

Finding of No Significant Impact And Decision Notice

Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale Environmental Assessment

*USDA-Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region
Rio Grande National Forest
Conejos Peak Ranger District
Conejos County, Colorado*

INTRODUCTION

This document describes the decision I have made on what actions to take in the Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale analysis area on the Conejos Peak Ranger District of the Rio Grande National Forest. This document also describes my reasons for my decision and my finding of no need to prepare an environmental impact statement. This finding is in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The decision and finding are based on an environmental assessment of the proposed activities and alternatives to those actions.

The Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale analysis area is located approximately 46 miles west of the community of Antonito, Colorado. The area is located primarily within the Grouse Creek drainage of the Rio de los pinos on the extreme south end of the Conejos Peak Ranger District. The total area of land in the analysis area is approximately 1,100 acres. The direction and proposals contained in this document applies to National Forest System lands within the Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale analysis area.

The Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale environmental assessment was conducted by an interdisciplinary team. The assessment describes the purpose and need for the action, the alternatives considered, and those persons and agencies consulted. Issues which drive the analysis are forest health, soil stability, and reforestation potential. Alternatives considered were:

Alternative 1: No Action

Alternative 2: Salvage harvest between 635 to 650 acres of timber using sanitation salvage harvest for approximately 1.75 MMBF of timber volume, replace two culverts within the sale area road system and stabilize approximately 2 miles of existing road surface.

Alternative 3: Harvest approximately 635 acres by felling live, un-infested spruce trees to absorb beetles as they emerge from infested trees (intermediate harvest). These trees then be harvested for an approximate .73 MMBF of timber volume. Road work includes replacing two culverts within the sale area road system and stabilize approximately 2 miles of existing road surface.

Alternative 4: Harvest between 635 to 650 acres of timber using a shelterwood harvest for approximately 2.6 MMBF of timber volume, replace two culverts

within the sale area road system and stabilize approximately 2 miles of existing road surface.

The selected activities are part of the implementation of the Rio Grande Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). These activities will occur within Management Area (MA) 5.13 – forest products, and may be implemented within the next year.

Forest Plan direction for Management Area 5.13 emphasizes “a full range of activities, with an emphasis on the production of commercial wood products”. This Prescription is applied in areas where the potential to grow timber is high, and where the harvest of commercial timber is intended. Operations are focused on wood production. The intent is to maintain suitable forested areas with commercially valuable species at ages, densities, and sizes that allow growth rates and stand health conducive to providing a sustained yield of forest products. The area has a well-developed transportation system. Wildfires are suppressed and insect and disease populations are maintained at endemic levels, to protect commercial forest products (Forest Plan page IV-27).

The specific objectives of this project are to: 1) reduce the impacts of insects and disease on lands designated for timber production 2) sustain healthy plant communities with a variety of plants for wildlife food and cover, 3) provide sawtimber to industry and fuelwood products for commercial and personal use

The Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale Environmental Assessment is available for public review at the Conejos Peak Ranger District, 15571 County Road T.5, La Jara, CO 81140, (719) 274-8971, the Rio Grande National Forest Supervisors Office, 1803 West Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144 , (719) 852-5941 and the Saguache Ranger District Office, PO box 67, Saguache, Colorado, 81149, (719) 655-2547. A copy of this document is available by request.

DECISION

Based on the results of the analysis documented in the Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale Environmental Assessment and the analysis file, it is my decision to implement Alternative 2 and the associated mitigation measures found in Chapter 2, pages 7 through 9 of the Grouse Creek Salvage Timber Sale Environmental Assessment.

The activities that will be implemented are listed below:

Between 635 to 650 acres will be treated with timber harvesting sanitation salvage harvest.

15 acres of optional area will be considered for skyline harvest system if purchaser opts to do so.

Between 25 and 40 acres of wet/steep areas will be treated using Trap and Treat methods.

Two culverts will be replaced and road bed stabilization will take place on approximately 2 miles of existing road.

Seed collection and replanting of approximately 116 acres if needed to meet stocking standards.

REASONS FOR THE DECISION

In making my decision I considered how well each alternative met the objectives and what the environmental effects would be. The conclusions for selecting alternative 2 are:

The decision has the greatest impact on reducing insect and disease within the project area

The decision provides wood products for local industries and economies.

The decision has the greatest effect on creating healthy plant communities.

The decision improves wildlife habitat by providing denning habitat for Lynx.

The decision is consistent with the management area prescription within the project area as identified in the Forest Plan.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT

Forest Plan Consistency

The actions are consistent with the Forest Plan. This decision is consistent with the forest wide standards and guidelines (pages III-4 through III-26 and III-35) for: hydrologic function, riparian areas, sediment control, soil productivity, timber management, wildlife management, fire management, and heritage resources. The projects are feasible and reasonable. The projects meet the plan's overall direction of protecting the environment while producing goods and services.

Suitability for Timber Production

All the land that will be harvested is suitable for timber production. Technology and standards and guidelines ensure that timber production can occur without irreversible resource damage to soil productivity or watershed conditions. The lands can be restocked within five years. On-the-ground examinations of the harvest stands have confirmed that conditions are sufficiently similar to previously treated stands in the area. The previously treated stands have restocked within five years through interplanting, it is likely the new harvest areas will also respond with adequate stocking, or will be replanted with seedlings grown in a nursery from seed stock collected on the site.

Vegetation Manipulation

The actions of this project which alter vegetation comply with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b). My reasons for making this determination follow:

1. The action alternatives are well suited to the goals stated in the Forest Plan. Vegetative manipulation as a means to these goals is discussed in the Forest Plan pages II-1 through II-6.
2. The technology exists to keep these lands adequately stocked within five years as discussed under Suitability for Timber Production in this Decision Notice.
3. Economic values were reviewed in all alternatives. Proposed harvests were not chosen primarily for the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber. Cost comparisons and efficiencies were always a factor during the development of alternatives. The range of management practices the alternatives display were determined by a combination of factors including protection of other resource values, management to achieve Forest Plan objectives for vegetation composition, management of habitat for wildlife species, and commodity output needs.
4. These alternatives were developed after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands. Effects of seed trees, shelter trees, cavity nesting trees, adjacent openings, edge effect, wildlife habitat distribution and accessibility were areas of discussion. These effects are documented throughout this environmental assessment or within the project file.
5. The alternatives developed would avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources through location of the harvest units and timing of activity as outlined in the Forest Plan pages III-4 through III-11.
6. The alternatives developed would provide the desired conditions on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields. These considerations are discussed more fully under the environmental consequences section of the Environmental Assessment and the Biological Evaluation.
7. The alternatives developed are practical in terms of transportation, and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging and administration. These projects are similar to those which have been practiced, and are currently being practiced, on the Rio Grande National Forest and the Conejos Peak Ranger District.

Even-aged Management

Where used, even-aged management is the appropriate silvicultural system to meet the objectives and requirements of the Forest Plan.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have reviewed the significance criteria of both context and intensity as defined by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) 40 CFR 1508.27, the environmental consequences of the alternative selected for implementation, the referenced documents, and maps of the project. **Based on this information and my experience with similar practices and projects I conclude that these projects, either singly, or in combination, do not constitute a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination is based on the following factors:**

A. CONTEXT

The setting of the proposal is localized with implications only for the immediate area. The physical and biological effects are limited to the project area and immediately adjacent areas. These are analyzed in the Environmental Assessment in Chapter 3, Present Condition and Effects of the Alternatives. All actions are consistent with the Rio Grande National Forest Plan and all environmental effects are within the range disclosed in the Final EIS for the Rio Grande National Forest Plan.

The types of activities selected to be implemented are similar to activities which have occurred in the past in this area or areas similar to it, and the amount of management activity is similar to historic levels of activities in the area.

There are no known significant irreversible resource commitments or any significant irretrievable losses of timber production, wildlife habitats, soil productivity, or water quality.

B. INTENSITY

1. Both adverse and beneficial impacts of the selected alternative are discussed in Chapter 3 of the environmental assessment (E.A. Chapter 3, pages 7-12, 14-16, 18-20, 22-26, 28-30, 31-36, 38-40, 41-45). There are no significant adverse or beneficial effects of the selected alternative.
2. The assessment describes the risks associated with each of the alternatives. Public health and safety will be minimally affected by the selected alternative (E.A. Chapter 3, pages 31-33).
3. The analysis identified no significant impacts to any unique areas (E.A. Chapter 3, pages 25, 34-36).
4. Based on consultation with others, on the level of response to the proposed project by the public, on past experiences with similar projects, and on the Environmental Assessment I have determined there are no highly controversial effects. This does not mean that implementation of the project will be acceptable to all people, because some people will neither agree or be pleased with the decision. However,

the effects of the project are not likely to be a source of substantial controversial scientific disagreement (E.A. Chapter 1, pages 2-5,).

5. This action is similar to many past actions, both in the analysis area and adjacent areas. Effects of this action will be similar to the effects of many past actions. Based on this past experience and the environmental analysis, there would not be any highly uncertain effects that involve unique or unknown risks (E.A.Chapter 3)
6. None of the projects I am deciding to implement will establish precedent for future actions or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The decision made about activities within this project area do not commit me to actions on lands outside the project area (E.A.Chapter 1 page 2, Chapter 2 pages 1-6).
7. There are no known significant cumulative effects between this project and other projects currently implemented or planned in the Grouse area or adjacent areas. With the exception of routine maintenance activities, all known connected actions associated with the selected activities which are likely to occur in the reasonably foreseeable future have been identified in the assessment. The direct, indirect and cumulative effects are disclosed (E.A. Chapter 3, pages 7-12, 14-16, 17-20, 21-25, 27-30, 31-36, 38-40, 41-45)
8. No significant impacts are foreseen on any proposed or listed National Historic places nor any loss or destruction of any scientific, cultural or historic places. Standard timber sale contract clauses protect cultural resources that may be discovered during implementation (E.A. Chapter 3 page 34).
9. No significant impacts to any endangered or threatened species or their habitat is foreseen. The Biological Evaluation documented a “not likely to adversely effect” finding on threatened, endangered and proposed species (E.A. Chapter 3 pages 22-23, 40-41 and Appendices 4 & 5).
10. The actions do not violate Federal, State, or local laws imposed for protection of the environment (E.A. Chapter 1 pages 2, 3, Chapter 2 page 1, Chapter 3 pages 23, 28, 35, 42-43).

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

These projects may be implemented after fifty days from the date of publication of notice of this decision in the Valley Courier newspaper. The notice is expected to be published on Saturday, June 10, 2000.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with the provisions of 36 CFR 215.7. The written notice of appeal must contain, as a minimum, the following information: a statement that indicates the document in a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7; the name, address, and telephone number of the appellant; an explanation of the

decision about which the appellant objects; the title and subject of the decision document, and the date of the decision; and the name and the title of the deciding officer. The notice of appeal must state the reason(s) for objecting, including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy, and if applicable, specifically how the decision violates law, regulation, or policy, and must identify the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

Notices of appeal must be postmarked or received by July 25, 2000 which is 45 days from June 10, 2000, the date the decision will be published in the Valley Courier (Alamosa, CO), and must be filed with the appeal Deciding Officer, the Regional Forester of Region 2. The mailing address is:

Lyle Laverty
Regional Forester
Rocky Mountain Region
P.O. Box 25127
Lakewood
CO 80225-0127

Questions regarding this decision should be directed to: Peter L. Clark, Forest Supervisor, Rio Grande National Forest, 1803 West Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144, or at the following telephone number: (719) 852-5941.

/s/ Peter L. Clark
PETE L. CLARK
Forest Supervisor

6/8/2000
DATE

“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, audiotape, 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.”