

DECISION MEMO
USDA FOREST SERVICE
MIDDLE FORK PRESCRIBED BURN
Washakie Ranger District of the Shoshone National Forest
Fremont County, Wyoming

DECISION

I have decided to conduct prescribed burns on about 4,646 acres within the Middle Fork Cattle and Horse Allotment as displayed on the attached map. The desired outcome is a vegetation mosaic of at least 50 percent burned within the target 4,646 acres.

The objectives of this project are to: **A) Reduce Fuel Loading, B) Improve Bighorn and Elk Habitat by Stimulating Aspen Regeneration, C) Reduce Conifer Encroachment in Meadows, Aspen Stands and Open Grasslands, and D) Improve Forage Productivity for Livestock.**

The project will be implemented based on the **Shoshone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan** vegetative goals. Specifically, these goals are designed to manage vegetation outside of wilderness to provide multiple benefits commensurate with land capability and resource demand and to improve the health and vigor of vegetation types outside of wilderness (Forest Plan/III-6). These goals are summarized as follows.



Middle Fork Prescribed Burn Units # 1 and #2. Note the winter / spring snow boundaries. Background identifies previous prescribed burns in Sinks Canyon.

Manage vegetation types outside of wilderness to provide multiple benefits commensurate with land capability and resource demands.

Provide cost-effective fire protection to minimize the combined costs of protection and damages, and prevent the loss of human life.

Improve the health and vigor of vegetation types outside of wilderness.

Reduce the accumulation of natural fuels.

Improve habitats where vegetation conditions are significantly below biological potential.

Develop, protect and manage the range resource to maintain it in fair or better condition status with an upward trend.

Additional Project Design Criteria Include:

- 1) Only existing roads will be used for access to implement the project.
- 2) Standard fire protection measures will be used to implement this project as defined in the Shoshone National Forest Fire Management Action Plan.
- 3) There will be one full year rest from livestock grazing following each burn to allow for maximum plant re-establishment and to improve plant vigor.
- 4) Whenever possible the sites will be burned in the spring to protect the existing bitterbrush within the area.
- 5) To adequately protect aquatic resources, burning will be prescribed so as to burn only portions of riparian area vegetation. Buffer strips of unburned riparian vegetation are desirable, however it is recognized that portions of these areas should be burned as they would naturally burn as a fire adapted community.
- 6) The State District Forester in Riverton will be notified in advance of burning to provide for interagency training to local firefighters.
- 7) A burn plan will be developed that will allow for both hand and aerial ignition



The Middle Fork Prescribed Burns are an extension of the Sinks Canyon Burns as identified in this photograph. The majority of the burning will be conducted in the same habitat type.

Category of the Proposed Action

The proposed action falls under Category Number 6 (d) , in section 31.2 of the *Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 - Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook* .

"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). Examples include but are not limited to: Reference item (d). Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor."

Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances

Extraordinary circumstances include, but are not limited to, the presence of steep slopes or highly erodible soils; threatened and endangered species or their critical habitat; flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds; Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas; inventoried roadless areas; Research Natural Areas; or Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites , or historic properties or areas.

This action does not involve any extraordinary circumstances, as documented by materials in the project file. Therefore, this action can be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

A Categorical Exclusion Guide and Checklist is attached to the project file for review.



Fire Effects on the adjacent Sinks Canyon Prescribed Burns. The Middle Fork fire effects should mimic Sinks Canyon.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The proposed action was scoped for a 2 month period between July 31, 2000 and September 2000, in the Wyoming State Journal, a newspaper of general circulation in the vicinity of the federal and non federal lands. Adjacent landowners, the Fremont County Commissioners and the Wyoming Congressional Delegation were also notified of the project on July 31, 2000.

The majority of the comments received were in favor of the project. The state of Wyoming recommended several items to be incorporated in the project. These recommendations are listed under the Additional Project Design Criteria and can also be found in the state's package from the Office of Federal Land Policy dated August 24, 2000 (see project file).

The following concern was identified from the Wyoming State Office of Federal Land Policy:

“The Middle Fork of the Popo Agie River is the City of Lander’s primary water supply. We are concerned as to what possible water quality impacts could occur as a result of the burn.”

In addition, the State Office of Federal Land Policy is also concerned about potential flood impacts due to reduced vegetation following the burns.

The majority of the project area will be prescribed burned prior to green up in the spring. In many of the previous Sinks Canyon burns, green up occurred as close as 2 weeks following the prescribed burn. There have been no documented impacts to the city of Lander’s water supply following the previous burns within this canyon. This can be attributed to the short duration of exposed soil prior to green up and the multitude of snow boundaries and unburned vegetation adjacent to streams and draws.

In contrast, a summer wildfire will leave slopes exposed a full year prior to green up the following spring. The Middle Fork burns are designed to reduce fuels under a winter – spring season to minimize the potential for severe soil/watershed impacts from a summer wildfire.

Some fall burning will occur on portions of the north aspect slopes. These will be late season burns following the first fall snow storms. Snow is expected to remain adjacent to stream banks and further expand wet riparian area buffer zones.

Findings Required By Other Laws

The Forest Plan has been reviewed and a determination made that this decision is consistent with the Forest Plan. The actions in this project comply fully with the goals of the Forest Plan, the Management Area Direction, including that contained under management prescription, 2A-Semiprimitive Motorized Recreation / Pages III-118 thru III-123. In addition, the Forest Goals for this area include section III-6 thru III-8.

Floodplain, wetlands, prime farm lands, threatened and endangered species, and cultural resource management implications have been considered and these resources will not be adversely affected.



**Post burn
fire effects
on the
adjacent
Sinks
Canyon
Burn.
Expect the
same fire
effects for
the Middle
Fork
Area.**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision can be implemented immediately and is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8 (a) (4). The project will be implemented during the 2002 field season. It is anticipated, that given proper weather and fuel conditions, portions of the area could be burned in January through April of 2002.

Contact Person

For further information, contact Karl Brauneis, Forester, by telephone at (307)-332-5460 or write to the Washakie Ranger District, 333 East Main, Lander, WY 82520

/s/ Burns Davison

11 April 2002

BURNS DAVISON

Date

Washakie District Ranger