environmental assessment.

### **How to Submit Comments**

Electronic comments can be submitted through the electronic comment form located on the project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>) through the "Comment/Object on Project" link found on the right-hand side of the page. This form allows for electronic attachments to comments (e.g., .doc, .txt, .rtf or .pdf) if desired.

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Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however anonymous commenters will not be eligible to object in the project administrative review process which follows publication of environmental assessment and draft decision notice. To have standing to object your written comments must be post-marked by the Postal Service, emailed, or otherwise submitted (for example, by express delivery service) by 11:59 p.m. (Mountain Standard Time) on March 24, 2022 (36 CFR 218.5(a)).

Questions concerning the project can be submitted to Jeff Underhill at [jeffrey.underhill@usda.gov](mailto:jeffrey.underhill@usda.gov) or by phone at (605) 673-9200.

Thank you for your interest and engagement in the management of your National Forest.

Sincerely,



JEFF TOMAC  
Forest Supervisor



**From:** [USDA Forest Service](#)  
**To:** [Little, Tera -FS](#); [Stewart, Marry -FS](#); [kenny.ly@dynamotechnologies.com](#); [King, Pamela - FS](#); [Underwood, Cindy -FS](#); [mclain.wilkinson@dynamo.works](#); [Weber, Kelly - FS, FORT COLLINS, CO](#); [Zmek, Carol -FS](#); [fs-empna-support@dynamotechnologies.com](#); [USDAFSAPI@govdelivery.com](#); [Suing, Judy -FS](#)  
**Subject:** Courtesy Copy: Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF  
**Date:** Wednesday, February 23, 2022 4:23:22 PM  
**Attachments:** [20220223SpruceEA\\_PublicScopingLtr.pdf](#)

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**This is a courtesy copy of an email bulletin sent by Pamela King.**

**This bulletin was sent to the following groups of people:**

Subscribers of Spruce Vegetation Management Project (144 recipients)

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USDA Forest Service



Greeting from your Black Hills National Forest,

The USDA Forest Service will be preparing an environmental assessment for the Spruce Vegetation Management Project, a forest-wide project to treat white spruce (*Picea glauca*) stands. We welcome your review and comments on this proposal to reduce the number of acres dominated by white spruce (*Picea glauca*) and increase the number of acres of pine and aspen forest-wide with the objective of increasing overall forest resiliency.

Please find attached the scoping letter. Other supporting documents, including a detailed scoping package and project map can be found online here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>.

The attached scoping letter initiates the public scoping process (40 CFR 1501.9), which helps guide the development of the environmental assessment. It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such manner that they are useful to the agency's preparation of the EA. Therefore, comments received by March 25, 2022 would be most useful.

#### **How to Comment**

Electronic comments can be submitted through the electronic comment form located on the project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>) through the "Comment/Object on Project" link found on the right-hand side of the page. Comments may also be submitted by means of written or printed comment via the U.S. Postal Service or hand delivery to: Jeff Underhill, 1019 N. 5th Street, Custer, SD 57730.

For more details on commenting, please see the scoping letter and detailed scoping package.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this project!

- [20220223SpruceEA\\_PublicScopingLtr.pdf](#)

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**File Code:** 1950  
**Date:** February 23, 2022

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The USDA Forest Service welcomes your review and comments on the Spruce Vegetation Management Project, a forest-wide project to treat white spruce (*Picea glauca*) stands. In March 2021, the Forest Service requested public input for the Pine and Aspen Restoration Project (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=59737>) to use commercial and non-commercial treatments on 2,800 acres of mixed conifer and ponderosa pine stands with a major spruce component. Following public feedback, it was decided to withdraw the project because a more comprehensive planning effort and project was needed which led to this new proposal. Public input received for Pine and Aspen Restoration Project was considered when developing this proposal.

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A separate 30-day comment period will occur following analysis providing interested parties an opportunity to review the draft environmental assessment.

### **How to Submit Comments**

Electronic comments can be submitted through the electronic comment form located on the project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599>) through the "Comment/Object on Project" link found on the right-hand side of the page. This form allows for electronic attachments to comments (e.g., .doc, .txt, .rtf or .pdf) if desired.

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Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however anonymous commenters will not be eligible to object in the project administrative review process which follows publication of environmental assessment and draft decision notice (36 CFR 218.5(a)).

Questions concerning the project can be submitted to Jeff Underhill at [jeffrey.underhill@usda.gov](mailto:jeffrey.underhill@usda.gov) or by phone at (605) 673-9200.

Thank you for your interest and engagement in the management of your National Forest.

Sincerely,



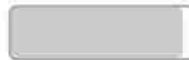
JEFF TOMAC  
Forest Supervisor

Subject: Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF  
 Sent: 02/23/2022 06:23 PM EST  
 Sent By: prking@fs.fed.us  
 Sent To: Subscribers of Spruce Vegetation Management Project

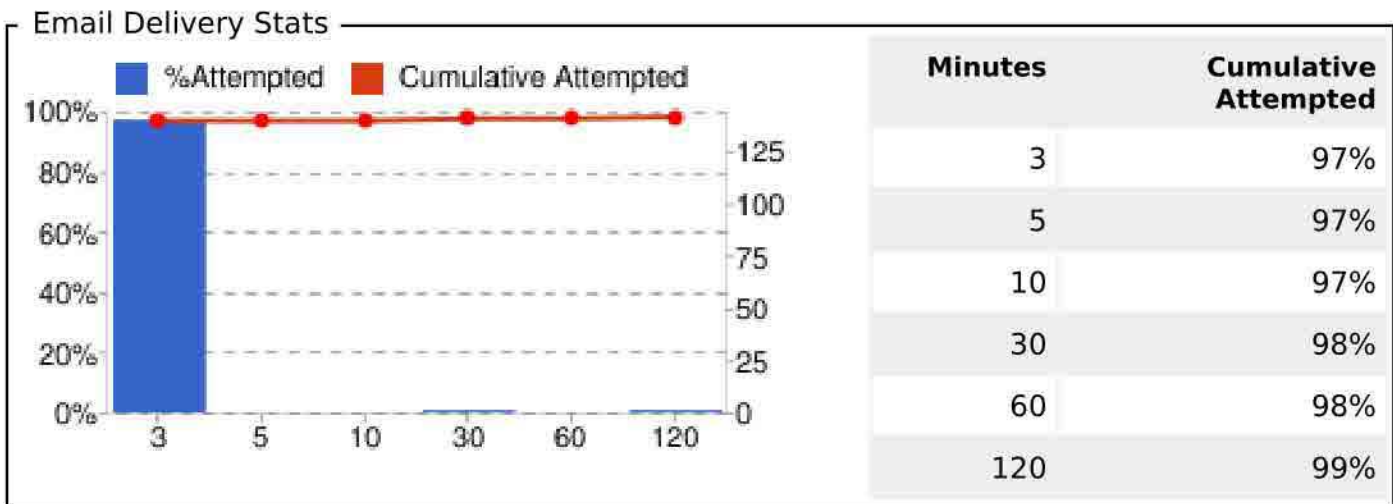
**144**  
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**93%**  
 Delivered



0% Pending  
 7% Bounced  
 39% Open Rate  
 12% Click Rate



Delivery Metrics - Details

- 144** Total Sent
- 134 (93%)** Delivered
- 0 (0%)** Pending
- 10 (7%)** Bounced
- 0 (0%)** Unsubscribed

Bulletin Analytics

- 276** Total Opens
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- 30** Total Clicks
- 16 (12%)** Unique Clicks
- 7** # of Links

## Delivery and performance

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	Progress	% Delivered	Recipients	# Delivered	Opened Unique	Bounced/Failed	Unsubscribes
<b>Email Bulletin</b>	Delivered	93.1%	144	134	52 / 38.8%	10	0
<b>Digest</b>	n/a	n/a	0	0	0 / 0.0%	0	0
<b>SMS Message</b>	Delivered	0.0%	0	0	n/a	0	n/a

## Link URL

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**Summary for "Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF"**

Summary		
1	Importance	Normal
2	Subject	Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF
3	Recipients	Subscribers of Spruce Vegetation Management Project
4	Date Sent	02/23/2022 06:23 PM EST
5	Total Sent	144
6	Delivered	134

3/2/2022 13:26

Account = USDA Forest Service Bulletin = Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF

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3/2/2022 13:26

Account = USDA Forest Service

Bulletin = Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF

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ofelia.velazquez-perez@caltech.edu	Delivered		0	0	
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onlinebnk-cptone@outlook.com	Delivered		0	0	
pamela.r.king@usda.gov	Delivered		3	0	
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Poortmansimon@defensie.world	Delivery Failure	2002 - [DNS ERROR] No records found, A record [NO DEFERRAL]	0	0	
rajtari@atagroupofcompanies.com	Delivered		0	0	
ranamasum72305@gmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
richard.currit@wyo.gov	Delivered		3	2	<a href="https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/USDAFS/2022/02/23/file_attachments/2085246/20220223SpruceEA_PublicScoping1.tr.pdf">https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/USDAFS/2022/02/23/file_attachments/2085246/20220223SpruceEA_PublicScoping1.tr.pdf</a> (1) <a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599">https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599</a> (1)
robertbarnett932@gmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
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salahhjr1m@yahoo.com	Delivered		0	0	
Sandra.Gibbons@usda.gov	Delivered		2	0	
sandralss57702@gmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
scott.fredrich@blackhillscorp.com	Delivered		0	0	



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Account = USDA Forest Service Bulletin = Opportunity to Comment: Spruce Vegetation Management Project on the Black Hills NF

Destination Address	Delivery Status	Failure Message	Total Opens	Total Clicks	Click Summary
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senginayat@gmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
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shelly.deisch@state.sd.us	Delivered		41	8	<a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599">https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599</a> (8)
sherryl.lawchamber@hotmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
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smithmantonton93@outlook.com	Delivered		0	0	
southdakota@trc.org	Delivered		2	0	
starrynighstoregon@yahoo.com	Delivered		1	0	
Stephanie.Polnitz@yahoo.com	Delivered		0	0	
steve.true@wyo.gov	Delivered		1	0	
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terry.r.miller@usda.gov	Delivered		17	1	
thomas.lowell@usda.gov	Delivered		0	0	
timothy.p.davis@usda.gov	Delivered		8	2	<a href="https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599">https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61599</a> (2)
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www.orabankplc.net1@gmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
youngdkimydk@gmail.com	Delivered		0	0	
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