

Greetings:

We are seeking comments on a proposal to precommercially thin up to 900 acres of overstocked ponderosa pine plantations on the Norwood Ranger District of the Uncompahgre National Forest. This letter and attached maps provide you with detailed information about the purpose and need, the Proposed Action, and decision framework. Comments concerning this proposal must be received by the Forest Service on or before Monday, June 30, 2008. Please refer to the "Public Involvement" section for additional information about submitting comments.

## **BACKGROUND**

During the 1970s and the 1980s, approximately 3000 acres of ponderosa pine plantations were established on the Uncompahgre Plateau as part of a nation-wide effort to restock open stands. Following extensive mechanical site preparation to eliminate oak competition, ponderosa pine seedlings were machine planted at an approximate spacing of 8 feet by 8 feet (about 680 trees per acre). Plantation survival rates have been good, and presently, the plantations are overstocked. In the autumn of 2007, stocking survey plots were taken within the plantations in the proposed project area. Data from the plots indicate that there are about 500 trees per acre in these plantations. The dense condition of the plantations is one factor contributing to a decrease in tree growth.

The proposal under consideration involves a precommercial thinning of up to twelve ponderosa pine plantations totaling approximately 900 acres. The proposed activity is intended to improve the vigor, health, and economic value of the remaining trees within the project area. The project, known as Ease Precommercial Thinning, is located in the in the Sanborn Park vicinity of the Uncompahgre Plateau and is approximately 6 air miles north of Norwood, Colorado. See attached maps.

The management emphasis for the Ease Precommercial Thinning Project, as identified in the Amended Land and Resource Management Plan for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests (the Forest Plan), is wood fiber production and utilization on suited timber lands (7A) and livestock grazing (6B).

## **PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION**

The purpose and need for this proposal is to move the twelve overstocked plantations within the Ease Precommercial Thinning project area toward a vigorous state by applying a precommercial thinning treatment to these stands. Thinning will fulfill the need to provide more growing space for the trees in these overstocked plantations. Thinning will improve the remaining trees' growth potential and reduce their susceptibility to insect and disease infestation. Opening up these stands through a precommercial thinning will also benefit both big game and livestock by allowing more light to reach the ground thus creating favorable growing conditions for forage. This project will be a starting step towards the long term process of improving each stand's survivability in a wildfire

through the break up of the current horizontal and vertical continuity of the fuels. Thinning these stands will provide economic opportunities for the local economy through a series of service contracts used to implement the proposed action and through the sale of posts and firewood after the stands have been thinned. Additionally, through subsequent, long term silvicultural treatments, these stands will provide future commercial forest products to local communities and industries.

### **PROPOSED ACTION**

I propose to utilize service contracts to accomplish the goals of the Purpose and Need for Action within five years of my decision. The first service contract is planned to be awarded in the summer of 2008. These goals are consistent with the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (1991, Amended):

The Proposed Action involves the precommercial thinning on National Forest lands of up to twelve overstocked ponderosa pine plantations totaling approximately nine hundred acres. The project is in the Sanborn Park vicinity which is located on the Uncompahgre Plateau. The project is within Sections 19, 20, 22, 26, 27, 30, and 35 of T46N, R12W; Section 31 of T46N, R11W; Section 6 of T45N, R11W; and Sections 1, 2, and 5 of T45N, R12W, New Mexico Principal Meridian, Montrose County, Colorado. The stands are all accessed by National Forest System Roads. Stands 1 and 11 are located off National Forest System Road (NFSR) 513, locally known as the Craig Point Road. Stands 2, 3, and 12 are located on NFSR 530 (Sanborn Park Road). Stands 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are accessed by NFSR 537 (Horsefly Road). Stands 9 and 10 are accessed by NFSR 515 (Deadhorse Road). Please see the attached maps.

Stand specific silvicultural prescriptions will designate the smallest and least thrifty ponderosa pine for removal. The stands will be thinned at an approximate spacing of 17 feet x 17 feet to reduce their stocking levels to about 150 trees per acre with an average leave tree diameter at breast height of 5 inches. Only chainsaws will be utilized to cut the trees designated for removal. The slash generated from this project will be treated through lopping and scattering. Slash will be lopped to a depth of 18 inches or less to facilitate natural decomposition. Slash treatment will be accomplished concurrently with the thinning of each stand. The boles of cut trees may be offered for sale as fence posts and firewood to further help reduce slash. Only existing roads will be used to access the stands in this project.

### **DECISION FRAMEWORK**

At this time, I plan to document the effects of this proposed action in a Decision Memo (DM).

The proposed action falls under Category 6, in section 31.2 of the Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook (FSH 1909.15). Categories of actions within this section of the handbook may be excluded from documentation in an EIS or an EA but do require a project or case file and Decision Memo. Category 6 allows “timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service Level D, FSH 7709.56)”.

I will be the Responsible Official. Given the purpose and need, I will review the Proposed Action and mitigation measures in order to make my decision on whether or not to proceed with implementing the proposed action. A Legal Notice of Decision will be published at that time in the Telluride Daily Planet newspaper.

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

This opportunity to comment serves as scoping for this project under the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act. The opportunity to comment on the Proposed Action ends 15 days following the date of publication of the legal notice of opportunity to comment in the Telluride Daily Planet. After receiving your comments, we will identify and analyze the issues raised and finalize a Proposed Action. Plans are to complete the NEPA analysis and make a decision whether or not to implement the Proposed Action in early July 2008 and implement the decision in August 2008.

Comments may be submitted as follows and must be received by close of business on Monday, June 30, 2008: Written comments via the U.S. Postal Service or hand delivered:

<b>Physical Street Address</b>	<b>U.S. Postal Service Address</b>
USDA. Forest Service	USDA Forest Service
Norwood Ranger District	Norwood Ranger District
ATTN: Ease Precommercial Thin	ATTN: Ease Precommercial Thin
1150 Forest	P.O. Box 388
Norwood, Colorado 81423	Norwood, Colorado 81423
<b>Written Comments via e-mail:</b>	
To: <a href="mailto:comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-norwood@fs.fed.us">comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-norwood@fs.fed.us</a>	
Subject: Ease Precommercial Thin	
<b>Written Comments via facsimile:</b>	
(970) 327-4854	
Attention: Jim Tambling, Ease Precommercial Thin	
<b>Oral Comments via telephone or in person:</b>	
Jim Tambling (970) 327-4261, extension 4357	
USDA Forest Service	
1150 Forest	
Norwood, CO 81423	

In accordance with 36 CFR 215.11(a), individuals or organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must comment during this 15 day comment period and provide the following

information: submitter's name and address, title of the Proposed Action, specific substantive comments on the Proposed Action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision, and signature or other verification of identity. Those submitting electronic comments (fax or e-mail) may submit a scanned signature. Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone or in person, or if during non-business hours, must be at an official agency function, which is designed to elicit public comment.

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; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decisions under 36 CFR Part 215. 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 requestor 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 requestor that the comments may be re-submitted with or without name and address within 15 days.

Office hours for hand delivery are 8:00 am to 5:00 pm weekdays in the Norwood Ranger District office. Those people responding to this scoping letter will be included on the mailing list for future information related to this project.

I appreciate your interest and involvement in the management of the Norwood Ranger District. If you would like more information concerning this proposal, please feel free to contact Jim Tambling, Forester, at this office. Our telephone number is (970) 327-4261. Or, you may email Jim at [jtamblng@fs.fed.us](mailto:jtamblng@fs.fed.us)

Sincerely,

/s/ Judy Schutz

JUDY SCHUTZ  
District Ranger