

**DECISION MEMO FOR
PEBBLE CREEK SKI AREA
2008 HAZARD FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT**

**USDA Forest Service
Westside Ranger District
Caribou-Targhee National Forest
Bannock County, Idaho**

Purpose of and Need for Action

The Westside Ranger District of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest has identified a hazard fuels reduction project within the Special Use Permit boundary of Pebble Creek Ski Area. The project is a silvicultural treatment using mechanical and prescribed fire activities in Green Canyon to improve stand vigor and resilience to insects, disease and fire. This project is similar to the 1995 proposed Pebble Creek Ski Area Vegetation Management Project. The 1995 project proposed to treat 125 acres of Forest Service lands with a timber harvest. An Environmental Assessment of the project was completed and a Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision Notice were signed on April 28, 1997. The project was offered for sale, but due to market values and the significant costs to harvest, no one bid on the project and harvest was never completed. The fuel build-up and diseased trees identified in 1995 have continued and there is a decline in the overall condition of the permit area. The potential for a stand replacement fire has increased substantially in the past ten years and has increased the need for action.

The three primary goals for the project are:

1. Reduce the potential for a stand replacing crown fire. The conifer stands within the permit boundary have become decadent with a heavy fuel load of dead and down vegetation. In addition to the surface fuel load, the increase in stand density has created an imbalance that could cause stand replacing crown fires. The fuel buildup creates a potential for extreme fire behavior that could have negative economic and environmental results to the forest, permit holder and community. Specific fire behavior related objectives are to: (a) reduce the tons per acre of dead and down 1, 10, 100 and 1000 hour fuels; (b) reduce the density of ladder fuels; (c) cut trees to reduce stand crown density; and (4) create vegetation breaks that would disrupt fire spread.
2. Manage the forest to promote vigorous and resilient stands of conifers. A widespread natural disturbance has not occurred in the area for a long time; vegetation has advanced well into the late seral successional stages. The vigor of the conifer component is declining with increasing amounts of pathogens. The effects of below average moisture cycles experienced since 1986 is also contributing to the number of stress-related pathogens. Douglas-fir bark beetle and the mountain pine beetle are causing a high level of tree mortality. Significant numbers of subalpine fir in the lower elevational ranges have also been killed by the combination of drought stress and bark beetles. Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine dwarf mistletoe is also present in the permit area. Specific timber resource objectives are to: (a) encourage residual tree growth; (b) reduce pathogen levels and their potential for epidemic infestations; (c) naturally regenerate openings created by insects and forest pathogen mortality; and (d) preserve or enhance biological diversity.

3. Contribute to the desired conditions identified in the Caribou National Forest Land Revised Forest Plan (2003 RFP). The management prescription for the area is to manage for privately operated types of recreation for large concentrated groups of people (RFP, IV-65). This project will address the following RFP standards and guidelines and agency directions:

Reduce hazardous fuels in the Special Use Permit Area. (RFP, IV-65; National Fire Plan, 2001)

Utilize wood products in the process of hazard fuels reduction. (Healthy Forest Restoration Act, 2002)

Stipulate removal of unsafe trees in the special use authorization. (RFP, IV-66)

This project will comply with Prescription 4.2(b,d) Special Use Authorization Recreation Sites of the RFP. Prescription standards include controlling disturbances, such as insect and disease, consistent with visual objectives. (RFP, IV-65) The project will improve the existing scenic integrity of the permitted area.

Decision

In an effort to reduce the fire hazard within the Special Use Permitted Boundary, it is my decision to treat 300 acres of the 700 acre permit area, mechanically and with the use of prescribed fire. The project area is within the Portneuf Uplands Transitional Subsection as defined in the RFP for the Caribou National Forest, Management Prescriptions area 4.2(b,d). The analysis area contains approximately 300 acres and is primarily in the upper portions of the Green Canyon Drainage. Generally the project is located in T7S, R37E, Sections 29 and 32. (See Map 1).

Treatments will include partial and sanitation cuts with harvest (where possible); vegetation piling; and broadcast and pile prescribed burning. Removal will target green trees which are suppressed by larger trees. Some dead and dying trees will be removed. Spacing between the remaining trees will average between 10 and 25 feet. Understory trees, accounting for approximately 50 percent of the trees in the treatment units, will be removed.

Where economically feasible, trees that are cut will be removed off the mountain for commercial gain. Where it is not economically feasible; trees will be contour felled, bucked cut and piled. Down woody vegetation will be piled and burned in some areas and broadcast burned in others, based on management prescriptions. Areas of mountain brush and scattered debris will be burned to utilize environmental conditions to help meet desired prescription parameters.

Trees on steep slopes will be removed by helicopter. Tractors and/or snowcats will be used on the gentler slopes and where service roads and runs already exist. No new road construction will be associated with the treatment of these stands.

Resolution of Issues

Forest Stand Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduction of understory vegetation.• Removal of insect host trees.• Thinning of denser stands.
Habitat Cover for Big Game Animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved stand conditions.• Reduce loss due to insect damage.
Biological Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce fire prone subalpine.• Reduce concentration of down and woody materials on forest floor.• Maintain and improve Douglas Fir stands.
Public Awareness/ Recreation Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Post Notice to public via several platforms, i.e. newspaper, signs, fliers.• Provide accurate and detailed project location and description information, i.e. quality topographic map, and aerial photo.
Visual Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce straight line cutting.• Feather cut areas to maintain a more natural setting.
Site Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct pre-assessment to determine baseline site condition.• Post-assessments on recovery, to ensure desired effects are being achieved.
Other Concerns:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of mechanical treatment where feasible and economically efficient.• Noxious weed invasion mitigation measures will be implemented.

Scoping and Public Involvement

A scoping letter was sent to those agencies or individuals who were interested in or may be affected by the project. Of approximately 50 scoping letters sent, six responses were received, bringing up a variety of issues. Comments received from the letters were incorporated into the design of the project as mitigation. These issues were analyzed and responded to by the ID team and are on file at the Westside Ranger Station (Pebble Creek Hazard Fuels Project File). Some of the issues received from the public include concerns for the effects of the project on watershed health, soil impacts, trail erosion, fire prevention, forest health, recreation opportunities, noxious weed prevention, pre/post site monitoring, and concerns about economic support to the local community. All these issues were resolved through project design features.

Reason for Categorically Excluding the Proposed Action

The action is excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental analysis in accordance with FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2. Category 10 is, "Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres."

The proposed action is within the following categories:

1. Project area is within the wildland-urban interface;

- a. Shall be identified through a collaborative framework as described in “A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan”;
- b. Shall be conducted consistent with agency and Departmental procedures and applicable land and resource management plans;
- c. Shall not be conducted in wilderness areas or impair the suitability of wilderness study areas for preservation as wilderness;
- d. Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure; and may include the sale of vegetative material if the primary purpose of the activity is hazardous fuels reduction.

The required scoping and notice and comment period was completed for the proposed action and no extraordinary circumstances were identified which would require further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. Issues generated through public involvement have been resolved by including specific mitigation measures and through disclosure of planned activities. The following resource conditions considered in determining extraordinary circumstances relating to the proposed action did not warrant further analysis and documentation.

a. Through the analysis of the Biological Assessment (BA) and Biological Evaluation (BE), field surveys, and the review of literature, the proposed action will result in “No Impact” to any listed sensitive species and is not likely to contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species. It is also concluded that no sensitive species will have any long term or cumulative effect from the proposed actions. BE and BA are available for review at the Westside Ranger District (Pebble Creek Hazardous Fuels Project File.)

b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.

There are no “extraordinary circumstances” that would warrant more in-depth NEPA requirements. The beneficial uses of downstream water bodies do include domestic uses, but there are no designated municipal watersheds within the project area. The analysis area does contain floodplains and wetlands and the appropriate management direction is in place to maintain and manage those resources to function at desired conditions. The potential effect of the proposed action on domestic beneficial uses, floodplains, and wetlands will be minimized through implementation of BMP’s (e.g. no heavy equipment is necessary and trees will be left on site to minimize disturbance). Therefore, no measurable adverse impacts in regards to water quality or water flow (timing, total volume, peak or base flows) are expected within analysis area.

c. Congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.

The project is not in any of these areas.

d. Inventoried roadless areas.

The project area is not in an inventoried roadless area.

e. Research natural areas.

The project area is not in a research natural area.

f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites.

The project area is not in an American Indian religious or cultural site.

g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

A review of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest's Cultural Resources Site and Survey Atlas including related files was conducted in order to determine potential effects on cultural sites from the proposed prescribed burn project on the Westside Ranger District. All known cultural sites will be avoided and protected from project-related activities. Therefore, it was determined that this project will have "no effect" on any known archaeological or historic properties. If any cultural resources are encountered during the course of the project, the Forest Archaeologist will be notified immediately and all project activities will cease in that area until the Forest Archaeologist takes appropriate action to document and /or mitigate (if necessary) the newly discovered cultural site(s).

h. This analysis has complied with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, The National Forest Management Act, and all other applicable acts.

Implementation

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Appeals must be postmarked within 45 days of the publication of this notice in the Idaho State Journal. The Appeal Deciding Officer is Larry Timchak, Forest Supervisor. Appeals must be sent to: Appeal Deciding Officer Caribou-Targhee National Forest, 1405 Hollipark Drive, Idaho Falls, ID 83401; or by fax to 208-557-5827; or by email to: appeals/caribou-targhee@fs.fed.us. Emailed appeals must be submitted in rich text (rtf) or Word (doc) and must include the project name in the subject line. Appeals may also be hand delivered to the above address, during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the Idaho State Journal, the newspaper of record. The publication date in the Idaho State Journal is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who submitted timely comments or demonstrated interest in the proposed action during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Jerald Tower
District Ranger

Date

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