

# Sand Bar Flat Prescribed Burn (23977)

## Draft Decision Memo

Stanislaus National Forest  
Summit Ranger District  
Tuolumne County, California

### Background

This memo provides documentation, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), related to a hazardous fuel reduction project, utilizing prescribed fire. The purpose of this project is to begin the process of restoring the historic, fire resistant conditions in this area. Reducing accumulations of dead and down ground fuels, reducing understory live fuels that create a fire ladder, and breaking up the continuity of the brush communities are the objectives of the burn.



The project area has not burned since the Forest Service began recording fire history (fires larger than 10 acres) in 1908. The natural fire regime<sup>1</sup> for this part of the Forest would have been one of frequent fire occurrence (0-35 years) and low (surface fire most common) to mixed severity (less than 75% of the dominant overstory vegetation replaced). Past management activities have been minimal in the area. Insect salvage harvest occurred in the early 1990's through helicopter removal, leaving the slash on site.

Pockets of slash remnants from the salvage harvest, combined with the effects of 100 years of fire exclusion have resulted in a build-up of dead and down ground fuels, and understory ladder fuels that increase the likelihood of stand-replacing, high intensity fire to occur under typical summer weather conditions. The fuel conditions, combined with the topographic conditions (south facing aspect and steep terrain, 50% – 75% slope) predispose this area to the likelihood of high intensity wildfire.

### Project Location

The 2,253 acre Sand Bar Flat project area includes 433 acres of Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) land. The 1,820 acres of Forest Service land are split between the Summit and Calaveras Ranger Districts. The project is located on the south facing slope above the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus River, approximately one half mile down-stream from the Spring Gap Powerhouse and extends approximately four and one half miles toward the west. The legal location of the project is Sections 17 – 21 of Township 4 North, Range 17 East, and Sections 13 – 15 & 22 – 24 of Township 4 North, Range 16 East.

### Proposed Action

The proposed action is a series of prescribed burns to meet the objective of restoring the historic, fire resistant, conditions for resource protection. It is anticipated that a minimum of 2 burn entries, and possibly 3 burns, would be necessary to achieve the desired results. Dead fuel, as a result of vegetation killed in the first burn, would be reduced with repeated burns in subsequent years. The intent of the prescribed burns is to reduce the fuel load and ladder fuels to decrease the potential for high intensity crown fire, while maintaining existing tree canopy cover to keep shrub species shaded out. The maximum acceptable level of tree canopy reduction would be 15 percent. Reduction of approximately 50

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<sup>1</sup> Natural fire regimes are general classifications of the role fire would play across a landscape in the absence of modern human intervention, but including the influence of aboriginal burning (Agee 1993, Brown 1995).

percent of the canopy within the pockets of chaparral is desirable to break up the continuity of fuel to reduce rates of fire spread. A minimum retention of 40 percent of the chaparral, configured in a mosaic pattern, is desirable for soil stabilization and to meet wildlife needs.

## Proposed Decision

My **proposed** decision, based upon my review of the project, is to implement the Sand Bar Flat Burn project with our adjoining neighbor, Sierra Pacific Industries. I reviewed and considered the most recent information, including specialist reports in the project record.

My **preliminary** assessment is that this proposal falls within a category of actions listed in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). No extraordinary circumstances<sup>2</sup> potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment would preclude use of the category as per Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapter [31.12 or 31.2], item 6, *“Timber stand and/or wildlife improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicide or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction. Examples include, Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improved plant vigor.”*

Resource specialists provided input covering terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, botany, hydrology, soils, silviculture, heritage, and fuels included in the project file. The various resource specialists are in agreement that the minor resource effects of prescribed burning far outweigh the potential substantial impacts of high intensity wildfire in the project area. I considered their recommendations in making this decision. Specific findings and mitigations included in this decision are described below.

- Beneficial uses of water are protected by Best Management Practices (BMPs) and would prevent or minimize the threat of discharge of pollutants of concern.
- Riparian resources within Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs) would be protected through compliance with Riparian Conservation Objectives in the Forest Plan.
- Results of the Equivalent Roaded Area (ERA) modeling show that the threshold of concern is not reached as a result of the proposed action and that the proposed action and other reasonably foreseeable future activities in the project watershed are not expected to result in adverse cumulative watershed effects.
- Region 5 Soil Quality Standards will be met through applied management requirements to maintain long-term soil productivity.
- The action **may affect** individuals of both USFS Sensitive Species, **foothill yellow-legged frogs, *Rana boylei*** and **western pond turtle, *Clemmys marmorata***, but is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability for these species within the planning area. The project will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened aquatic species or their habitat because it is outside the current or historic range of any USFWS endangered, threatened, or candidate species.
- The proposed action will have no effect on any Federally listed Threatened & Endangered terrestrial species. The action will not affect the Sierra Nevada red fox, California wolverine, Swainson’s Hawk, Great Gray Owl, and Willow Flycatcher. The proposed action may affect individuals, but is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability for the following Sensitive species: western red bat, Townsend’s big-eared bat, pallid bat, Northern Goshawk, California Spotted Owl, American marten, Pacific fisher, Bald Eagle, and Northern Goshawk.

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<sup>2</sup> The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is (1) the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions and (2) if such a relationship exists, the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist.

- The project area was surveyed for Sensitive Plants, no occurrences were found. The unsurveyed suitable habitat for *Lomatium stebbinsii* has been identified and will be avoided to protect potential plants.
- Implementation of the project with management requirements reduces or eliminates the risks of introducing or spreading noxious weeds in the project area.

### **Reasons for the Proposed Decision**

In summary, I **propose** to implement the Sand Bar Flat prescribed burn project to reduce the potential of high intensity wildfires for the following reasons:

- To maintain existing diversity in vegetation types on the landscape,
- Protect watershed values,
- Maintain water quality consistent with the Middle Fork Stanislaus River, Wild Trout Stream,
- Protect and improve wildlife habitat, and
- Provide protection to a large parcel of private ownership with a high investment in reforestation, within the zone of influence from wildland fires originating in the river canyon.

### Public Involvement

The Forest Service first listed the Sand Bar Flat in the April 2008 issue of the Stanislaus National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). The Forest distributes the SOPA to about 160 parties and it is available on the internet [<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/stanislaus/projects/sopa>].

### Findings Required by Other Laws

This action is consistent with the Stanislaus National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended.

Reports in the project record address the project's consistency with laws and policies for environmental protection. These include the Forest service Handbook, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, Water Quality Best Management Practices, and the National Historic Preservation Act.

The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The project will have no effect on any threatened or endangered species, or species viability for any sensitive species.

### Contact Person

For further information concerning this action, please contact Linda Johnstone, Fuels Officer, Summit Ranger District; #1 Pinecrest Lake Road, Pinecrest, CA 95364; (209) 965-3434 ext. 5314; [ljohnstone@fs.fed.us](mailto:ljohnstone@fs.fed.us)



