

**PUBLIC SCOPING NOTICE**

**PREPARATION OF AN  
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

**COTTONWOOD II VEGETATION TREATMENT**

**BIG PINEY RANGER DISTRICT  
BRIDGER-TETON NATIONAL FOREST**

**INTRODUCTION**

Public involvement is an important part of the environmental planning process for the U. S. Forest Service. We ask for your input to determine the issues and the scope of this environmental analysis.

Please take the time to read the following information and let us know your concerns about the proposed actions and decisions to be made. We appreciate your contribution of time and effort, and believe the information you share with us will lead to a better decision.

The Big Piney Ranger District is proposing to implement vegetation management in the Cottonwood Creek drainage over the next 3 to 5 years. The need for vegetation management in this area has previously been identified and studied in the Bridger-Teton Forest Plan implemented in 1990, in the Cottonwood Plan Implementation Study (CPIS), conducted from 1991 to 1993, and in the Cottonwood/Maki Environmental Assessment conducted from 1999 to 2003. Each effort included extensive public and Forest Service interdisciplinary input, as well as use of the best data available on Forest resources. Management opportunities, practices, standards and guidelines, and mitigation have been developed to help achieve desired resource conditions. These are the basis for this proposal and for further site specific analysis of effects.

The Cottonwood Creek watershed is approximately 25 miles northwest of Big Piney, Wyoming in the Green River drainage, on the east slope of the Wyoming Range. The analysis area is approximately 41,420 acres within this watershed and includes the tributary creeks of North and South Cottonwood Creek, including Nylander, Ole, and Hardin, Irene, Lander, Eagle, and Bare creeks. Lander Peak and Bare Mountain are within this area, as is Soda Lake. The legal description includes portions of: T32N, R115W; T32N, R116W; T33N, R114W; T33N, R115W; T34N, R115W.

There are existing and past uses of this area as detailed in the CPIS and other studies. The area is accessed by Forest Roads 125 and 050 as well as numerous collector roads. There are approximately 69 miles of open roads. Many roads have been closed by gating or rehabilitation. The area is used extensively for dispersed camping, hunting, snowmobiling, and other recreational pursuits. There have been approximately 2,064 acres of timber harvest and 600 acres of wildfire disturbance in the last 50 years. These areas are currently in various stages of forest re-growth, with young trees beginning to restore a forested appearance and wildlife hiding cover. Most areas have achieved sufficient regeneration and tree growth to be considered wildlife cover under Forest Plan standards. In addition, many acres were partial cut in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for railroad ties and currently consist of multi-storied

forested stands with subalpine fir understory. Permitted and regulated grazing of sheep and cattle occurs on grazing allotments located throughout the area. Important habitat for elk, deer, moose, Colorado cutthroat trout, and many other species of wildlife is present and utilized. Approximately 70% of the area is forested and 30% is sagebrush/grasslands. The main tree species present is lodgepole pine, with significant amounts of Engelmann spruce, aspen, and subalpine fir and minor amounts of Douglas-fir and whitebark pine. Seventy five percent of the forests are over 100 years old.

## **PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION**

The purpose of this proposal is to improve Forest resource conditions in the North and South Cottonwood Creek drainage, bringing them closer to desired conditions. Attaining desired conditions for each of the Forest resource Desired Future Conditions (DFCs)<sup>1</sup> would help restore healthy ecosystem functioning and support sustainable resource use. Desired conditions were identified in the CPIS and refined during the environmental analysis, through public input and extensive interdisciplinary review. Current conditions in need of improvement include:

- Aspen forests are predominantly old age classes, are being encroached by conifers, and are in declining growth and health. Desired conditions would maintain 50% to 55% of aspen stands in younger age classes.
- A majority of conifer forests are in older age classes with declining growth and health, heavy forest fuel loads, and high tree densities for site conditions. Desired conditions would maintain 15% to 20% of stands in seedling sapling stages, maintain forest structure in snags, down logs and tree clumps, maintain lower tree densities in many areas, and promote natural regeneration.
- Many of the reforested areas have high tree densities, which will not support optimal tree growth or sustained big game hiding cover. Desired conditions would maintain lower tree densities to sustain hiding cover longer and improve tree growth and health.
- Some roads and road culverts are substandard and contributing to sedimentation in streams, damage to riparian areas, and impairing fish passage and habitat. Desired conditions would bring roads and culverts up to standard or rehabilitate to reduce sedimentation and improve adjacent resource conditions.
- Existing trailheads in Nylander and South Cottonwood Creeks are not adequate for expected levels of use and are contributing to resource damage.

The vegetation site objectives and management opportunities identified in the CPIS to improve resource conditions in the area are the basis for the projects contained in this proposal. For the Cottonwood II proposal, the objectives and project design from the CPIS have been updated and refined during the initial environmental analysis, using issues from initial public scoping, interdisciplinary team input, and updated resource information.

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<sup>1</sup> Described in the Forest Plan's DFC (1B, 10, 12 and 2A), standards and guidelines and the Cottonwood Plan Implementation Study

## **PROPOSED ACTION**

This proposal was developed in response to issues from initial public scoping, changes in resource demand since the CPIS, and recently identified resource issues. This proposal is also designed to improve Forest resource conditions as identified in the CPIS.

**Treat approximately 1,150 acres of aspen stands** to regenerate healthy aspen and remove conifers that are growing into the stand and replacing the aspen component. Primary treatment would be with prescribed fire, facilitated by some mechanical treatment to increase ground fuels that are needed to provide a fuel bed for better burning. Commercial conifers would be removed on approximately 57 of these acres. Because of the mixture of sagebrush and aspen, along with the edge effect it offers, elk use this area for spring calving. These areas are also important elk forage during transition from winter feed grounds. Following the treatment, aspen regeneration from root suckering will provide cover and feed for the elk calves, mule deer fawns, and other wildlife.

**Partial cut trees on approximately 577 acres** to thin overstocked conifer forests while maintaining a forested appearance. The objective is to leave the healthiest trees of diverse species while reducing losses caused by insects and disease and salvaging wood products. These treatments will take place in older stands where tree growth is greatly reduced or where mortality of trees exceeds growth. The remaining trees will better utilize the resources available on the site and provide habitat for forest-dependent species. Approximately 3 to 10 MBF will be removed per acre, dependent on the site and numbers of healthy trees left to provide a forested appearance and habitat. No new permanent roads will be constructed to complete the treatments.

**Harvesting of trees on approximately 402 acres to provide for regeneration** of the declining lodgepole pine and mixed conifer forests and enhance age class diversity across the landscape. This treatment entails removing most merchantable trees through a commercial timber sale. Regeneration of healthy new stands will be ensured by planting with lodgepole pine or Englemann spruce or providing for natural regeneration. Individual and groups of healthy seed trees, snags, and groups of healthy non-merchantable trees will be left for seed, habitat, and diversity, where they are available. Created openings will range in size from 5 to 20 acres. The age class diversity is important to reduce losses caused by insects and disease and will reflect historically occurring conditions. No new permanent roads will be constructed.

**Timber haul road and end-of-road trailhead improvements:** Re-locating the current Nylander Road out of the riparian area to the dry ridge area to the east would reduce sediment into Nylander Creek. The project would be approximately 1.0 mile long. The old road, which is easily rutted, difficult to maintain, and contributes sediment directly to Nylander Creek, would be reclaimed. The re-located road would end at an existing dispersed camping area, which would be managed to include trailhead facilities. A low-standard road beyond this point, which crosses boggy, wet soils, would be closed.

The existing road and stream crossing inventory of 1998-99, would be the basis for culvert replacement or stream crossing improvements on the haul routes. Culverts will either act as designed fish barriers or allow passage of fish as identified in the inventory. Reconstructing the South Cottonwood Road from Hidden Basin to the trailhead (approximately 1.0 mile) would provide safe access for log trucks, livestock haulers, and recreation traffic. Currently the road is narrow, with no turnouts, and during the periodic high

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spring run off, South Cottonwood Creek overflows its banks and runs down the road. The trailhead would be improved, the creek channel restored, and old roads beyond the trailhead re-claimed.

Harvesting will occur in the following areas:

LOCATION & SITE NUMBER	PROPOSED ACRES TREATED			TREATMENT METHOD <sup>2</sup>					
	DFC 1B <sup>1</sup>	DFC 10	Total	CC	TH	SW	S	GS	Aspen
S. COTTONWOOD	560	34	594	267	123	85	109	10	0
LOWER N. COTTONWOOD	175	0	175	40	0	40	30	40	25
MCDUGAL GAP	105	0	105	65	30	10	0	0	0
SCHOBERG	102	0	102	30	30	10	0	0	32
NYLANDER	60	0	60	0	60	0	0	0	0
<b>SUB TOTALS (Harvest)</b>	<b>1002</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>1036</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>57</b>
ASPEN BURN									1,100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1002</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>1036</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>1,157</b>

<sup>1</sup> DFC 1B – Substantial commodity resource development with moderate accommodation of other resources;

DFC 10 – Simultaneous development of resources, opportunities for human experiences, and support for big game and a wide variety of wildlife species

<sup>2</sup> CC- Clearcut; TH – Thinning; SW – Shelterwood; S – Salvage; GS – Group Selection; Aspen – Aspen Treatment

### POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES TO PROPOSED ACTION

Alternatives to this proposal, including no action, will be analyzed and refined in the environmental analysis process. The alternatives will be developed primarily from issues generated during this scoping process. Site-specific impacts from each alternative will be examined. **Your input is important to the development of alternatives to the proposal and providing details to the implementation of the proposal.**

### NATURE OF DECISION TO BE MADE

This decision will be whether or not to implement specific vegetation management projects and associated road and trailhead improvements, as allowed in the Bridger-Teton National Forest Plan and CPIS. The decision will include any mitigation measures needed in addition to those prescribed in the Forest Plan.

### SCOPING PROCESS

Public scoping for the Cottonwood projects began during the CPIS phase in 1991. Throughout 1991 and 1992 there were a series of public mailings, meetings and field trips to discuss implementation of the Forest Plan in the Cottonwood area. Public input received during this period was used to develop desired future resource conditions and site objectives to reach the desired conditions. These were then carried forward to the development of specific project proposals that will be analyzed in this National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process.

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An initial scoping letter, describing proposed actions in the Cottonwood watershed, was sent to the Big Piney District mailing list on May 14, 1999. The list of 127 individuals, groups, organizations, and agencies notified is in the project file. There was also a news release at the same time. A field trip to the area was conducted on August 10, 1999. Comments were requested on the proposal by September 1, 1999. A total of 8 comment letters were received. This present scoping letter requests public comments on actions to be addressed in the Cottonwood II Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). That EIS will evaluate the Proposed Action, no action (current management), and other alternatives that may be proposed during this scoping process.

The Forest Service is seeking information, comments, and assistance from individuals, organizations, Tribal governments, and Federal, state, and local agencies interested in or affected by this project. Comments submitted on the May 14, 1999, scoping effort and during field trips of the project area will be used to prepare the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Additional public participation will be solicited by notifying in person and/or by mail known interested and affected publics. News releases will be used to give the public general notice. Public participation activities will include requests for written comments. The first formal opportunity to comment is to respond to this Public Scoping Notice, which initiates the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping includes: (1) identifying potential issues, (2) narrowing the potential issues and identifying significant issues from those issues that have been covered by prior environmental review, (3) exploring alternatives in addition to the No Action Alternative, and (4) identifying potential environmental effects of the Proposed Action and alternatives.

### **PRELIMINARY ISSUES**

The Forest Service has identified the following potential issues. In addition, through the May 1999 scoping effort, issues have been refined. No determination has been made as to which issues will be examined in detail in the environmental analysis. Your input will help determine which of these issues merit detailed analysis and will also help identify additional issues related to the Proposed Action that may not be listed here.

*Issue 1* - Amount and/or types of vegetation treatments under the Proposed Action and the effects on old growth and mature vegetation for lynx, security cover for elk and other habitat, as well as Colorado cutthroat trout habitat.

*Issue 2* - Forest health, specifically the high proportion of older age class conifer stands and declining tree growth, dwarf mistletoe infection levels in lodgepole pine, and high fuel loadings from dead and down material.

*Issue 3* - Amount of aspen treatments.

### **RESPONSIBLE OFFICIALS**

Greg Clark, District Forest Ranger, Big Piney Ranger District, P.O. Box 218, Big Piney, Wyoming 83113.

### **COMMENTS**

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Comments concerning the scope of the analysis must be received by February 3, 2004. The Draft EIS is expected to be available to the public in September 2004 and the Final EIS is expected to be available to the public in January 2005.

Send written comments to:

District Ranger  
Big Piney Ranger District  
P.O. Box 218, Big Piney  
Wyoming 83113.

Electronic comments may be mailed to [mailroom\\_r4\\_bridger\\_teton@fs.fed.us](mailto:mailroom_r4_bridger_teton@fs.fed.us) and on the subject line put only "Cottonwood Vegetation Treatment"

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this Proposed Action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Parts 215 and 217. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold their submission from the public record, but those requesting such confidentiality should be aware that under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within (15) days.

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