



Forest
Service

Teton Basin
Ranger District

P.O. Box 777
Driggs, ID 83422

File Code: 1950/5150
Date: April 11, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

The Teton Basin Ranger District proposes to use prescribed fire within aspen and mountain brush in the Red Creek drainage southwest of Driggs, and west of Victor Idaho. The project boundary is bounded by existing FS trails with the exception of the northwest boundary which is located within the Holter Creek drainage. The legal description for this project is T 4N R 44E Sec. 32-34; T 3N R 44E Sec. 2-5, 9-11, 13-16, 22-24; T 3N R 45E Sec. 19 (View Scoping Document and Maps at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/caribou-targhee/projects/>).

The primary purpose of this project is to create diversity of age classes within the current vegetation for a variety of wildlife species. Secondary purpose of this project is to reduce hazardous fuel accumulations, regenerate brush communities and increase the amount of young aspen across the project area by reducing the amount of conifer encroachment. The total project area is approximately 6,900 acres, with the intent of treating approximately 35-55 percent of the proposed project area. An exclusion area encompassing 286 acres has been identified to protect potential Lynx habitat in the Red Creek drainage

I have made a preliminary assessment that this proposal meets Forest Plan direction; falls within a category of actions listed in the Forest Service Handbook that is excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement [FSH 1909.15, 31.2(6)] and that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would preclude use of the Category. Additional information regarding this proposal can be obtained by contacting Spencer Johnston, Palisades Ranger District, 3659 E. Ririe Hwy, Idaho Falls, ID 83401, 208-523-1412. [sdjohnston@fs.fed.us](mailto:sjohnston@fs.fed.us) or Kristy Swartz, Teton Basin Ranger District, PO Box 777, Driggs, ID 83422, 208-354-2312.

This comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their own concerns known prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. It is being provided pursuant to the July 2 and September 16, 2005, orders issued by the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California in Case No. CIV F-03-6386JKS. The decision will be subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. Only individuals or organizations who submit comments or otherwise express interest in the project during this comment period may appeal this project.

How to Comment: Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of this notice in the Idaho Falls Post Register. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. You should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Written comments must be submitted to: **Jay Pence, District Ranger, Teton Basin Ranger District, PO Box 777, Driggs, ID 83422.** Office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Oral comments must be provided to the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone, (208)354-2312 or in person. Electronic comments must be submitted in rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to comments-intermtn-caribou-targhee-teton-basin@fs.fed.us. Each individual or representative from each organization submitting comments must either sign the comments or otherwise verify identity in order to attain appeal eligibility.

Sincerely,

/S/JAY PENCE
JAY PENCE
District Ranger



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Public Scoping

Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project

USDA Forest Service
Teton Basin Ranger District, Caribou-Targhee National Forest
Teton County, Idaho

Dear Interested Forest User,

The Forest Service is seeking public input on the Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project on the Teton Basin Ranger District of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest.

Project Location

The project area is located within Teton County, Idaho approximately 9 miles SW of Driggs, Id. The project boundary is bounded by existing FS trails with the exception of the NW boundary which is located within the Holter Creek drainage. The project area lays mostly within the Pine Creek Principal Watershed (006) and a small portion (422 acres) within the Mahogany Creek Principal Watershed (022). The project area encompasses approximately 6,900 acres of public lands managed by the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, Teton Basin Ranger District. Legal Description: T 4N R 44E Sec. 32-34; T 3N R 44E Sec. 2-5, 9-11, 13-16, 22-24; T 3N R 45E Sec. 19 (See Figure 2).

Project Purpose

The primary purpose of this prescribed fire project is to create diversity of age classes within the current vegetation. Diversity of age classes in vegetation is needed because early seral stages are under represented across both the Pine Creek and Mahogany Watersheds due to a lack of disturbance. Mountain shrubs, willows and aspen sprout from the roots after a disturbance to regenerate, which historically was fire. Many wildlife species rely upon the diversity and early seral stages of mountain shrubs, willows, aspen and the abundant herbaceous understory which occurs after a disturbance such as a wildland fire.



Figure 1: Conifer encroachment into an aspen stand within the project area.

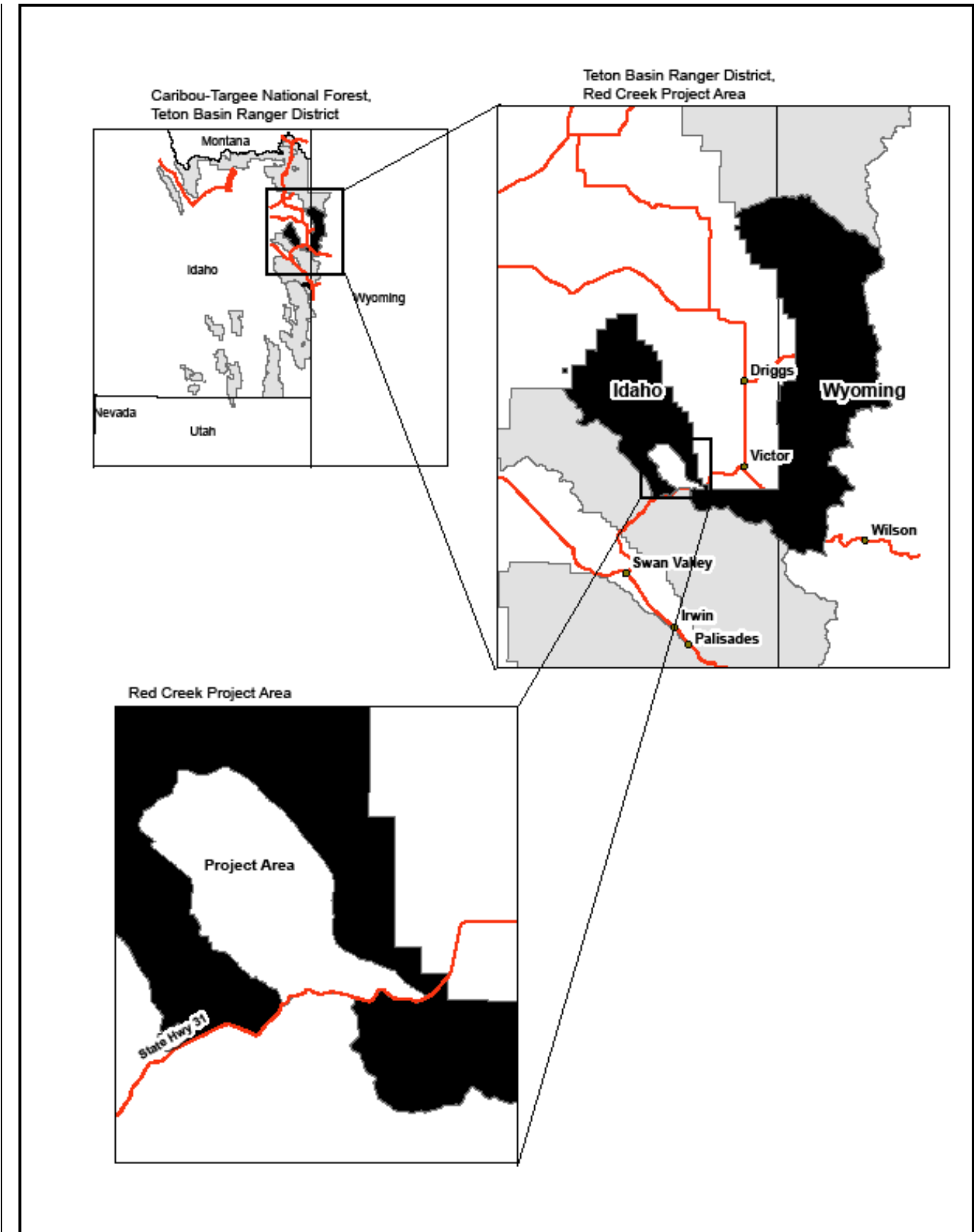


Figure 2: Vicinity Map

Secondary purpose of this prescribed fire project is for hazardous fuels reduction to protect values at risk. The project area is partially located within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) area that has been identified on the Forest. Fire suppression and a lack of disturbance within both the Pine Creek and Mahogany Watersheds have contributed to an increase of fuel loadings. By reducing the current fuel loadings by prescribed fire it will minimize the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire that pose a risk to utility corridors, FS trails and campgrounds and WUI areas. Hazardous fuels reduction within the project area will have a benefit to the defensibility and protecting these areas from wildfire and also future implementation of Wildland Fire Use (WFU) incidents.

Current Conditions and Need For Action

Current vegetative conditions within the Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project Area are approximately 40% mixed conifer, 40% mountain shrubs/grass, and 20% aspen. The project area is located within the Big Hole Subsection (Targhee Forest ecological subsection). The landscape in this subsection is a mixture of vegetation community types with 65 percent of the landscape forested and 35 percent is nonforested. The most common forest type is mixed lodgepole and Douglas-fir, comprising 47 percent of the forested acres. Aspen, pure Douglas-fir and pure lodgepole pine each account for roughly 15 percent of the forest. Mountain mahogany is found on south slopes along with various mountain brush species (RTFP, III-58). Photo Guides for Appraising Down and Dead Fuels (NFES 2293/2294, 1981 and NFES 2629, 2000) was utilized to determine current fuel loading in the project area. In mountain shrub/grass cover types, fuel loading is roughly 5-7 tons/acre and in mountain shrub/conifer fuel loading is 7-15 tons/acre. Fuel loading in aspen/conifer cover type is approximately 15-25 tons/acre. In mixed conifer stands (Douglas-fir, Lodgepole, and Subalpine fir) fuel loading ranges from approximately 15 to over 25 tons/acre. Based upon LANDFIRE fire regime group data, the project area is 99% in fire regime groups 3 and 4. Fire regime groups are intended to characterize the presumed historical fire regimes within landscapes based on interactions between vegetation dynamics, fire spread, fire effects, and spatial context (Hann and others 2004). Fire regimes 3 and 4 historically burned every 35-200 years with varying severity. Based upon the LANDFIRE data, over 50% of the project area should have burned within the last 100 years with some of these areas burning more frequently (National Map LANDFIRE: LANDFIRE Fire Regime Groups Layer, 2008).

The Pine Creek watershed encompasses 44,875 acres with 1.2 percent or 559 acres of disturbance while the Mahogany Creek Watershed is 42,672 acres in size with 8 percent or 3,384 acres of disturbance in the past years. The Pine Creek and Mahogany Watersheds have had little disturbances in the past years which have lead to a lack of biodiversity in habitats and distribution of plant communities. Aspen, mountain shrubs and willows are dependent upon disturbance to regenerate. Historically, disturbance such as wildland fire initiated the process of regeneration where these species sprout from the root. In Idaho, 61% of the aspen has been lost and much of the remaining aspen is mature and in danger from seral conifer and grazing of aspen by wild and domestic animals (Bartos, 2004). On the Teton Basin Ranger District, over 95 percent of the aspen is mature with varying degrees of seral conifer (Mahogany Watershed Analysis, January, 2001, page 31). Aerial photography from the 1940's and 1950's indicates much more aspen than what is found currently. When the aspen stands on these photos are re-visited, a conifer stand is often present. Many of these former aspen stands are now dense mixed-conifer stands with just a few remnant aspen trees or only aspen snags from a dead clone.

Much of this loss is the result of late-seral conifer encroaching, out-competing and finally excluding the aspen. Other causes of aspen decline include: over grazing of aspen sprouts, development of wild and rural lands, and changes in farming and ranching which favors open fields over aspen stands. Additionally, many sites that were mountain brush & grass communities are also now dense mixed-conifer stands. This transition has occurred in the relatively short span of 50 to 60 years.

Fire Family Plus software was utilized to analyze past wildfire disturbance greater than or equal to 10 acres in size within the Pine Creek Watershed. According to the analysis, there have been a total of four wildfires, two of which occurred in 1992 (Pine Creek 1, 200 acres and Pine Creek 2 Fire, 10 acres). The Pine Creek Fires are adjacent to the southwest boundary of the project area. The other two fires took place in 2007 (Spencer Canyon, 80 acres and Little Burns Fire, 36 acres). Spencer Canyon is located approximately 8 miles south and west of the project area and it is situated at the southern end of the watershed. Little Burns Fire is located approximately 3 miles from the northern boundary of the project area and it is situated at the northern end of the watershed. GIS software was utilized to determine the number of acres of timber harvest that has occurred in the past. The analysis determined there was a total of 233 acres of timber harvest within the Pine Creek Watershed which was located in Tie Canyon, Mike Spencer Canyon and adjacent to the Pine Creek Organization Camp. According to district files, there has been no prescribed fire within the watershed. The Mahogany Creek Watershed has had 787 acres of timber harvest and approximately 2,590 acres of prescribed fire dating back to the late 1970's (Mahogany Creek Watershed Assessment, 2001). Both timber harvest and prescribed fire was located well north of the project area from the Twin Creek drainage north to the Grandview area. Based on wildfire records from 1960 to 1998, there have been 30 fires within the watershed with the largest fire 7 acres in size (Mahogany Creek Watershed Assessment, 2001). From 1998 to the present there have been no notable fires greater than 10 acres because the fires were actively suppressed.

The desired condition for the project area encompasses goals outlined in the Revised Targhee Forest Plan (RTFP). These goals are outlined below.

- Biodiversity is maintained or enhanced by managing as much as possible for a diverse array of habitats tied to natural occurrence and distribution of plant communities (RTFP, III-5).
- Maintain properly functioning condition for ecosystems and their components for dynamic and resilient disturbances to structure, composition and processes (RTFP, III-5).
- Identify the historic role of fire and restore fire as an ecological process, where appropriate to achieve multiple use and ecosystem management objectives (RTFP, III-6).
- Prescribed fire and managed natural fire is used to achieve desirable soil and habitat characteristics, improve forest health and create or maintain diversity in vegetative structure, composition, and patterns (RTFP, III-6).
- Fuel accumulations are reduced and managed within their historic range (RTFP, III-6).
- Maintain and restore healthy diverse forested ecosystems through time (RTFP, III-12).
- Use vegetation management to achieve a broad array of multiple use and ecosystem management objectives including maintenance, improvement and restoration of: forest health; wildlife habitat effectiveness and quality; hazardous fuels reduction; biological diversity of plant and animal communities; vegetation structure, composition and distribution in larger landscapes (RTFP, III-12).

- Wildlife biodiversity is maintained or enhanced by managing for a diverse array of habitats and distribution of plant communities (RTFP, III-15).
- Provide habitat to support the wildlife and hunting goals in the State of Idaho (RTFP; III-15).

The Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project area is located in Forest prescriptions 2.1.2 (Visual Quality Maintenance), 3.2(i) (Semi-Primitive Motorized), and 5.1.3(b) (Timber Management Big Game). The relevant management direction for these areas include:

- “Manage travel corridors to protect their natural visual quality.
- Maintain stand vigor by controlling tree density.
- Prescribed natural fire and management-ignited fire will be managed to maintain fire’s ecological role and to enhance habitat.
- Manage vegetation and fuels to minimize fire risk for urban facilities within the interface” (RTFP, III-82).

The Desired Future Condition (DFC) for ecosystem processes and patterns is to provide for a mosaic of age classes and types of vegetation across the landscape and sustain it through time. Natural disturbances such as insects, disease and fires continue their natural role (currently, that role has been interrupted by modern fire suppression). The Forest functions as an integral part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as well as adjacent systems sustaining habitat and conditions necessary for free movement of wildlife (RTFP; II-2). Lack of disturbance and fire exclusion within the project area has resulted in reduced biodiversity in the vegetation and an increased fuel loading. This is the reason why there is a need for change and why this area has been identified for mechanical slashing and prescribe burning.

Proposed Actions

The project area is approximately 6,900 acres and is bounded by existing FS trails with the exception of the NW boundary which is located within the Holter Creek drainage. The project area lays mostly within the Pine Creek Principal Watershed (006) and a small portion within the Mahogany Creek Principal Watershed (022). Existing FS trails and changes in aspect or fuel continuity will be utilized for prescribed fire containment. Some trail improvement and brushing adjacent to the trails may be necessary to contain the prescribed fire. Hand and aerial ignition will be employed to ignite areas within the project area. Prescribe burning will target approximately 35-55% of the project area and creating a mosaic of burned and unburned areas. Due to prescribe burning in fall or spring conditions, moderate fire intensity is expected. Some slashing with chainsaws will occur where conifer encroachment into aspen stand is present. Slashing of conifer will target trees <12” dbh and roughly 20-30% of the project area has been identified for potential slashing (See Figures 3-4 below). The purpose of slashing will create additional fuels on the ground to aid fire spread into aspen stands. Additionally, a 286 acre area has been identified in the Red Creek drainage as multi-storied, mixed conifer and therefore potential lynx habitat. As such, this area will be excluded from treatment. Moistures of extinction will be used to exclude fire from this area. Project implementation is planned for July 1, which would encompass slashing followed by prescribed burning in the fall season. All burning will comply with clean air act standards for particulate emissions and will be coordinated with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality. All burning will require a burn plan conforming to agency standards approved by the line officer and a qualified Prescribed

Fire Burn Boss prior to ignition. All necessary preparation to prevent the fire spreading beyond forest boundaries will be completed prior to implementation.

This action, as proposed, would be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment because it falls into a category of actions that have been determined not to individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, neither an environmental assessment nor an environmental impact statement is required (FSH 1909.15, Ch. 31). The category in which this action falls is “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activity which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction [31.2(6)].

Mitigations Measures to the Proposed Actions

- Any known cultural sites will be avoided.
- Areas that are prone to landslides or mass movement associated with steeper slopes will either be avoided or mitigations measures consisting of burning in the spring and fall season will be employed which should minimize fire intensity in these areas. Additional mitigation measure will be to limit the area burned or essentially allow small patches to burn in landslide areas.
- During mechanical slashing, crews will attempt to close non-system trails that have been identified by falling trees across these trails to prevent future use or pioneering of new trails.
- Livestock will not be allowed to graze the treated areas for two years following the treatments or until conditions can support their use, whichever is longer.

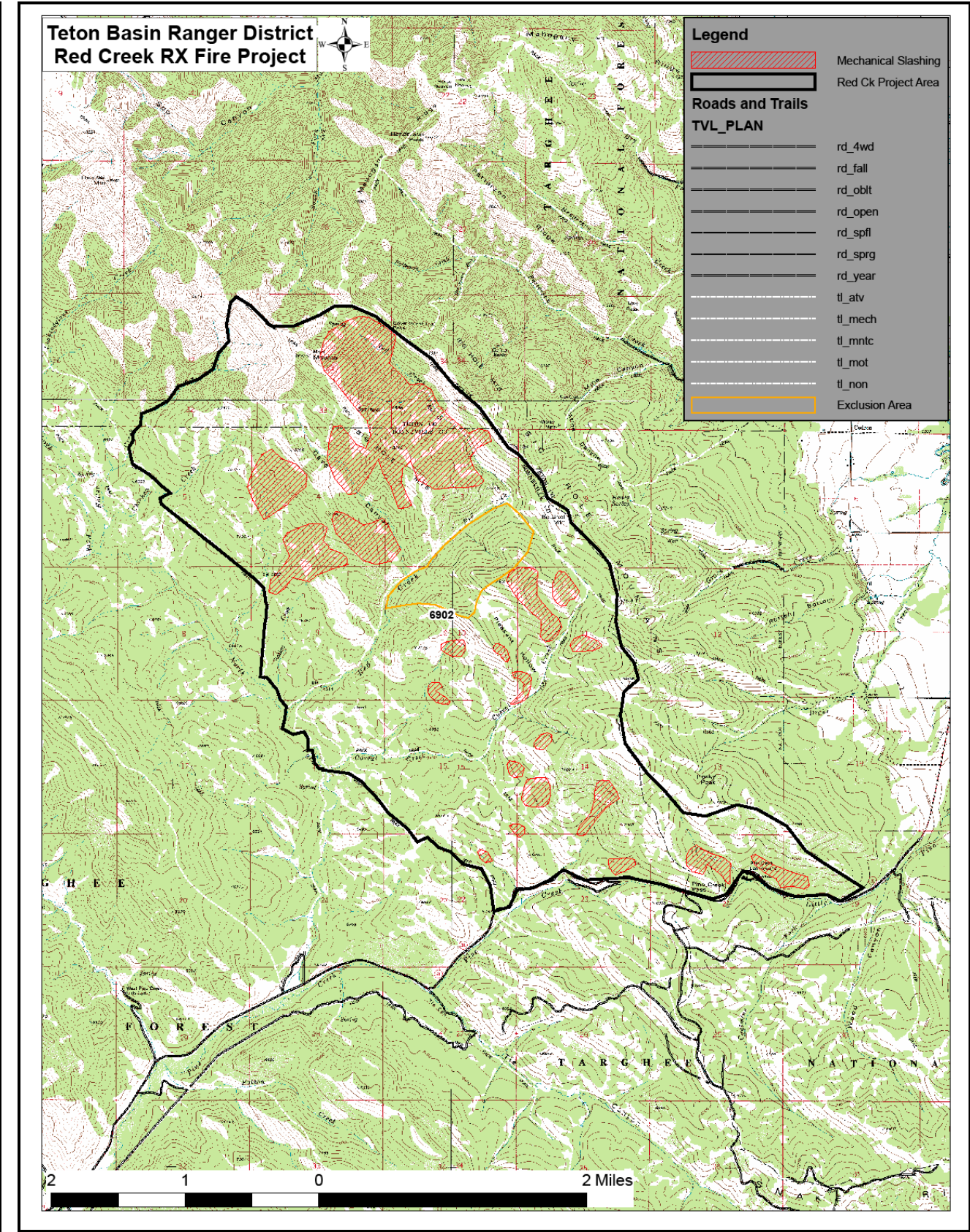




Figure 3: Red Creek Project Area with exclusion area and mechanical slashing areas identified.

Teton Basin Ranger District
Red Creek RX Fire Project



Legend

-  Red Ck Project Area
-  Exclusion Area

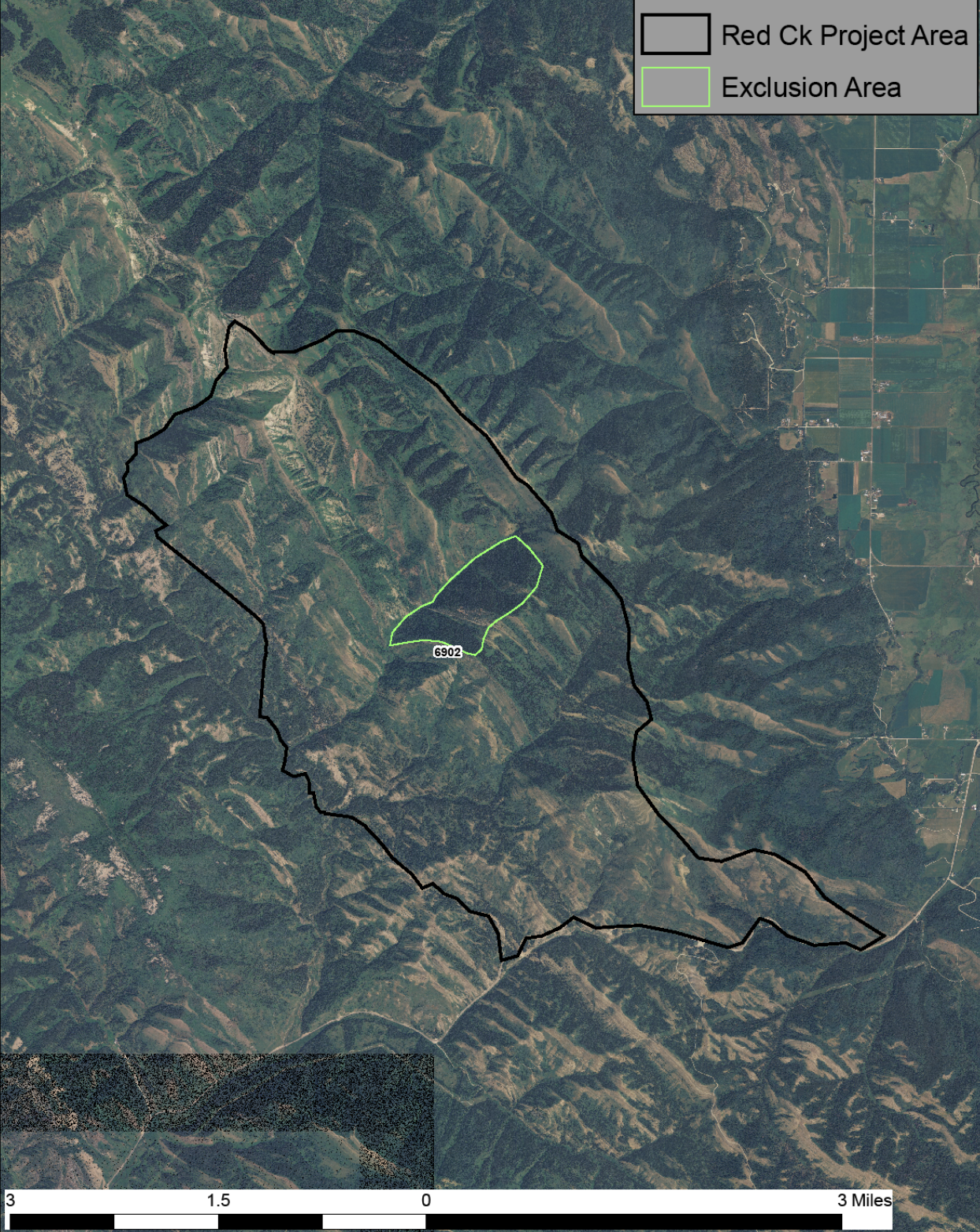


Figure 4: Aerial Imagery of the Red Creek Project Area.

Consistency with Targhee Revised Forest Plan

The Forest Plan establishes long-term management direction for the Forest and contains management standards to achieve forest-wide multiple-use goals and objectives. Ecological subsection and management prescriptions were also established based on ecological units and management themes. Each subsection and associated management prescription has specific goals, objectives, and standards that supplement forest-wide standards listed in the Forest Plan. The Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project area is located in Forest prescriptions 2.1.2 (Visual Quality Maintenance), 3.2(i) (Semi-Primitive Motorized), and 5.1.3(b) (Timber Management Big Game). The proposed project will adhere to the standards and guidelines outline in the Revised Targhee Forest Plan.

Extraordinary Circumstances

Resource conditions that will be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS are:

a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. A Biological Assessment and Biological Evaluation will be completed prior to completion of the CE. At this time, listed or proposed species that could be affected by the project are Yellowstone cutthroat & Canada Lynx.

Primary threats to Yellowstone cutthroat in *Pine Creek* and its tributaries would be the introduction of non-native trout. The proposed project will not alter the threat posed by or increase the likelihood of introduction of non-native salmonids. However this project should reduce the risk of catastrophic fire by burning under prescribed conditions at low to moderate intensities. Because this project should reduce the risk of catastrophic fire in the drainage and not increase sedimentation, preliminary determination is that this project is not likely have an adverse affect on Yellowstone cutthroat(Lee Mabey, Fishery Biologist, CTNF).

The project area includes two Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs), at this time one exclusion area has been identified and two additional areas are being evaluated for exclusion from treatment in order to comply with the Northern Rockies Lynx Amendment. All treatments will comply with the amended forest plan to safeguard the future existence of Canada Lynx.(USFWS Streamlining, Spring 2008)

b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. This project is not anticipated to have any effect on flood plains, wetlands, municipal watersheds, or other soil and water resources.

c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas. There are no congressionally designated areas within the project area.

d. Inventoried roadless areas. 6,700 acres of the Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project area is located in the Garns Mountain Roadless area. Nothing in this proposal is prohibited by the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The roadless character will not be affected because project implementation is not planned to include:

- Use of heavy equipment.
- Commercial timber harvest.

- Any removal of materials from the project area
- Any vegetation cut will be for ecosystem restoration purposes.
- Constructing new motorized trails.

e. Research natural areas. The project is not within a RNA.

f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. Consultation with tribes is being completed currently.

g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office will be completed before the project is implemented

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented on or after July 1, 2008. This project is subject to weather conditions and the availability of support personnel.

Decision Framework

I will decide whether or not to implement the actions as proposed or to modify the project design depending on the information we receive as the result of public scoping.

Public Involvement

I am interested in your input regarding this project. Concerns identified during this scoping period will aid me in identifying issues or concerns that may need to be addressed. To help me understand and address your concerns, please make your comments as specific as possible and keep them within the scope of the project. Comments become a part of the public record including names and addresses of those who comment. Your comments will be most useful if received in this office by May 14, 2008.

For more information about this proposal, please contact Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project Leader: Spencer Johnston, Palisades Ranger District, 3659 E. Ririe Hwy, Idaho Falls, ID 83401, or (208)-523-1412. Or contact David Ovard, Kristy Swartz, or Jay Pence at: Teton Basin Ranger District, PO Box 777, Driggs, Idaho 83422, or call 208-354-2312.

Sincerely,

/s/ *Jay Pence*

JAY PENCE

<p><u>Three Ways to Comment</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write a letter to the Forest Service and mail it preferably prior to May 14, 2008. <p style="text-align: center;">Address To: Caribou-Targhee National Forest Red Creek Prescribed Fire Project Leader 3659 E. Ririe Hwy. Idaho Falls, ID. 83401</p> 2. Call the Project Leader at 208-523-1412 3. Send an email to Project Leader at: mailto:comments-intermtn-caribou-targhee-teton basin@fs.fed.us
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District Ranger