

SCOPING STATEMENT
for the
PINEY RIVER PROJECT
ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

WHITE RIVER NATIONAL FOREST
HOLY CROSS RANGER DISTRICT

Scoping

Scoping is an integral part of the environmental analysis process that develops issues related to a proposed action (40CFR 1501.7). These issues may be formed around possible environmental impacts, public uses, management practices, purpose and need for action, or opportunities associated with the proposed activities.

Through this scoping process, interested parties have the opportunity to provide specific comments as to their concerns and issues relative to this project.

Location

The Piney River project area is located approximately 4 miles northwest of Vail, Colorado near Freeman Creek. Legal description as follows: portions of sections 8, 13-28 and 33-36, T4S, R81W; and, portions of sections 18-19 and 30, T4S, R80W; 6th Principal Meridian, Eagle County, Colorado. The project area encompasses approximately 34,745 acres of National Forest System Lands.

The primary transportation access into the project area is via Forest Service Road (FSR) 700 (Red Sandstone Road).

Background

The Piney River Project area consists predominantly of lodgepole pine stands and a mixture of spruce/fir and aspen vegetation across the landscape. Elevation ranges between 9,000 and 9,800 feet. Past management activities including timber harvest using clearcuts (856 acres) have occurred throughout the project area over the last 20 years. These clearcuts are visible to the forest visitor from many different viewpoints in the project area through their very distinct edges and geometric shapes in relation to the natural vegetation landscape shapes. Access into the project area is good using the existing transportation system.

The majority of the vegetation in the project area is mature. 88% of the lodgepole pine vegetation within the project area is more than 80 years old (mature) and approximately 10% of lodgepole pine is less than 30 years old (young seedling-sapling). Based on forest stand inventory information collected in 2000, lodgepole vegetation in the project area possess an average 400 trees per acre and 250 square feet of basal area. At this density, trees are on average 10 feet apart with the crown touching or very close together. Lodgepole pine average 10" at diameter breast height (DBH) and approximately 80 lodgepole pine trees per acre are 12"DBH and larger.

Mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) population levels in the project area have been increasing since 1998. Mountain pine beetle activity is visually evident in stands of lodgepole

pine by the amount of red-needled trees increasing across the landscape. Walk-thru surveys in the project area have confirmed the increasing attacks of Mountain pine beetle on an annual basis. Lodgepole pine vegetation is currently above acceptable number of trees and square feet of basal area per acre as related to Mountain pine beetle management. The high density of trees maintains cool, calm understory conditions. These conditions and the existing 12" DBH structural component within the project area are considered ideal to support beetle activity at epidemic levels.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to treat through commercial timber harvest an estimated 1,900 acres of lodgepole pine and lodgepole pine/aspens-spruce/fir vegetation. Vegetation management activities would occur over an eight year period between 2005 and 2012.

Four commercial timber sales are proposed during this period. They include Freeman Creek (estimated 834 acres), Lost Lake (estimated 926 acres), Left Out (estimated acres 47) and Fix It (estimated 90 acres). Personal-use and commercial-use post/pole and firewood sales would also occur. The proposed activities would produce an estimated 11,400 thousand board feet (MBF) of wood fiber during this period. Many of the proposed harvest units are adjacent to or surrounded by previous harvest treatments (clearcuts). The shape and size of the proposed harvest units are designed to blend with the current mix of natural openings within project area. Proposed unit edges and shapes would be designed to retain a variable mix of trees, densities and age/size classes.

The proposed silvicultural practices include an estimated 312 acres of shelterwood preparatory cuts, 1,301 acres of shelterwood seed cuts, 194 acres of commercial thinning and 90 acres of single tree selection. Monitoring for acceptable natural regeneration stocking levels would occur on all shelterwood seed cuts.

An estimated 230 acres of vegetation management and approximately 2 miles of temporary road construction would occur in Inventoried Roadless Areas. Management of the Spraddle Creek and Buffer Mountain Roadless areas were identified in the White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Revised 2002 (2002 Forest Plan) as part of the suitable timber base (Management areas 5.13 and 5.4 pages 3-51 to 3-56). Roadless areas were inventoried in the Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation EIS and Rule (November 2000). National and 2002 Forest Plan direction on Inventoried Roadless allows for management activities in roadless areas that emphasize the long-term maintenance of roadless characteristics and maintenance and restoration of ecosystem composition, structure, such as reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire effects or threat of insect or disease epidemics.

The harvested logs would be transported via FSR 700 (Red Sandstone), FSR 701 (Piney), FSR 719 (Middle Creek), FSR 734 Red & White Mtn), FSR 786 (Lost Lake) and FSR 787 (Buffer), North Frontage Road in Vail and I-70 to millsite.

No new permanent roads would be constructed. An estimated 9.6 miles of Forest System roads would be reconstructed for access to harvest units. Road reconstruction would occur on portions

of FSR 719, 786, 720.1H, 734, 734.1C, 734.1D, 787 and 729. The primary objectives of reconstruction is to reduce the number of connected, disturbed sites that are contributing sediment to wetlands and streams. Road maintenance would occur on these roads during the timber sale contract periods during and after haul.

Approximately 15-20 miles of temporary road would be needed to access the proposed harvest units. All temporary road locations would be approved by the Timber Sale Administrator prior to construction. After timber sale or other post harvest activities are completed, these roads would be obliterated by ripping to a minimum 12" depth, recontoured where necessary and seeded with appropriate seed mix. Debris such as stumps, rocks, slash with lodgepole cones and logs would be placed in exposed soil road prism.

Logging operations, roadwork, tree cutting, loading and hauling of the harvested logs, would occur annually between June 1 and October 31. No hauling would occur on weekends and holidays. To provide for public safety, flaggers or safety devices would be used during harvest operations (falling, skidding, loading) on the FSR 700 to the Lost Lake Trailhead and along FSR 786 to unit 14.

Snags and coarse woody debris would be retained within the project area to meet 2002 Forest Plan standards and guidelines. Clumps of standing dead snags would be retained for wildlife purposes where feasible, provided safety hazards to loggers are minimized. The marking guides would retain large, dominant, live lodgepole, spruce or fir with physical defects within proposed harvest units at a rate of 3-5 per acre when available for future standing dead snags or as larger patches for future dead-down concentrations.

Water Conservation Practices (WCP'S) as designated in the 2002 Forest Plan would be implemented to protect soils and water resources. Landings would be a minimum of 100 feet from any water course or wetland, wheeled or tracked vehicles would not be allowed in any designated water influence zones and trees would not be removed within wetlands or along immediate margins of stream channels. Any intermittent or perennial designated stream crossings would be reviewed and approved by the Forest Service.

Purpose and Need

The need for this proposed action is to develop and design management practices that would move current vegetation, scenic integrity levels and transportation systems toward their desired conditions as outlined in the 2002 Revised Forest Plan for this project area (See Chapter 3, pp. 3-1 to 3-90). The project area lies within a 5.13 – Resource Production (Forest Products) and 5.4 – Forested Flora and Fauna management areas in accordance with the 2002 Revised Forest Plan.

The Purpose and Need for Action for the proposed projects are:

1. Provide wood fiber and forest products to local industry from areas identified as part of the suitable base while contributing to the White River National Forest allowable timber sale quantity (ASQ).

2. Reduce the susceptibility of lodgepole pine forest type to mountain pine beetle infestations by lowering the current stand densities from approximately 250 square feet of basal area to approximately 100 square feet of basal area.

3. Move the lodgepole pine landscape in the project area towards its desired condition by creating a mosaic of age and size classes.

Current Condition: 88% of the lodgepole pine in the project area is 80+ years old (mature), 2% of lodgepole pine is between 30 and 80 years old (intermediate) and 10% of lodgepole pine in project area is less than 30 years old (seedling/sapling).

Desired Condition: Over the life of the 2002 Forest Plan, move lodgepole pine in the project area to the following age classes. 50% lodgepole pine 80+ years old, 20% lodgepole pine 30-80 years old (intermediate) and 30% lodgepole pine less than 30 years old (seedling/sapling).

4. Improve scenic values through rehabilitating straight, geometric edges of past clearcutting activity.

Desired Condition: Over the life of the 2002 Forest Plan, decrease the amount of visible edges and geometric shapes in the project area by providing a mix of tree densities, irregular edges and tree islands that better blend with the existing mix of natural openings and forested areas.

The 2002 Revised White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan provides goals and objectives for vegetation management on National Forest System Lands. The proposed Piney River Project would contribute fully or in part to the following Goals and Objectives of the 2002 Revised Forest Plan (Chapter 1, pp. 1-1 to 1-18).

Goal: Provide for multiple uses and sustainability of national forests in an environmentally acceptable manner.

Objective 1a - Improve and protect watershed conditions to provide the water quality and quantity and soil productivity necessary to support ecological functions and intended beneficial uses.

Objective 1b – Provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired nonnative species and to achieve objectives for Management Indicator Species (MIS) and focal species.

Objective 1d – Increase the amount of forest and rangelands restored to or maintained in a healthy condition with reduced risk and damage from fires, insects, disease, and invasive species.

Objective 2c – Improve the capability of national forests and rangelands to sustain desired uses, values, products and services.

Objective 4a – Improve the safety and economy of Forest Service roads, trails, facilities, and operations and provide greater security for the public and employees.

Objective 5a – Work cooperatively with individuals, organizations, local, state, tribal, and other federal agencies to promote ecosystem health and sustainability across the landscape.

Process

The extent, duration and complexity of the project proposals will be determined after comments are received through the scoping process. An Interdisciplinary Team will evaluate public comments and develop a reasonable range of alternatives, including a proposed action. The number of alternatives depends on significant issues identified.

Following the formulation of alternatives, the Interdisciplinary Team will evaluate the environmental consequences of each alternative selected for analysis and prepare a recommendation to the Forest Supervisor.

The significance of the issues raised will aid the District Ranger in determining whether the analysis will be documented in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Environmental Assessment (EA), or Categorical Exclusion (CE). A final decision will be made in a Record of Decision (ROD), Decision Notice or a Decision Memo. The responsible Official for this proposal is the Forest Supervisor.

Decision to be Made

The decision to be made from the environmental analysis is whether the activities planned within the Piney River Project area should take place as proposed, not at all, or to some other extent.

Consultation Requested

Invited comments on this proposal are appreciated from the following agencies and groups:

- Environmental Groups
- County Commissioners
- Range Permittees
- Local Residents
- Colorado Division of Wildlife
- Timber Industry
- Outfitters and Guides
- Native American Communities

Interested parties should provide specific comments as to their concerns and issues relative to this project.