



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Stanislaus National Forest
Summit Ranger District

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File Code: 1950

Date: February 26, 2008

Dear Friend of the Stanislaus:

The Stanislaus National Forest, Summit Ranger District is starting the scoping process for the Pincrest Interior Healthy Forest Restoration project. We have collaborated with the local community, meeting on site with cabin owners, organizational camp managers, and business owners within the Pincrest Basin, as well as the Highway 108 Fire Safe Council and the local Tribe to develop the proposal presented in this scoping letter. The accompanying document and map provide a description of the proposed actions, their locations, purpose and need, and the nature of the decision to be made. Fuels reduction (tree thinning) is proposed on approximately 780 acres within and adjacent to the cabins, camps, campgrounds, open spaces, and businesses of the Pincrest Basin. We expect to complete an Environmental Assessment (EA) in May 2008.

You are receiving this scoping notice either because you expressed a specific interest in this project or because the Forest Service believes you may be directly or indirectly affected by this project. If you have information you feel the Forest Service may not be aware of, you have issues (points of dispute or disagreement) regarding potential effects of this proposal, or you know of any extraordinary circumstances related to the implementation of this project, this is your opportunity to comment.

This proposed hazardous fuel reduction project meets the criteria for an authorized fuel reduction project as defined in section 102 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003: it is on Federal land and in a wildland-urban interface area. As an authorized fuel reduction project, the Pincrest Interior Healthy Forest Restoration project is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218. It is not subject to the notice, comment, and appeal procedures found at 36 CFR 215 (36 CFR 218.3). Only those individuals and organizations who submit written comments specific to this project, during scoping or other opportunity for public comment, will have standing to file an objection (36 CFR 218.6(a)).

The Forest Service will accept written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic scoping comments on this proposal for 30 calendar days following publication of this notice in the Union Democrat. The publication date in this newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the scoping comment period for this proposal. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Comments may be submitted to: Summit Ranger District; **Attn: Pincrest**; #1 Pincrest Lake Road, Pincrest, CA 95364. Comments may be submitted by FAX [(209) 965-3372] or by hand-delivery to the address shown above, during normal business hours (Monday-Friday 8:00am to 4:30pm). Oral comments must be provided at the Ranger District office, in person or via telephone [(209) 965-3434], during normal business hours.



Electronic comments, in acceptable [plain text (.txt), rich text (.rtf) or Word (.doc)] formats, may be submitted to: [comments-pacificsouthwest-stanislaus-summit@fs.fed.us] with **Subject: Pinecrest**. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgment from the agency as confirmation of receipt. Names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed project, and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who only submit anonymous comments will not have standing to file an objection under 36 CFR 218.

For additional information on the proposed action, contact Maria Benech at the Summit Ranger District, #1 Pinecrest Lake Road, Pinecrest, CA 95364 or by telephone [(209) 965-7825 ext. 5366].

Sincerely,

KAREN JO CALDWELL
District Ranger

Enclosures

PROPOSED FUEL REDUCTION PROJECT
Pinecrest Interior Healthy Forest Restoration (22764)
Stanislaus National Forest
Summit Ranger District
Tuolumne County, CA

Background

The forest in and around the Pinecrest Basin was historically dependent on frequent, low intensity fires. Fire suppression, starting in the early 1900s, excluded fire and disrupted the historic fire intervals which kept this forest more open and less prone to stand replacing fire. Fire exclusion along with high recreation/human activity has contributed to the change in tree species composition, stand structure, and tree density in this area. The denser, closed canopies (crowns) have favored the growth of shade tolerant species (white fir and incense cedar) to the exclusion of shade intolerant ponderosa pine, black oak, and sugar pine. The shade tolerant trees have grown into dense stands which act as fuel ladders to the larger overstory trees, and throughout Pinecrest overtopped trees are now declining and dying out because of the competition for water. Compaction caused by vehicle and foot traffic also affects the soil's ability to transfer water into the rooting zone of trees. Natural tree regeneration (seedlings) has also become almost nonexistent in the Basin due to trampling from vehicle and foot traffic.

The area typically has over 800,000 visitors a year, mostly during the summer recreation season. All of the cabins and other facilities in the Pinecrest Basin are privately owned. The Highway 108 Strategic Fire Plan (2006) lists this area as a "community at risk," and under significant threat to human life and property from wildland fires. It is also listed in the Federal Register (Federal Register Vol. 66, No. 160/Friday, August 17, 2001/Notices) as a "community at risk". These types of communities are defined as "urban wildland interface communities within the vicinity of federal lands that are at high risk from wildfire," and are otherwise known as Wildland Urban Intermix (WUI) areas. The entire project falls within the core or defense zones, areas on National Forest Lands closest to communities or other developments.

Who, What and Where

The Summit Ranger District proposes to conduct hand thinning and chipping or small pile burning within the cabins, camps, and other facilities within the Pinecrest Basin. Hand felling and helicopter removal is proposed for the steep slope adjacent to the south shore cabins. The project is located in sections 14, 15, 21 – 23, 28, & 29, Township 4 North, Range 18 East, and in sections Tuolumne County, California.

Why Here and Why Now

The Pinecrest Interior project area is in an ecosystem that evolved with frequent low intensity fires, but has not burned for many decades and is becoming increasingly vulnerable to wildfire. The risk of losing 388 cabins, numerous camps, and other infrastructure as well as various forest ecosystem components is high, and would continue to increase without treatment.

Overlying all proposed activities is the consideration of the recreating public, especially those who currently own cabins and operate camps in the area, even when this meant compromising forest health values. The primary goals of this project are to create forest conditions that would reduce fire intensity and increase fire suppression efficiency as well as improve forest health conditions. Thinning for forest health in overstocked cabin/camp areas is addressed in this project, but compromises were made in order to meet visual quality and recreation goals. The Forest Service met with over 90% of cabin owners and special use permit operators in the Basin to develop the thinning prescriptions for each individual facility. The thinning is designed to remove ladder fuels, enhance tree composition to favor more fire-resistant (and long-lived) species, reduce inter-tree competition, and increase tree vigor to resist insects, disease and drought. The desired condition is to return the historic species balance of pine overstory with scattered white fir in the understory with incense cedar and black oak intermixed. The Forest Service recognizes that this is the first entry into this area to deal with forest health and that multiple entries will be necessary to balance forest health, visual quality, and recreation user needs. Reforestation needs would also be met by planting rust resistant sugar pine (a tree that is declining in younger

age groups from disease in the Sierra Nevada) and incense cedar (for screening) in areas that have become deforested through disease, insects, or human impacts (primarily vehicles and feet). Meadow and aspen restoration through removal of encroaching conifers is also a goal of the project. Restoring these natural systems would provide diverse habitat and a higher functioning hydrologic system within the Pinecrest Basin.

Proposed Action

The Summit Ranger District in coordination with Pinecrest Basin stakeholders proposes the following site-specific prescriptions to achieve desired conditions for the project area. See attached map for specific unit locations.

1. Reduce fuels, both horizontally and vertically by thinning trees, and cutting brush in patches greater than 10 feet square and from underneath trees (removing the fuel ladder). Cabin owners are expected to complete the brush work to meet existing Cal Fire Standards.
2. Enhance habitats including aspen stands and meadows through removal of encroaching conifers.
3. Improve forest health by thinning overstocked areas where tree vigor is fading and trees have already started to die out.
4. Plant areas that have been deforested through past activities and recreational use. Rust resistant sugar pine and incense cedar would be used.
5. Remove noxious weeds by hand where feasible.

Treatments

- **Thinning of Merchantable Trees:** Remove merchantable trees greater than 10 inches and less than 30 inches DBH, primarily suppressed and intermediate trees. In rare cases within the cabins and camps, groups of codominant trees would be thinned in order to prevent overlapping crowns and over stocking. The emphasis is on retaining the largest, healthiest and most vigorous trees. Within the cabins, the spacing would be tighter than for traditional forest health prescriptions due to cabin owner concerns. All large black oak and riparian hardwood species would be retained. Some thinning/pruning of live oak would occur to meet fuel reduction needs primarily on the north and south shores of the lake where access is more difficult. Over topped black oak trees would be released where feasible. During thinning, sugar pine, ponderosa pine, and incense cedar would be favored for retention. The helicopter unit above the south shore cabins would be thinned to a spacing of 1/2 to 1 crown spacing between residual crowns (approximately 20 feet between crowns depending on tree size). Trees over 30 inch DBH would only be removed where necessary for operational safety. In addition, the Forestwide Hazard Tree Guidelines would be used, allowing larger size hazard trees to be removed. Thinning would be conducted on approximately 745 acres.
- **Hand Thinning of Sub-Merchantable Trees:** Small, sub-merchantable trees, small seedlings to 10 inches DBH would be removed by hand. Small trees would be spaced far enough apart to break up the continuity of fuels, but to continue to provide screening within the cabins and camps. The spacing would vary depending on tree size, but at a minimum, interlocking crowns would be separated. Hand-thinning treatments are proposed in the cabin and camp areas for all small trees and large ones that cannot be sold for lumber. The hand thinning would include chipping the material on site, piling and burning of dead and live trees and brush, and leaving firewood size material to be used by the cabin owner or other user. The oak and rocky units within the helicopter unit would also be treated by hand as described above (no chipping). Hand treatment would be conducted on 561 acres.
- **For the helicopter unit (219 acres):** Due to the high cost of biomass removal on steep slopes and the rising cost of fuel, the following options would be allowed on this site: 1) Flown out, chipped on the landing, and removed, or 2) Hand cut, piled, and burned.
- **Meadow and Riparian Treatments:** Along the edges of the meadows and within the aspen stands, all encroaching conifers less than 30 inches DBH would be removed to encourage natural regeneration of riparian species. This covers approximately 50 acres.

- Noxious Weed Eradication: Himalayan blackberry would be removed from the meadow behind the Pinecrest Store. Other infestations may exist and these too would be removed by hand. No herbicide use is proposed in this project.

Project Design Criteria

Aquatics

These Design Criteria are established to prevent or minimize disturbance to individuals and/or populations of U.S. Forest Service sensitive aquatic organisms, with an emphasis on mountain yellow-legged frogs.

- In meadow and riparian treatment areas (approximately 50 acres), no heavy equipment use (Tractor Keep Out) within 25 feet of wet meadows, streams, or lakes/ponds. Methods that do not produce ground-disturbance (e.g. aerial) may be used to remove trees inside of this zone.
- In proposed treatment areas within 100 feet of perennial waters, conduct Visual Encounter Surveys for U.S. Forest Service sensitive aquatic species (mountain yellow-legged frog emphasis) prior to project implementation. If species presence is confirmed, protect individuals through restriction of equipment and burning activities from their immediate vicinity; this would likely require a minimum exclusion distance of 100 feet, but could be greater if deemed necessary by an aquatic biologist.
- Place all burn piles at least 50 feet from perennial waters, or where hardened sites already exist.

Cultural Resources

Archaeological sites in the project area would be protected during all ground disturbing activities. In the event that any new sites are discovered during project implementation, the District Archaeologist would be notified and the area flagged and avoided during the remaining implementation of the project. Non-mechanical, fuel reduction treatments, such as hand thinning may occur within sites to increase protection of heritage structures/features. Avoid dropping trees directly into known sites. Consultation with the District Archaeologist would occur prior to any treatment within a site.

Hydrology

Protection of water quality is derived from the Forest Service Water Quality Best Management Practices (BMPs) and the Aquatic Management Strategy. BMPs would be implemented for the timber management, vegetation manipulation, and fuels treatments to minimize erosion and protect long-term watershed values.

- Skidding:
 - No operations allowed when soil is wet.
 - Fully suspended yarding within meadows is required where resource damage may occur.
 - Soil displaced in meadow areas would be returned to contour.
- Stream Crossings:
 - Existing roads would be used to cross streams and drainages.
- Wet meadows:
 - Do not operate in the meadows when the soil is wet.
 - Burn piles would not be placed in meadows; may be placed on the drier upland.
 - All disturbed areas would be mulched with local slash in order to provide 75% ground cover.
- Staging of equipment:
 - Equipment would be staged in already impacted areas such as existing parking lots and pull outs.

Recreation

- Road surface on all interior roads used for haul would be repaired to pre-treatment conditions.
- Logging activities would occur before Memorial Day (all activities need to be cleaned up by the Thursday before the holiday weekend) or after Labor Day for cabins, organizational camps, and campgrounds. No activities in Meadowview, Pinecrest, and Pioneer campgrounds or the Day Use Area from May 15th to September 15th. In addition, no weekend operations would occur in the Day Use area throughout the year.
- Access point(s) for crossing the lakebed at low water would be re-blocked by Friday(s) and at the end of all timber removal activities.
- All skidding related activities to be blocked and restored upon completion of need for that particular route to minimize the illusion of newly created driveways or access routes.
- Purchaser to coordinate with commercial permit holders to minimize impact to their operations.
- The permit administrator must be notified at least 2 weeks prior to commencement of helicopter operations so that cabin owners can be informed of the pending activity adjacent to their lots.
- Public notification:
 - Coordinate with Recreation Staff to post signs at information boards in recreation areas (campgrounds, picnic area, and trailheads) informing users of tree removal, mechanical and hand thinning, and prescribe burning activities. Include timing, duration, and contact person and phone number.
 - Publish notice/articles in local papers (Modesto Bee, Union Democrat)
 - Coordinate closely with members of Pinecrest Permittee Association and post on their website (schedule and activities)
- Monitor roads within project area for unauthorized access and use after treatment operations are complete. Close and rehabilitate all unauthorized access points as soon as possible.
- Protect all constructed features (replace or repair to acceptable standards all publicly owned facilities/improvements if damaged during operations)
- Provide provisions for damage to privately owned permitted improvements
- Flush cut stumps in all locations except units 24, 25, and 26.
- In units 21, 22, and 23, treat cut stumps over 12 inches in diameter (all species) with an EPA registered borate compound, for the prevention of annosus root disease.

Sensitive Plants/Noxious Weeds

- Block or decommission all temporary roads that are created by this project after project completion.
- All equipment, including earthmoving and chipping equipment must be free of soil, mud (wet or dried), seeds, vegetative matter or other debris that could contain seeds in order to prevent new infestations of noxious weeds in the project area. Dust or very light dirt which would not contain weed seed is not a concern.
- Weeds may be pulled, cut, and hand dug in units prior to, during, and after the project to minimize spread and expansion. Any digging would be done in consultation with Heritage Resources.
- Avoid the Himalayan blackberry in the meadow behind the Pinecrest store and the ox-eye daisy at Camps Gold and Oski and at some cabins, or clean all heavy equipment that works in those areas before it leaves.
- If possible, work in the more weed free areas such as the north and southeast shores first and leave the more weedy areas such as around the sewage treatment plant and some of the cabins for last.

Silviculture/Vegetation

- Protect healthy sugar pines within the units during all operations. Timber removal would be conducted to promote this species.

Soils

This section highlights design elements or mitigation measures that help meet R-5 Soil Quality Standards (USDA, 1995). They provide for erosion control, soil cover, and surface organics to build soil. They are designed to limit the amount of area impacted and/or restore areas where detrimental compaction occurs. The protection of wetlands is also a primary goal.

- Maintain 50% cover of duff and small woody material in Unit 23, and 60% cover in Unit 24.
- Operate on dry soils of high soil strength in Unit 23.
- Subsoil landings (may need reshaping depending on visual quality needs) after use in Units 23 and 24 except where already existing and desired “landings” occur (e.g. existing parking lots).
- Keep tractors out of wet meadows. Allow equipment access only when soils have high bearing capacity and strength.
- Subsoil all temporary roads (reshape/contour for visual quality needs).
- Level 1 roads to be blocked may include re-contouring to line of site distance to discourage unauthorized use.

Transportation

See the table below for a summary of road needs for the project.

Road Number	Miles	Road Status	Stands Accessed	Prescription/Coordinating Requirements
Unclassified Roads				
41823K	0.3	Blocked	24	Reconstruct and re-block after treatment operations are complete.
TOTAL	0.3			

Wildlife Management

- Limiting Operating Period (LOP) within 500 feet of active Osprey nests from March 1st through August 15th.

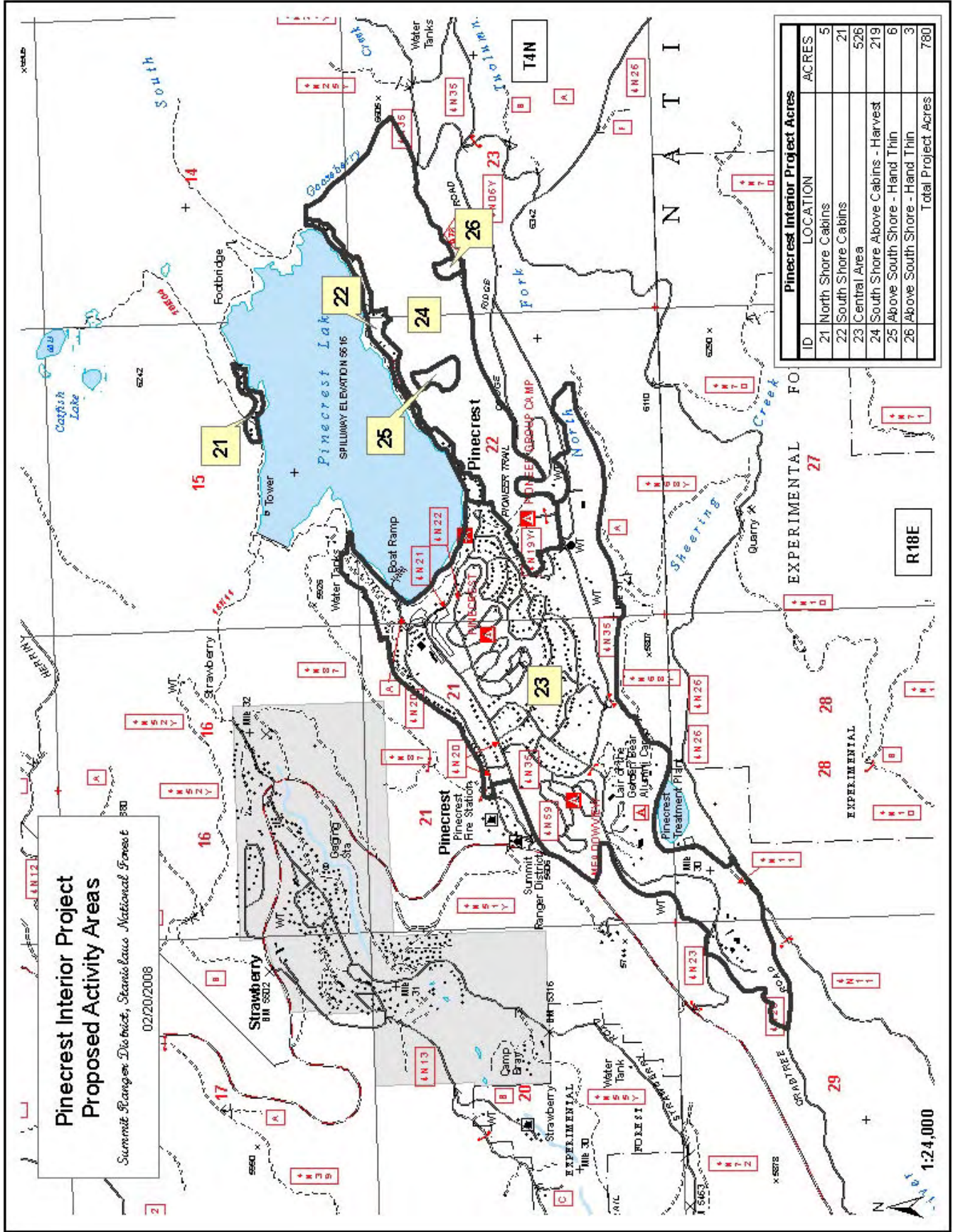
Decision to be Made

Whether to implement the Proposed Action as described, to implement an alternative to the Proposed Action that better resolves conflicts and meets the purpose and need, or to take no action at this time.

All treatments would be consistent with the Stanislaus Land and Resource Management Plan as amended and would not require any amendment of the Forest Plan.

Pinecrest Interior Project Proposed Activity Areas

Summit Ranger District, Stanislaus National Forest
02/20/2008



Pinecrest Interior Project Acres		
ID	LOCATION	ACRES
21	North Shore Cabins	5
22	South Shore Cabins	21
23	Central Area	526
24	South Shore Above Cabins - Harvest	219
25	Above South Shore - Hand Thin	6
26	Above South Shore - Hand Thin	3
Total Project Acres		780

1:24,000