

Public Scoping Notice
Buffalo Valley Fuels Management Proposal
Buffalo Ranger District
Bridger-Teton National Forest
March 6, 2009

Introduction

Public involvement is an important part of the environmental planning process for the U. S. Forest Service. Please take the time to read the following information and let us know your concerns about the proposed actions and decisions to be made. We appreciate your contribution of time and effort, and believe the information you share with us will lead to a better decision.

The Buffalo Ranger District of the Bridger-Teton National Forest is proposing to re-analyze and implement hazard fuels reduction treatments along National Forest boundaries, designated wilderness boundaries, and private land boundaries within the community of Moran (Buffalo Valley area) in Teton County, Wyoming.

On December 5, 2007, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals declared the Hazardous Fuels Reduction Categorical Exclusion (CE-10) developed under the President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative invalid and issued an injunction against further use of the CE-10. The USFS responded to this ruling by applying the injunction nation wide. This has resulted in many projects being halted in various phases of completion, including the projects outlined in this document. Categorical Exclusions are a category of actions that are excluded from the requirement to prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Both the EA and EIS require more extensive analysis than a Categorical Exclusion.

The 3 CE-10 decisions within the Buffalo Valley affected by this injunction include: Blackrock Hatchet (signed 12/13/2004), Buffalo Valley Defensible Space (signed 7/28/2005) and Randolph Mountain (signed 4/6/2007). Work has been initiated and some phases of these projects have been completed. The repeal of the CE-10 authority has given the Buffalo District the opportunity to review the three decisions and combine them into a single Environmental Analysis. The basis for these projects is described below and is still valid.

The community of Buffalo Valley has been designated as a community-at-risk to wildland fire due to the proximity of numerous residences to National Forest boundaries (2001 USDA-FS and USDOJ report). Beetle and disease infestations starting in the late 1990's have caused tree mortality to reach high levels within the mature conifer stands in the area. This combined with abundant ladder and ground fuel accumulations in and around these stands creates conditions favorable to large fire growth and resistance to control by fire crews during the typical fire season. Examples of this type of fire behavior have been seen on the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton National Forests in recent years. Once established, fires occurring in these types of fuels have the ability to endanger life and cause damage to property. These fuel accumulations may have been accelerated by the disturbance of natural fire cycles due to effective suppression of fires within and adjacent to the Buffalo Valley.

The need for vegetation management in this area has previously been identified and documented in the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) implemented in 1990 and the Teton Division Landscape Scale Assessment (Teton LSA) of 2003. Each effort included extensive public and Forest Service interdisciplinary input and use of the best data available on forest resources. Management opportunities, practices, standards, guidelines, and mitigations have been developed to achieve desired resource conditions.

Current and historic uses of the project area are quantified in the Teton LSA and Forest Plan and include past timber harvest activities. Many old roads associated with past timber activities have been closed by rehabilitation actions, but some roads require additional work to bring them into Elimination Condition 3 or 4 (obliteration or restoration). This would improve watershed health and improve grizzly bear habitat by reducing road density.

Purpose and Need

The Buffalo Ranger District proposes to reduce fire risk on National Forest Lands in the Buffalo Valley by using the following vegetation treatments:

- Thinning of dead and live standing trees, removal of dead logs and other forest fuels on the ground, and pruning of lower branches on the remaining live trees to minimize crown fire initiation and spotting.
- Cutting and removing conifer and mature aspen to promote aspen regeneration as a buffer to fire spread and to reduce fire behavior.
- The use of prescribed fire, mechanical removal, and/or herbicide to reduce fuel continuity and burning intensity of sagebrush and grass fuels near private lands.
- Broadcast burning to modify existing fuel models to reduce flame lengths, and/or for maintenance of mechanical or chemical treatments in all fuels and to promote aspen stands as fuel breaks.

Mechanical treatments and prescribed burns would be designed to minimize impacts to soils. No permanent roads or other improvements would be constructed in the project and adjacent areas. Some temporary haul roads would be created and requirements for reclamation would be outlined in the Environmental Analysis and included in the decision document.

Woody debris created during mechanical activity would be either piled on site or removed as per silviculturist prescription and contract administration. Debris that is suitable for use as personal use firewood or post and poles may be made available to the public where access permits. Materials treated in mechanical treatments may be removed in commercial timber sales where access and terrain allow.

Proposed Action

Treatments including prescribed fire, timber harvest, thinning of trees, and removal of dead and down fuel loads are proposed in the following areas:

Heart Six Prescribed Burn Area: This treatment area addresses lands adjacent to and East of the Heart Six ranch and North of the Buffalo Valley road (T45N, R113W, Sec. 13-16, 22-26). The analysis area measures approximately 4633 acres. The original CE-10 analysis area was approximately 5673 acres. The smaller analysis area incorporates findings from the Mt. Randolph analysis while allowing fire managers to identify strategic burn units closer to values at risk with the ability to utilize natural barriers to fire spread as much as possible. This treatment area has been redrawn based on field reconnaissance to target areas closer to the communities at risk around the Heart Six Ranch. Within the 4633 acre analysis area, smaller target areas would be identified for prescribed burning with objectives for increasing aspen stand size and vigor, reducing fuel concentrations (jackpots) within conifer stands, and creating a mosaic of burned and unburned areas within the analysis area. Wildlife habitat improvement would also be incorporated into prescribed fire treatments through collaboration with wildlife and habitat specialists.

Wilderness Ranches Timber Sale mechanical thinning: This treatment area addresses hazardous fuels reduction on lands adjacent to and near the Wilderness Ranches Summer Home area, Evergreen Estates, Buffalo Run, Heart Six Ranch, and Buffalo Valley Ranch (T45N, R113W, Sec. 20-21). The analysis area measures approximately 391 acres. Three treatment units have been identified totaling 212 acres.

Burro Hill Timber Sale mechanical thinning and prescribed burning: This treatment area addresses hazardous fuels reduction and promotion of aspen on Burro Hill, south of the Buffalo Valley Road and north of the Buffalo Fork River (T45N, R113W, Sec. 24, 26-28). The analysis area measures approximately 1013 acres. Three treatment units totaling 114 acres remain to be thinned. A 406 acre prescribed burn was completed in the fall of 2007 adjacent to this project area and additional burning may be considered following mechanical treatments to stimulate aspen regeneration.

Box Creek Trailhead Post and Pole mechanical Thinning: Public green post and pole permits were sold in 2008 with 25 acres partially thinned along the Box Creek trailhead access road (T45N, R112W, Sec. 15). Additional posts and poles are available within this unit, and slash generated from removal activities will be evaluated for follow-up treatments to assure fuel reduction objectives are met.

Turpin Lodge Timber Sale mechanical Thinning: Timber harvest units designed to reduce tree density in order to minimize the possibility of crown fire have been located to the south of the Turpin Meadows Lodge compound on Rosies Ridge (T45N, R112W, Sec. 23). Treatment areas identified total 109 acres.

Blackrock Hatchet Timber Sale mechanical Thinning: Timber harvest units designed to reduce tree density in order to minimize the possibility of crown fire have been located south of the Blackrock Ranger Station near the Hatchet Resort, USFS Hatchet Campground and the Flagstaff road (T45N, R112W, Sec. 31. & R113W, T45N, Sec. 36). Treatment areas identified total 145 acres.

Lava Creek/Wilderness Ranches Prescribed Burn: Prescribed burn to reduce sagebrush continuity and flame lengths resulting from unplanned fire starts affecting the Wilderness Ranches subdivision (T45N, R113W, Sec. 19, 29-30). Project has an approved burn plan covering lands within Grand Teton National Park and the Bridger-Teton National Forest. The burn unit is 322 acres in size and firelines have been established to identify the unit boundary and contain prescribed fire within the project area.

A map of the proposed treatment areas is attached.

Preliminary Issues and Resource Concerns

The following is an initial list of potential issues for this project. These issues may be brought forward for detailed analysis and disclosure in the EA, they may be considered in refining the proposed actions, and they may drive alternatives to the proposed actions. Other issues may also arise during the scoping process.

1. Impacts from smoke generated from prescribed burning. This will be addressed in project specific burn plans.
2. There is a concern that there may be adverse impacts to soils from vegetation thinning and prescribed burning.
3. Adjacent homeowners may be concerned about the use of fire or mechanical vegetation management methods and the effect on current vegetation conditions. This will be addressed through public mailings and or meetings.
4. Effects to listed Threatened & Endangered & Sensitive plants and animals will be addressed in a Biological Assessment and Evaluation for the project. Project design criteria will address effects to T&E species.
5. Impacts to Cultural Resources. Treatment areas would be surveyed prior to any vegetation treatments to ensure damage to archeological sites and cultural sites of significance will not occur. State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) clearances have been obtained for most of the project areas identified in this area.
6. Impacts associated with recreational use in the area including permitted operations. This will be addressed through collaboration with USFS permitting officers and permittees.
7. Designated roadless areas in portions of the project areas may limit methods of implementation.
8. Forest stand health in relation to levels of insect and disease activities.
9. Impacts to populations of Forest Service management indicator species.
10. Specific to the Northern goshawk, a 32.5-acre nest buffer zone has been established around the nest verified within the Evergreen Estates area, along with a Post-fledgling Family Area (PFA) of approx. 420 acres. Within the nest buffer zone, specific silvicultural treatments may occur through close consultation with wildlife specialists. Within the PFA, treatments shall be restricted during the breeding season of 3/1 through 8/30.
11. Existing and desired visual qualities impacted by past and proposed timber harvest activities.
12. There is a concern that hydrologic resources, including riparian areas and wetlands, could be adversely affected by the proposed activities.

Decision Framework and Responsible Official

Responsible Official:

John Hagengruber
District Forest Ranger
Buffalo Ranger District
P.O. Box 278
Moran, WY 83013.

In the decision, the District Ranger will answer the following two questions based on the analysis:

1. Whether the proposed action will proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?
2. What mitigation measures, design features and monitoring requirements will the Forest Service apply to the proposed action?

Forest Plan Consistency

The project must be consistent with the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan of 1990.

The proposed Buffalo Valley Fuels Management project lies within Management Area 61 (Blackrock) as described in the 1990 Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (pp 262-263). Additional direction regarding fire and fuels management comes from the Fire Amendment EA completed in 2004.

Management Area 61 is further divided into Desired Future Condition (DFC) areas that have specific management direction to accomplish Forest goals and objectives. There are 7 DFC areas represented within this proposed project area. Applicable standards and guidelines will be reviewed during IDT meetings and included in the project design criteria. Management themes for the DFC's are summarized as follows:

- DFC 2A – **Non Motorized Recreation Areas** – An unroaded area managed to give a quiet, almost primitive recreation experience.
- DFC 3 – **River Recreation** – An area managed to give river-recreation and scenic recreation experience.
- DFC 7A - **Grizzly Bear Habitat Recovery Through Scheduled Timber Harvest** – An area managed to provide forage and security for the recovery of grizzly bears allowing for some resource development and roads.
- DFC 9A – **Developed and Administrative Sites** – An area managed for campgrounds, other noncommercial areas, and Forest Service administrative sites, including related roads and sites.
- DFC 9B - **Special Use Recreation Areas** – An area managed for permitted, private recreation homes, permittees, and others offering services to the public, including related roads and sites.

- DFC 10 - **Simultaneous Development of Resources, Opportunities for Human Experiences, and Support for Big-Game and a Wide Variety of Wildlife Species** – An area managed to allow for some resource development and roads while having no adverse and some beneficial effects on wildlife.
- DFC 12 – **Backcountry Big Game Hunting, Dispersed Recreation, and Wildlife Security Areas** -An area managed for high-quality habitat and escape cover, big-game hunting opportunities and dispersed recreation activities.

Comments

It is important that we understand your views regarding this proposal. Your comments will also help us determine if there are alternative ways to achieve the purpose and need. Although your comments are always welcome, comments received by April 30, 2009 will be most useful to this analysis. A subsequent opportunity to comment will be provided later in the process which complies with 36 CFR215.11 and individuals who comment at that time are eligible to appeal the project.

Comments or suggestions should be sent to:

Bridger-Teton National Forest
Buffalo Ranger District,
Attention: Mack McFarland
P.O. Box 278
Moran, WY 83013

Phone: (307)543-0113, (307)690-0573

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 15 days.

Submitting comments will ensure that you are included in the mailing list for further information. If you do not wish to comment at this time, but want to remain on the mailing list, please notify us.

"The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all

programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audio tape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer."

Map Attached.