

DECISION MEMO

Warm Springs Fuel Reduction Project

Ketchum Ranger District Sawtooth National Forest Blaine County, Idaho

Township 4 North, Range 17 East, Sections 11, 14 and 15 Boise Meridian

Background

Following the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), the Forest Service placed emphasis on identifying areas where, should wildfire occur, there could be significant loss of private lands and developments and extraordinary danger to the public and firefighters. Portions of the Warm Springs drainage on the Ketchum Ranger District were identified as a high priority for treatments to reduce these hazards due to heavy fuel loadings, high tree densities, steep slopes, narrow roadways, high concentrations of homes and other developments, increasing fire occurrences in the area and drought. According to a 2004 analysis of the forested stands in lower Warm Springs, if the forest fuel load and tree densities were left at current levels, there is an increased probability of insect infestation and potential for crown fire. Crown fires are often the most damaging fires to private developments because of spotting and direct flame contact with structures.

Phase 1 – treatment of approximately 104 acres is being proposed now. It is anticipated that additional fuels reduction activities will treat approximately 900 acres in the Warm Springs area. Site-specific analysis will be completed for future phases when and if they occur.

Decision

It is my decision to authorize the implementation of Phase 1 of the Warm Springs Fuel Reduction Project. An approved silvicultural prescription is required prior to implementing any tree removal for this project.

Proposed Action

The project area for Phase 1 consists of 104 acres of primarily Douglas-fir forest and is located within two miles of Ketchum, Idaho immediately adjacent to Lower Board Ranch, the proposed Warm Springs Ranch and approximately 10 parcels of private lands between the base of Warm Springs lifts and Warm Springs Ranch. (See attached project area map).

The proposed action is to treat approximately 104 acres with both mechanical (35 acres) and hand treatment (69 acres) followed by slash disposal (either burning or chipping) to provide defensible space, reduce overall fuel loading, and modify the fuel profile within the project area. The project will be accomplished with a variety of treatments and methods. These include:

- Commercial Timber Sales (Mechanical treatment)

- Service Contracts (Mechanical or hand treatment)
- Forest Service Fire Crews (Hand treatment)
- Stewardship Contracts (Mechanical or hand treatment)

Hand Treatments

Hand Treatments will focus on removing approximately 90% of the 0-7.9 inches in dbh trees. Treatment will be accomplished with hand crews using chainsaws. The cut trees will be piled on site and burned at a later date when conditions warrant, or trees will be removed, sold, chipped, piled off site and burned, etc. Disturbance associated with hand treatments will be from falling trees, hand skidding slash, tops, or whole small trees and pile burning if done on site.

Mechanical Treatments

Mechanical treatment will be accomplished using mechanized ground-based logging equipment on slopes 0%-35%. This will include chainsaw/feller buncher and skidding on designated skid trails. Whole tree skidding (limbs attached) will occur to designated landing locations, limbed and topped. Areas of heavy ground fuel loading may also be piled or skidded to reduce fuel loading. Slash will either be sold or burned as weather conditions permit.

Mechanical treatment will include removing approximately 90% of the 0-7.9 inch dbh (diameter breast height) trees, removing 8-19.9 inch dbh trees to achieve desired 80-110 sq. ft. basal area/acre and reduced canopy closure, and remove up to 10% of the trees greater than or equal to 20 inches dbh as necessary to achieve desired basal area and canopy closure.

Project Design Features

- 1) In compliance with 2003 revised Sawtooth Forest Land & Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) Management Direction for Non-native Plants NPST03, NPST04, and NPST10 to reduce the potential for the invasion and/or expansion of noxious weeds:
 - a) Earth-disturbing equipment used on National Forest System lands shall be cleaned of all plant materials, dirt and material that may carry noxious weed seeds prior to entering the forest.
 - b) The proposed project areas, adjacent areas and access routes would be surveyed for noxious weeds prior to implementation and post project implementation under the Ketchum Ranger District's noxious weed program. If noxious weed are identified prior to implementation they would be treated before the proposed project is implemented and the area of infestation would be avoided during implementation.
 - c) The proposed project area would be monitored for 2-3 growing seasons post implementation. All noxious weeds would be treated for eradication.
- 2) To protect the integrity of native plant communities, restoration seeding and/or rehabilitation of areas disturbed during project implementation will utilize native seed and plant species. A Forest Service botanist will be contacted for an appropriate species list prior to seeding or planting.
- 3) Project implementation would occur after July 31 of the calendar year to avoid disturbance to nesting birds.

- 4) Goshawk surveys would be completed again in 2005, pre-implementation. Any goshawk nest discovered during pre-implementation surveys, timber marking or project implementation, would be buffered by a 30-acre no harvest buffer.
- 5) Standing dead trees would not be cut down unless considered a serious safety hazard.
- 6) In compliance with Forest Plan - #SWST11, do not authorize storage of fuels and other toxicants or refueling within RCAs (including on private land) unless there are no other alternatives. Storage of fuels and other toxicants or refueling sites within RCAs shall be approved by the responsible official and have an approved spill containment plan commensurate with the amount of fuel.
- 7) No activities (other than timber cruising/marketing) will occur on weekends between the hours of 6 P.M. Friday and 8 A.M. Monday.
- 8) No activities (other than timber cruising/marketing) will occur over Memorial Day weekend, Fourth of July, or Labor Day between the hours of 6 P.M. Friday and 8 A.M. Tuesday.
- 9) Two historic sites, 10BN450 and 10BN482¹, determined ineligible by Walsworth sit just inside the boundary of the Warm Springs Ranch Unit. Both sites sit in hand-treatment portions of the unit, which will be treated with hand thinning and piling. Although the sites are ineligible, they will be ***flagged and avoided*** in order to preserve them in their historic context. Piles in the area will be eventually burned – thus, ***piles must not be located in areas adjacent to these sites because creep from piles could cause scorching or burning of the resource. Fire personnel will be made aware of these resources prior to implementation and be briefed on avoidance measures.***
- 10) Historic stumps with spring board cuts may lie in the project area – in the event that they are identified by fire personnel, they must be avoided when hand piling and burning occurs.

Public Involvement

A proposal to reduce/rearrange fuels on approximately 900 acres of National Forest land directly adjacent to the city of Ketchum, privately owned developments and the Sun Valley Ski Resort has been listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions from October 1, 2004 through the present. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping. This proposal was scoped internally among the Ketchum Ranger District staff. The proposal was provided to: Idaho Department of lands, Idaho Department of Water Resources, Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, as well as numerous special interests groups (list available in project file) for scoping. The scoping period was from September 13, 2004 – October 13, 2004.

Public scoping was completed by placing news releases in local media resources from the surrounding Wood River Valley communities. Additionally, an “interested parties list”

¹ According to the *Bald Mountain Heritage Survey Phase III (SW-93-1549)* by Claudia Walsworth this site was originally recorded as an isolated find. Presently, no data in the Sawtooth National Forest records exist to justify why this isolate was determined to be a site.

consisting of neighboring landowners and organizations was developed and a letter describing the proposed action was sent to each party. Recipients were encouraged to provide written comments. A total of 14 written comments were received. Two public meetings were held in Ketchum, one on September 30, 2004 at the American Legion Hall and the other on April 7, 2005 at Ketchum City Hall.

Identified Concerns:

Five categories of comments were received for the project. All comments received can be found in the project file located at the Forest Service office; 5 North Fork Canyon Road, Ketchum, ID. Many of the comments relayed support for implementing the project. Those comments that expressed concern about the project, listed by category are:

Fuels/Fire related comments:

Comment.

“...In the gullies that extend into the back of the mountain, there are thick deadfalls that are elevated and suspended across the gullies. Clearance of the deadfalls should extend farther up the gullies than in other areas.”

Response.

Studies indicate (Cohen, 2000) that treatments within approximately 40 meters (131 feet) of structures provide the most effective protection. Treatment beyond 40 meters is less effective to help protect homes from wildfire. However, site-specific factors can influence the effective zone for fuels treatments. We have chosen to extend treatment up to 500 feet in some localized areas due to steep slopes and heavy fuels.

Comment.

“The Forest Service should examine an alternative using some prescribed burning to accomplish some of the project goals.”

Response.

Due to steep slopes, proximity of homes, fuel type, and safety concerns, pile burning will be the only prescribed fire implemented on this project.

Comment.

“The Forest Service should describe efforts to relay such information to community leaders and homeowners with the result being that homeowners take responsibility in protecting their personal property.”

Response.

The Blaine County Fire Mitigation Plan has addressed homeowner education. We have shared information with homeowners regarding how to protect their homes and their responsibility to do so.

Comment.

“We encourage the Forest Service to adopt some diameter limits to preserve the large-tree component.”

Response.

Our objectives are to reduce basal area and canopy closure. To achieve this goal, following a silvicultural prescription, small diameter trees will be removed first. If it is determined that this action achieves the goal, treatment will stop. We will only remove large diameter trees (up to 10%) to achieve desired basal area and canopy closure if necessary. All treatments will comply with Forest Plan direction regarding vegetation.

Road related comments:

Comment.

“How long will Warm Springs Road be used and by how many (log trucks)?”

Response.

The project may last up to 3 years. An estimated 50-100 log trucks (through out the entire project) will be utilized.

Comment.

“Will the Forest Service be responsible for maintenance of the road?”

Response.

The project has been adjusted so that log trucks will not travel on the dirt portion of Warm Springs Road. Maintenance on the paved portion of Warm Springs Road lies with Blaine County. Any dirt roads utilized in the project area will be the responsibility of the timber sale contractor and a requirement will be established in the timber sale contract.

Comment.

“Logging trucks and equipment on narrow paved and dirt roads are hazardous to residents and animals.”

Response.

We will monitor logging trucks and equipment to ensure travel at safe speeds. Contracts will specify speed limits and areas of high use.

Terrestrial/Aquatic/soil/plants comments

Comment.

“The forest floor in flat areas of the treatment area is relatively pristine and has developed a lush community of native grasses and forbs. I would encourage the use of temporary fencing or flagging that directs mechanized equipment towards specified access routes in the treatment area to avoid indiscriminate driving over the forest floor.”

Response.

Designated travel routes for mechanized equipment will be incorporated into the project design.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Action

This project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment as per Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, 31.2, (10) “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”. A Decision Memo and project file is required. The proposal has been reviewed internally by Forest Service staff and by the public.

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. The US Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Historic Preservation Office oversight agencies concur with our findings. For these reasons, I am excluding this decision from further documentation.

I have reviewed the proposed action and the project file and use the above referenced categorical exclusions in good faith.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision, as designed and with mitigation and management requirements, is consistent with the 2003 revised Sawtooth National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan goals, objectives, standards and guidelines. The categorical exclusion as it applies is in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing NEPA.

Appeal Opportunities

This action is not subject to appeal as per 36 Code of Federal Regulations 215.4(a).

Implementation Date

This decision may be implemented immediately. Implementation of mechanical harvest of trees is anticipated to begin in early September, 2005.

Hand treatments will be implemented this summer (July through October), and continue over the next two summers.

Responsible Official and Contact Person

The responsible official is Kurt J. Nelson, District Ranger, Ketchum Ranger District, 206 Sun Valley Road, Ketchum, ID, 83340. For further information, contact the project leader, Matt Filbert at the Sawtooth NRA Headquarters, (208) 727-5000.

/s/ KURT J. NELSON

August 8, 2005

Kurt J. Nelson
Ketchum District Ranger

Date