



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service

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Scoping Information

Dog Valley Fuels Reduction and Ecosystem Enhancement Project

**Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
Carson Ranger District
Sierra County, California**

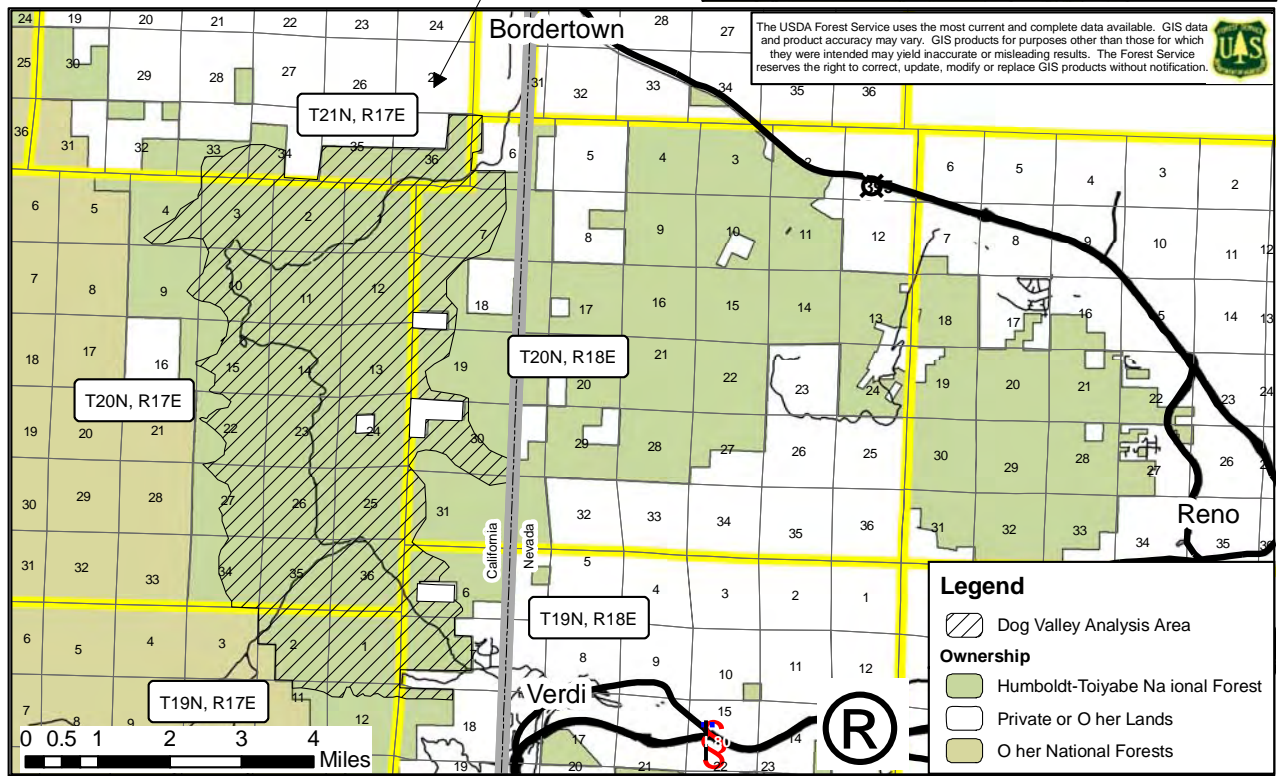
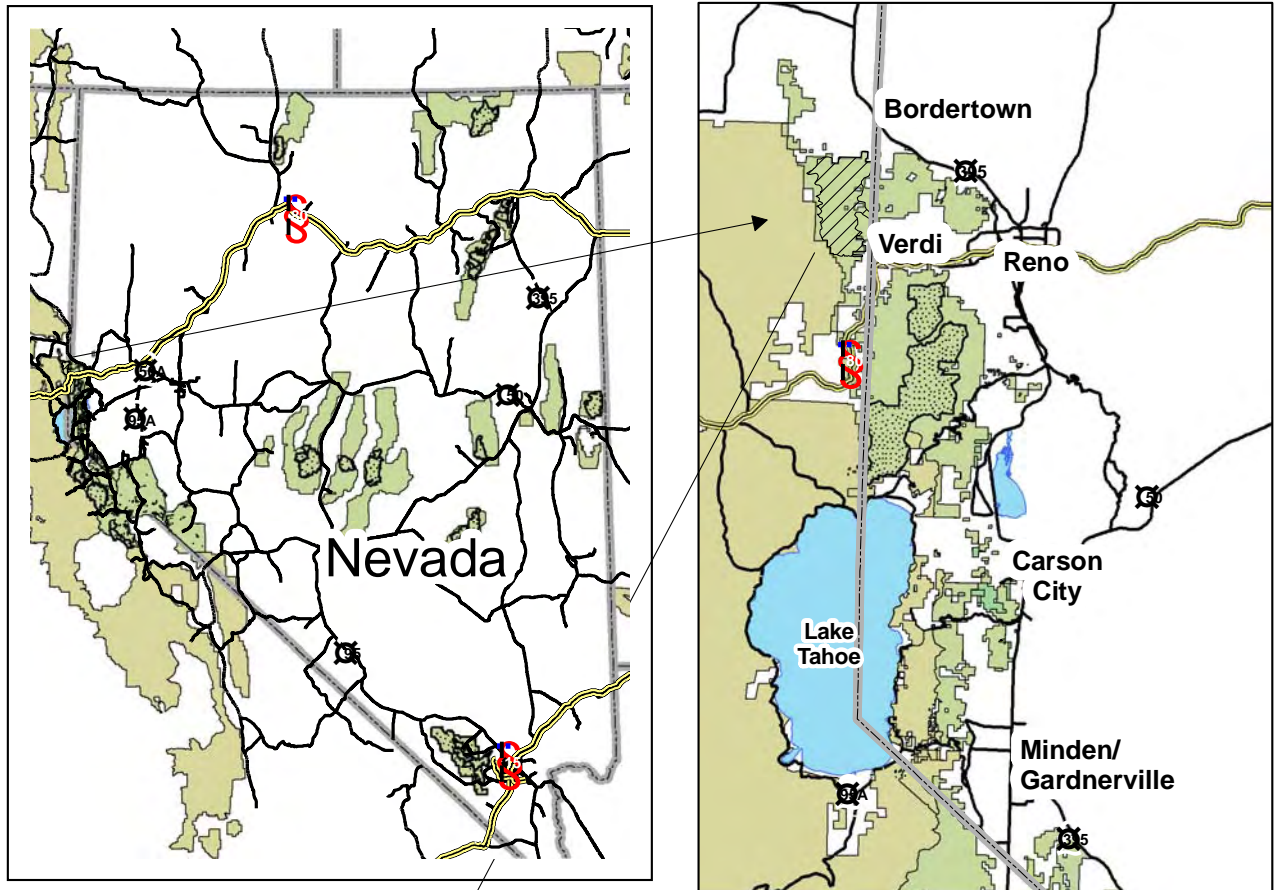
Comments Welcome

The Carson Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is proposing to reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildland fire, improve forest and meadow health, protect and improve tree plantations, and enhance and expand aspen stands in an area known as Dog Valley, California. Figure 1 is a vicinity map of the analysis area. This project, called the Dog Valley Fuels Reduction and Ecosystem Enhancement Project, has an approximately 16,000 acre analysis area. Of this, approximately 15,730 acres are National Forest System lands and 270 acres are private lands, treatments proposed in this document would only occur on National Forest System lands. The proposed action includes thinning trees and shrubs, removal of conifers from aspen stands and prescribed burning.

We welcome your comments on this proposal within the Dog Valley area. Written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication in the Reno Gazette Journal. For detailed information on how to provide comments please refer to the "Comment Process" section of this document.

This project is being completed under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003. Section 102 (a) of the HFRA authorizes hazardous fuels reduction projects on: (a) Federal land in wildland-urban interface areas or Federal lands in condition class three or condition class two within fire regimes I, II or II, in such proximity to a municipal water supply system or a stream feeding such a system within a municipal watershed that a

Figure 1 – Vicinity map



significant risk exists that a fire disturbance event would have adverse effects on the water quality of the municipal water supply or the maintenance of the system, including a risk to water quality posed by erosion following such a fire disturbance event.

Approximately 5,150 acres of the analysis area is located within the wildland urban interface (WUI) and 10,580 acres are located within the general forest in fire regime I and II and condition class two and three.

Background

The legal description for the analysis area is Township 19N, Range 17E, sections 1, 2, 11 and 12; Township 19N, Range 18E, sections 6, 7 and 18; Township 20N, Range 17E, sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35 and 36; Township 20N, Range 18E, sections 6, 7, 18, 19, 30 and 31; and Township 21N, Range 17E, sections 33, 34, 35 and 36.

The Dog Valley analysis area is comprised of conifer, shrub, meadow, and aspen vegetation types. There are approximately 8,150 acres of conifer; 6,750 acres of shrub; 680 acres of aspen and 400 acres of meadow within the analysis area. Approximately 20 acres around the Crystal mine are identified as barren land. The conifer areas are primarily eastside pine, which includes Jeffrey and ponderosa pine and white fir. Shrub species primarily include bitterbrush and sagebrush, with areas of manzanita, ceanothus and mountain mahogany. The plantations are included within the conifer and shrub vegetation types; the younger plantations are included as shrub vegetation because the conifer trees are currently overtopped by shrubs. The meadow areas contain grasses and sagebrush, as well as scattered conifers. The aspen within this area exists as either pure aspen stands with minimal regeneration or aspen stands slowly being eradicated through the encroachment of conifers. Many of the aspen stands in the analysis area are slowly declining in size and vigor due to conifer encroachment.

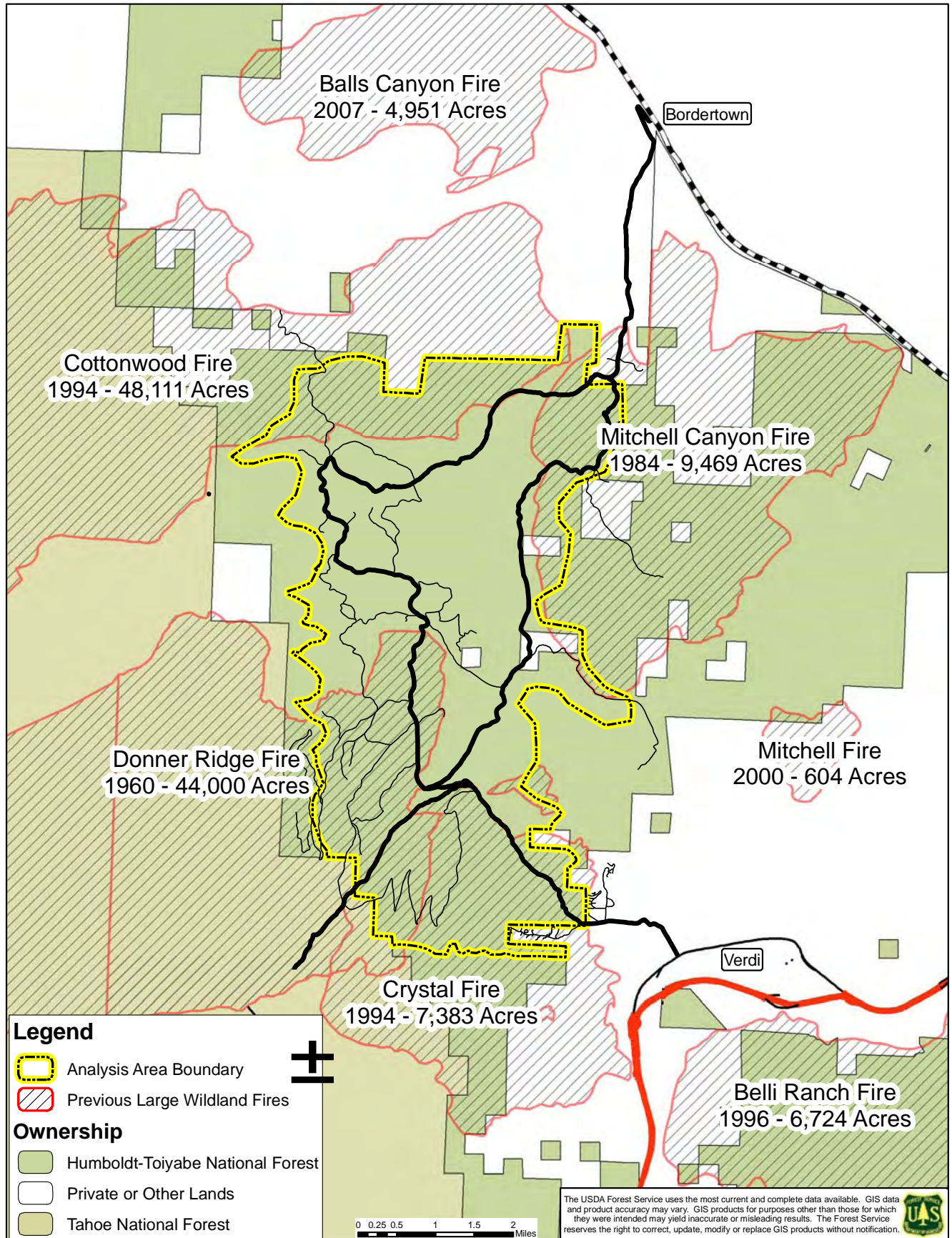
Several large wildland fires have occurred within and adjacent to the analysis area within the previous 50 years. Figure 2 is a map depicting previous large wildland fires with the year and acreage burned within and near the Dog Valley analysis area.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for this project includes:

- Reduce wildland fire risk to the Verdi and Bordertown communities and reduce fuel loading and ladder fuels in forested and shrub areas. Currently dense vegetative conditions with high fuel loading and excessive ladder fuels create a moderate to extreme risk of uncharacteristic catastrophic wildland fires.
- Improve aspen stands that are declining from encroaching conifer trees that shade out and replace sun-loving aspen. This action is needed to restore an ecosystem component that has diminished in size and vigor.

Figure 2 – Previous large wildland fires within and near the Dog Valley analysis area; their acreage and year burned.



- Improve the quantity and quality of mule deer forage and deer winter range. The need for improved forage would assist with providing wildlife with more forage and assist with improving the vitality of the Loyalton-Truckee interstate deer herd. In some areas, bitterbrush and sagebrush is old and decadent, providing reduced and poor quality forage.
- Improve meadow areas through the removal of encroaching conifers from within and adjacent to the meadows. The need for improved meadow habitat exists due to the existing conifer encroachment within and adjacent to the meadow.
- Improve watershed conditions and protect municipal watersheds from adverse effects of wildland fire on soil and water quality.
- Change conditions to reflect more natural or historical fire regimes.
- Provide defensible areas for firefighters to control and/or suppress future wildland fires.

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1986), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Record of Decision (January, 2004) and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in those plans. A desired condition is a statement describing a common vision for a specific land area. Following are the desired conditions for the WUI defense and threat zones, general forest, and Northern goshawk protected activity centers (PACs).

Desired conditions for wildland urban interface defense zones, which roughly extend ¼ mile out from communities, include: 1) Stands are fairly open and dominated primarily by larger, fire tolerant trees. 2) Surface and ladder fuel conditions are such that crown fire ignition is highly unlikely. 3) The openness and discontinuity of crown fuels, both horizontally and vertically, result in very low probability of sustained crown fire.

Desired conditions for wildland urban interface threat zones, which buffer the defense zone are described as: 1) Flame lengths at the head of the fire are less than 4 feet; 2) The rate of spread at the head of the fire is reduced to at least 50 percent of pre-treatment levels; 3) Hazards to firefighters are reduced by managing snag levels in locations likely to be used for control of prescribed fires and fire suppression consistent with safe practices guidelines. 4) Production rates for fire line construction are doubled from pre-treatment levels. 5) Tree density has been reduced to a level consistent with the site's ability to sustain forest health during drought conditions.

Desired conditions for general forest include: 1) Forest structure and function generally resemble pre-settlement conditions. 2) High levels of horizontal and vertical diversity exist within 10,000 acre landscapes. 3) Stands are composed of roughly even-aged vegetation groups, varying in size, species, composition, and structure. 4) Individual vegetation groups range from less than 0.5 to more than 5 acres in size. 5) Tree sizes range from seedlings to very large diameter trees. 6) Species composition varies by elevation, site productivity, and related environmental factors. 7) Multi-tiered canopies, particularly in older forests, provide vertical heterogeneity. 8) Dead trees, both standing and fallen, meet habitat needs of old-forest-associated species. 9) Where possible, areas

treated for fuels also provide for the successful establishment of early seral stage vegetation.

Desired conditions for Northern goshawk PACs include: Stands in each PAC have: 1) at least two tree canopy layers; 2) dominant and co-dominant trees with average diameters of at least 24 inches dbh; 3) at least 60 to 70 percent canopy cover; 4) some very large snags (greater than 45 inches dbh); and 5) snag and down woody material levels that are higher than average.

The Proposed Action

The proposed action is designed to reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildland fire by reducing forest fuel loading through treating fuels in the three fuel layers: crown or canopy fuels, ladder fuels and surface fuels. The proposed action is intended to improve watershed conditions through enhancement and expansion of existing meadows and aspen stands, improvement of tree vigor and plantation tree growth and survivability and improved wildlife habitat. The Forest Service proposes to meet the purpose and need within the Dog Valley Project area by implementing the following activities:

Our proposal is to treat approximately 14,000 acres; these initial treatments would be spaced throughout a ten year time period. Some areas would receive multiple treatments, such as thinning and underburning. Figure 3 is a map indicating the proposed action.

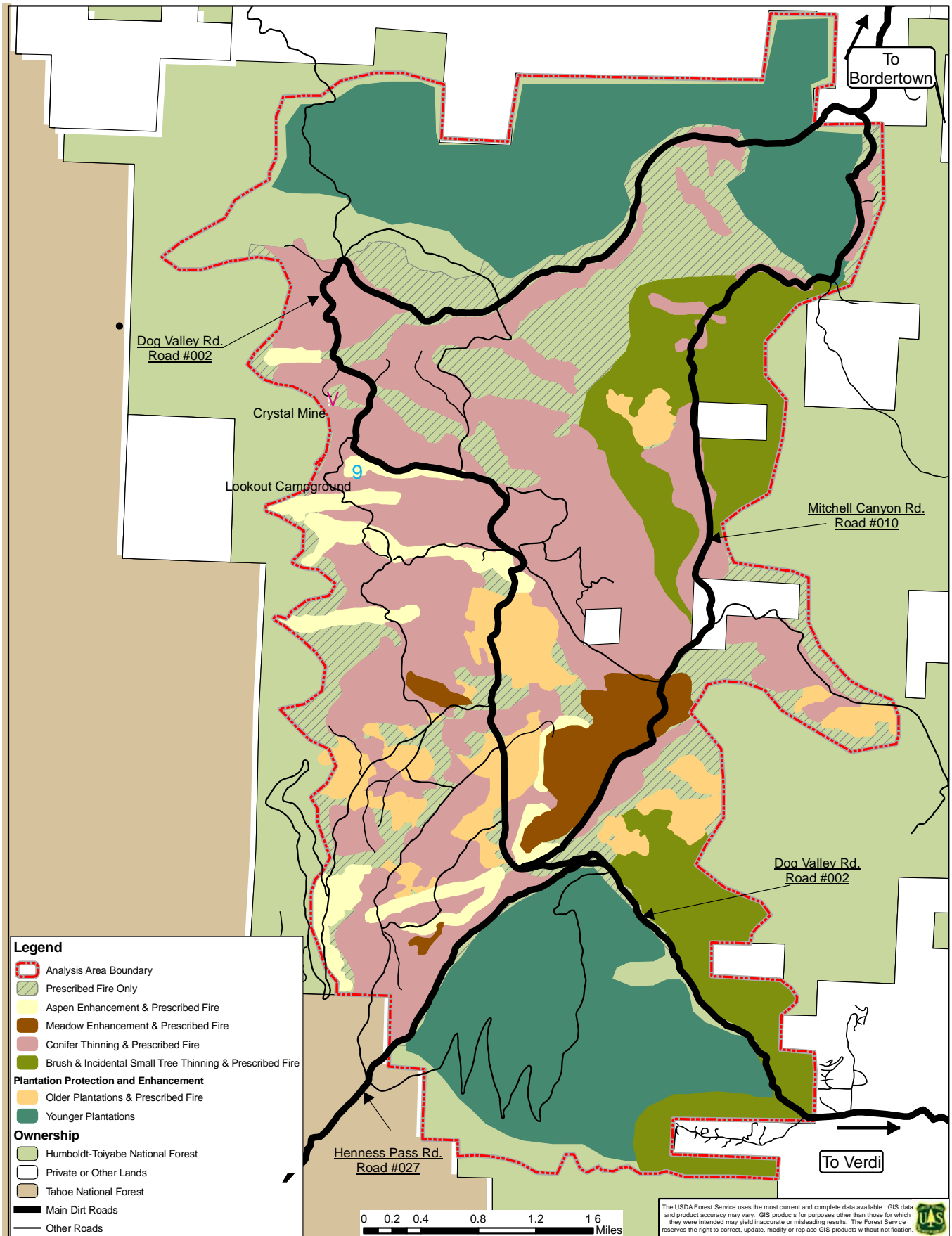
Prescribed Fire. On approximately 3,800 acres, prescribed understory fire only would be utilized to reduce shrub and small diameter trees densities and reduce fuels. Areas where prescribed understory fire only would occur are reflected in figure 3.

Aspen Enhancement. On approximately 550 acres, aspen stands would be enhanced and expanded through removal of encroaching conifers and stimulation of aspen regeneration. Treatment would include removal of most conifers up to 30" diameter at breast height (dbh) from within and approximately 100 feet (1 ½ times the tallest aspen tree) from the edge of the existing stand. Activity slash would not be piled or burned within aspen stands. If successful aspen regeneration, approximately 2,000 to 4,000 stems per acre, does not occur with conifer removal alone, prescribed fire would be utilized. Aspen enhancement would not occur within all stands in any single year. Approximately 150 acres of aspen within the Northern goshawk PAC would not be treated. Refer to figure 3 for areas where aspen enhancement would occur.

Meadow Enhancement. On approximately 400 acres, meadows would be enhanced through the removal of encroaching conifers from within and around the perimeter of the meadows. Treatment methods would include hand thinning and prescribed fire. Prescribed fire and seeding may be used in portions of the meadow to remove non-native grasses. Refer to figure 3 for areas where meadow enhancement would occur.

Conifer Thinning on Forested Areas. On approximately 4,000 acres, generally on slopes less than 30%, trees up to 24" dbh would be thinned from below, favoring fir species, mistletoe infected and insect infested trees for removal. This treatment would involve thinning from below by generally removing smaller trees that are most susceptible to wildfire and leaving the dominant tallest trees that are less susceptible to fire. Residual overstory trees would be irregularly spaced across the landscape and small

Figure 3 – Proposed Action



groups of typically three to six closely spaced overstory trees would be left to retain structural diversity. Commercial sawtimber and fuelwood and personal use fuelwood sales and hand crews would be utilized to complete treatments; multiple sales would be spaced out over a ten year period. Whole tree yarding, removing the bole, tops and limbs of trees, would be utilized where economically feasible. In areas where whole tree yarding is not feasible, activity slash would be lopped and scattered for underburning, piled or chipped. Activity slash would be a priority for burning. Where needed prescribed fire would be utilized after initial thinning to reduce brush densities. Refer to figure 3 for areas where conifer thinning would occur.

Brush and Incidental Small Tree Thinning. On approximately 1,800 acres, shrub and small trees densities would be reduced. Initial treatment methods would include mastication, hand cutting, piling, chipping and/or prescribed fire. These treatments would occur in areas adjacent to private property if underburning could not safely occur, in more inaccessible areas and in areas where existing vegetation is too dense to safely underburn as an initial treatment. Refer to figure 3 for areas where brush and incidental small tree thinning would occur.

Plantation Protection and Enhancement – There are two era’s of conifer tree plantations within the project area, described as older and younger plantations. Trees and brush within plantations would be thinned. Trees heavily infested with western dwarf mistletoe within plantations would be removed; conifer planting would occur where western dwarf mistletoe removal exceeds two acres. Heavily infested trees would be described as: dwarf mistletoe present within the bole of the tree or tree is at least 40 percent infested. Mature trees infested with western dwarf mistletoe within 75 feet of plantations would be removed as described below.

Older Plantations – The older plantations were planted in the late 1950’s and 1960’s after the Donner Ridge and other wildland fires. The trees in these areas are approximately 8” to 20” dbh, 10 to 40 feet tall and have a fairly dense understory brush component. Some plantation trees are also heavily infested with western dwarf mistletoe. These plantations have been thinned in the past and loss from fire due to the heavy brush component is a threat. On approximately 900 acres, brush and some small trees would be removed through a mixture of treatments, which could include tree removal, mastication, hand cutting and piling, lopping and scattering, chipping and/or prescribed burning. Refer to figure 3 for areas where older plantation protection and enhancement would occur.

Younger Plantations - The younger plantations were established in the 1980’s and 1990’s after the Mitchell Canyon, Crystal and Cottonwood wildland fires and are composed of natural conifer regeneration with interspersed conifer planted areas. In the past, the Forest Service has completed some prior thinning and brush release within these areas. The trees are generally 2 to 10 feet in height with dense brush and inter-tree competition. On approximately 2,500 acres over-dense trees would be thinned and brush removed. Treatment methods would include hand thinning, chipping and mastication. No prescribed fire would be used due to the risk of high seedling mortality. Refer to figure 3 for areas where younger plantation protection and enhancement would occur.

Maintenance. Maintenance would include repeated treatments to remove ladder and surface fuels and maintain the treated areas. Maintenance may occur on any areas that received initial treatment and would be based on monitoring results. Maintenance may include brush and small tree mastication, invasive weed treatments (hand-pulling), hand cutting and piling, chipping, removal and/or prescribed fire. Maintenance may occur within three years of the initial treatment and would continue, as needed, for at least 20 years.

Design features within the proposed action include:

- All Federal, State and local regulations pertaining to prescribed burning would be followed. A Region 4 approved burn plan would be completed and followed.
- Archeological sites would be flagged and avoided during project implementation. Trees would be directionally felled away from identified archeological sites, temporary roads and skid trails would avoid archeological sites and no slash piles would occur in identified archeological sites.
- Where available, three of the largest snags per acre would be retained. Large woody debris would be retained, at least 3 pieces per acre, greater than 12" dbh or the largest available.
- No treatment activities would occur in PACs.
- In aspen stands and plantation areas, harvest activities would not occur April to July during migratory bird breeding season.
- Rare plant populations would be flagged and avoided.
- Only native seed mix, tested as weed free, would be used.
- Generally, ground based equipment would operate on slopes less than 35% (30% on decomposed granite soils), except for pitches of 150 feet or less. However, ground based operations may occur on slopes up to 50%; these would be designed on a unit by unit basis only after soil stability, soil rock content and the location of the steep slope in relation to the remaining portions of the treatment unit have been determined to be appropriate by the Forest Service.
- Equipment exclusion zones would be established within 50 feet of a seasonal stream and 100 feet of perennial streams, except for equipment crossing areas. No trees would be removed where they provide stream bank stability and ground based equipment would stay on established stream crossings.
- Pile burning would be minimized in riparian conservation areas and would not occur within aspen stands.
- Prescribed fires are subject to permitting by the Northern Sierra Air Quality Management District (NSAQMD). For each prescribed fire, the Forest Service would have contingency plans identified to reduce smoke emissions. Contingency plans shall be implemented when the NSAQMD determines that acceptance limits of smoke are exceeded, and/or the Forest Service anticipated that the prescription for a prescribed fire would be exceeded. When mechanical fuels treatment

operations occur, dirt roads would be monitored for air quality compliance with the standards set forth by the NSAQMD.

- Equipment would be washed and inspected prior to entering National Forest System lands to remove any soil and debris that may harbor noxious weed seeds.
- Known occurrences of noxious weeds would be managed. If road surface material is needed to repair roads, sources would be inspected and determined to be weed free.
- Skid trails would be designated on ground based skidding units and rehabilitated after use. Multiple pass skid trails would be located a minimum of 100 feet apart except where they converge at landings.

Public Involvement

This project has been posted on the Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in 2008 and 2009. Further information about this project can be found on our website located at www.fs.fed.us/r4/htnf/projects.

The project was presented to the Washoe County Citizens Advisory Board meeting on May 1, 2008.

On October 29, 2008, the analysis area was visited and the proposed actions reviewed by the Sierra County Fire Safe and Watershed Council.

A public open house meeting to present this project is scheduled for Thursday, March 19th 2009 from 6:00 to 8:00 pm at the Verdi Elementary School, 250 Bridge Street, Verdi, Nevada.

Comment Process

The Forest Service encourages your comments on this proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the responsible official should consider in reaching a decision.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of this notice in the Reno Gazette Journal. Comments must be submitted to: District Ranger, Carson Ranger District, 1536 South Carson Street, Carson City, NV 89701 or fax 775-884-8199. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-carson@fs.fed.us. Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

This hazardous fuel reduction project is being prepared under the provisions of the HFRA. It is subject to the 36 CFR Part 218, Subpart A Predecisional Administrative Review Process.

Individuals and organizations who have submitted specific written comments related to the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project during scoping or other public

involvement opportunities may file an objection following completion of the environmental assessment during the predecisional administrative review process.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project, will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information please visit our website at www.fs.fed.us/r4/htnf/projects/#carson or contact Amanda Brinnand at 775-884-8142.

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