



File Code: 5150

Date:

Dear Interested Party:

The Medicine Wheel/Paintrock Ranger District is soliciting comments and concerns for the Bench Restoration Project on the south face of Shell Canyon, T 53, R 89 W, in portions or all of sections 7 through 34, Bighorn County, Wyoming. Your comments and suggestions are needed and encouraged.

A heavy infestation of Douglas-fir beetles has killed several hundred acres of mature forest in Shell Canyon; more acres adjacent to the Shell Canyon Visitor Center are at risk. Approximately 80 percent of the trees have been killed by the beetle infestation. As the infestation moves up the canyon, values such as water quality, campgrounds, cabins, lodges, mature dry Douglas-fir ecosystems, and long-term forest diversity are at risk.

Collaboration with the public, private landowners, conservation groups, county government, tribal governments, resort owners, and the Forest Service is underway. There is great interest in reducing the risk of a large, high intensity/high severity wildfire, and a local commitment to achieving a sustainable ecosystem structure.

This collaboration has guided the development of a proposal to treat these concerns. The proposed vegetation management treatments could include timber harvest, prescribed fire or other fuels reduction methods, or a combination of treatment methods. Project alternatives will be determined and environmental consequences analyzed during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process initiated by this scoping letter.

The purpose and need for the proposal includes:

- Reducing public safety concerns caused by hazard trees around high use recreation sites, buildings, and facilities
- Creating defensible space adjacent to structures
- Reducing fuels and removing beetle-killed trees
- Improving live-tree resistance to beetles
- Reestablishing native fire-resistant plants such as aspen
- Maintaining visually pleasing on-site conditions
- Reducing fuel loading and fire risk
- Reducing the risk from large scale fire events in areas where there are homes and administrative sites

Four types of approaches to meet these objectives are listed below. See the enclosed map for specific locations.

- 1) The proposal in stands 5, 11, 14, and 18 is to leave approximately one-third of the existing Douglas-fir stand. Seventy percent of the remaining trees would be smaller trees,



most less than 10 inches in diameter. The remainder would be larger trees, most over 25 inches in diameter. Smaller Douglas-fir is less susceptible to Douglas-fir beetle, and would respond better to this type of thinning. The large trees would provide a seed source to repopulate the area after the treatments. Branches, deadfall, and slash would be piled and burned in these areas.

- 2) In stands 2, 3, 7, 12, and 13 the proposed treatment is to remove all the Douglas-fir and regenerate the suppressed aspen understory. This is expected to release any remaining small understory trees, including Douglas-fir and spruce. To reduce fuels further, these areas would be broadcast burned.
- 3) The proposal in stands 4 and 6 is to remove 80 percent of the Douglas-fir, leaving the youngest and least susceptible trees. This would provide a firebreak between the stands in the lower canyon and the structures up the canyon. Branches, deadfall, and slash in Unit 4 would be piled and burned; Unit 6 would be broadcast burned.
- 4) In stands 1, 8, 9, 13, 16, and 17, the proposed treatments would remove the dead and decadent trees, separate the tree crowns, and remove the ladder fuels to minimize the risk of wildfire and provide for health and safety concerns adjacent to the special use recreation residence. The treatment would occur within a mixed Douglas-fir and spruce stand. Spruce beetle is also active within these Units. Removals would target the large dead first, followed by the small ladder fuels, smaller diameter trees, and brush.

To complete these actions, approximately six miles of temporary road would be needed. The road would not become a permanent part of the Forest's developed road system; it would be reclaimed upon completion of the project. To mitigate soils and slopes concerns, stands 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, and 18 are being designed for helicopter yarding operations.

Two alternatives are being developed. Under the no action alternative, current management would continue and no vegetative manipulation projects would occur. The area would be left undisturbed for the progression of Douglas-fir beetle to run its course. The second alternative, the proposed action, would authorize the project as proposed. An additional alternative will be analyzed if issues and concerns related to the proposed area are identified and could not be mitigated.

We have identified the following preliminary issues:

- Fuel accumulations and wildland fire risk
- Human health and safety from hazard trees
- Damage to facilities from falling trees and wildland fire
- Timing of harvest to eliminate conflicts with other activities
- Effects of treatment on wildlife in and around the area
- Effects of treatments on cultural resources
- Effects of treatment on soil

The decision to be made is whether to implement the proposed action or an alternative to the proposed action. The decision could also include what mitigation measures need to be applied to the proposed action. Based on public comment from this scoping notice and environmental analysis, the Forest Service must determine whether significant issues or concerns exist. If there are significant issues, they will be addressed in the analysis and in the eventual decision.

There is an urgency to complete this project quickly, given the heavy fuel loadings, values at risk, and the added jeopardy of insect infestation. The target date for a decision on this project is winter 2004.

The environmental effects analysis for this project is expected to be categorically excluded from further documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement, based on Forest Service Handbook 1909.15; ID 1909.15-2003-1, Section 31.2 category 10. This category addresses hazardous fuels reduction activities not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods not to exceed 1,000 acres.

The public is provided this opportunity to identify and submit issues and concerns they feel the Forest Service should address. To be most helpful, written comments need to be submitted no later than October 25, 2004. Comments should be as specific as possible to assist us in the analysis. Anyone wishing to comment, or be placed on the project mailing list, must respond to this project notice. Send comments to:

Bench Restoration Project
Attn: Scott Hill
Bighorn National Forest
2013 Eastside 2nd St.
Sheridan, WY 82801
Phone (307) 674-2600

Electronic mail comments may be submitted to:

Mailroom_r2_bighorn@fs.fed.us, with "Bench Restoration Project, Attn: Scott Hill" in the subject line.

To be considered valid, all comments must include your name, mailing or email address, organization represented, and the title of the project (Bench Restoration Project) for which the comment is being submitted.

Hand-delivered comments may be submitted to the above address during business hours, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm MDT. All comments on this proposed action are open for public inspection and become part of the official record.

For additional information, contact me at (307) 548-6541, 604 E. Main, Lovell, WY 82431, or Scott Hill at the above address or telephone number.

Again, your comments are important to the success of this project.

Sincerely,

DAVID SISK
District Ranger

Enclosure