

DECISION MEMO

Pole Creek Prescribed Burn Project

**Townsend Ranger District
Helena National Forest
Broadwater County, Montana
DECISION**

It is my decision to use prescribed fire on about 140 acres of grasslands in the Pole Creek area of the Elkhorn Wildlife Management Unit. Livestock will not graze the pasture where the units are located one growing season (spring through summer until seed set) prior to and after burning. Noxious weed monitoring and any needed herbicide treatments will occur before and after the prescribed burn. Trail 115 will be closed to public use during the actual burning.

The project is in Forest Plan Management Area E-3, which emphasizes elk calving and summer range. Management direction for this area includes the use of prescribed fire to maintain and enhance the quality of the habitat. This project will revitalize key grasslands on the Pole Creek allotment, which in turn will take pressure off areas that are currently heavily grazed by elk and livestock.

This project is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or an Environmental Analysis because it is consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) category 31.2 6d., "Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor."

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances, which may significantly affect the environment. There are no threatened, endangered, or sensitive species or their designated critical habitat in the project area. There are no floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. Although National Forest System lands in the Elkhorn Mountains are administered as a "Wildlife Management Unit", this designation occurs relative to the Forest Plan (National Forest Management Act) and is not a Congressional designation. The project area is not in an inventoried roadless area or a research natural area. The project area does not include American Indian religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties.

I considered the 15 comments submitted during public scoping in my decision. The comments included widespread support for the project. Several comments were made concerning noxious weed spread. One comment put forward several questions about how the trails in the area would be managed during burning, what we considered a "growing season", and what provisions we would have for ensuring the fire did not head for the forest. These issues were addressed in the project design and the mitigation measures.

Other past, present, potential projects in the Elkhorns were reviewed for possible contributions to cumulative effects. No other projects, including the North Elkhorns Vegetation Project near Helena, have the potential to cumulatively affect the Pole Creek

area. These two areas are independent of each other in terms of elk herds, transportation systems, and livestock allotments.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Townsend Ranger District mailed a scoping document to those with previous interest in the Elkhorn Mountains and specifically burning projects on March 13, 2003. A news release was also sent to both the Helena Independent Record and the Townsend Star. A total of 15 written comments were received within the comment period. These are available for review in the project file at the Townsend Ranger District. The Townsend Ranger District also met with the area biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and with the livestock permit holders on the Pole Creek Allotment to help identify the units and appropriate mitigation measures. The original decision was signed on April 16, and because of a legal change relative to a case called "Heartwood II", was subject to a 30-day public review period and the appeal process. A legal notice in the Helena Independent Record initiated the review period on May 4, 2003. No comments were received in the 30-day period.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This decision is consistent with the Helena Forest Plan as required by the National Forest Management Act. The project was designed in conformance with forest plan standards and incorporates appropriate Forest Plan guidelines for Management Area E-3 (Helena Forest Plan, pages III/87-III/89).

IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

The project would be implemented during the fall of 2003 or spring 2004.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to administrative review under 36 CFR Part 215. Any appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14 (Content Of An Appeal, Including Reasons For Appeal), and must be filed with the US Forest Service, Appeals Deciding Officer (RFO) at the address below within 45 days after the date of the notice of this decision is published in the Helena Independent Record.

USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
Attn: Appeals Deciding Officer
PO Box 7669
Missoula, MT 59807

If no appeal is received, Forest Service implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five (5) business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of the appeal disposition.

CONTACT PERSON

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Jodie Canfield, Elkhorn Coordinator, or Tracy Schilling, Rangeland Specialist, (406)-266-3425, Townsend Ranger District, 415 South Front St., Townsend MT 59644.

/s/ Michael Cole

MICHAEL L. COLE
Townsend District Ranger

Signed on June 11, 2003