



File Code: 1950/5100

Date: August 12, 2004

Dear Forest Interest:

The Pleasant Grove Ranger District, Uinta National Forest, is initiating scoping for a project proposal designed to address hazardous fuel conditions in the area surrounding the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Recreation Residence tracts. The project area is located about 7 miles east of the mouth of American Fork Canyon, in Sections 6, 7, 8, 18 and 19 Township 4 South, Range 3 East, Salt Lake Base Meridian.

A more detailed description of the purpose and need for this project, and the specific actions being proposed follows. Your input will help direct and define issues, alternatives considered, and the analysis of environmental effects associated with this proposal. To be most helpful, comments should identify specific issues and concerns with the proposed action. Valid issues and concerns are not factored or weighted by numbers of people or organizations submitting them. This process and decision is not based on popular vote, but by the soundness of the analysis and the information that it incorporates. However, all comments will be addressed.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

Forest Service officials are initiating environmental analysis of a proposed hazardous fuel reduction project to be implemented in and around the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tracts. Specific treatment activities associated with this project include the following:

1. Thinning of aspen, conifer and associated understory vegetation in the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract, and aspen, oak and maple vegetation within the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract to a spacing of about 8-10 feet would be accomplished mechanically, for a distance of 150-300 feet from the edge of the roadways (where slope allows), and for a distance of 150-200 feet beyond the boundary of the recreation residence tracts (where slope allows). Brush and trees below six inches diameter breast height (DBH) would be removed along with branches up to a height of six feet on larger trees. Trees larger than six inches DBH may be removed only if they are dead, dying, or a hazard to work crews or the public.
2. Chipping cut vegetation and distributing the chips back onto the ground to provide organic material for soil protection and enhancement.

BACKGROUND

The Tibble Fork Recreation Residence area is dominated by conifer and aspen vegetation. Interspersed oak, maple and understory shrub and grass vegetation provides a continuous layer of fuel from the forest floor to the overstory tree canopy. Fire history information indicates that the conifer stands and other vegetation in and around the area haven't burned for nearly 150 years.



This isn't outside of the natural fire interval for the aspen/conifer vegetation. However, the understory vegetation is outside of natural condition, primarily due to fire suppression.

Vegetation in the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract is characterized by aspen with interspersed conifer, and oak and oak/maple vegetation. In some places it is nearly impossible to walk through. Historically, oakbrush stands burned naturally every 35-60 years. Based on fire history data for oakbrush along the Wasatch Front, these stands haven't burned in the last 100 years or more. Aspen and conifer vegetation has a longer fire return interval. It is estimated that 2-3 natural fire intervals have been missed in the oakbrush vegetation, primarily due to fire suppression. As a result, oakbrush has grown thick, old, and provides a nearly continuous pathway for fire to travel. Stands with these characteristics can burn fast and with great intensity. Understory herbaceous vegetation associated with the aspen and conifer vegetation is fairly continuous and would provide a ready fuel source if a fire were to be ignited in these stands.

The topographic lay of the land surrounding the Tibble Fork residences is characterized as a steep V-shaped canyon, with the residences located at the lower to mid-slope area. Thick conifer occupies the north-facing slope around and above the residences. The south-facing slope is characterized by aspen, oak/maple and shrub species, with scattered conifer. Canyons act much like a chimney flu, and funnel heat, smoke and fire toward the top. Fires can move through such areas quickly.

The Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residences are situated along the top of an intermediate hill that lies east, south-east of the Silver Lake Flat Reservoir. The topography is considerably less steep than the areas surrounding Tibble Fork or the campground. However, because it is located at the top of a hill slope, fire could run toward and through the area rapidly.

The roadway between the Tibble Fork Reservoir and the Silver Lake Flat Reservoir switchbacks up the southwest-facing slope from the Granite Flat Campground, gaining about 800-1,000 feet of elevation in less than a mile. If fire were to be ignited at the bottom of the slope, fire would run uphill at a rapid rate, posing a safety hazard to people trying to exit the area and firefighters trying to access the area.

Topography, combined with the continuous fuel arrangement that exists, creates a potential threat to the campground and recreation residences, and anyone who might be in the area if a fire were ignited by lightning or people. Fire control would be very difficult under severe fire conditions. Given the past several years of drought, this could well be the situation if a fire were ignited in this area.

IMPACTS BEING ADDRESSED

Fire suppression over the last 100 years has resulted in vegetation conditions that are outside of what would be considered "natural" if fire had been left to act as a natural process in the ecosystem. Thick, decadent stands of oakbrush and oak/maple, and aspen/conifer with thick understory vegetation can burn at intensities that make fire control difficult. The Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tracts are surrounded by such vegetation and have

been recognized as at risk of loss should fire occur at times when fire danger is high and the possibility of control is low. People recreating in these areas could be a risk as well. In event of a fire, the fuel arrangement surrounding the tracts and campground are such that if a fire were to burn through the area, the public's ability to exit the campground area and canyon is unlikely without potential injury or loss of life.

Wildlife species that use oakbrush and oak/maple, and aspen/conifer vegetation would be displaced should a fire burn through that removed all vegetation in this canyon. A high intensity, high severity wildfire in these drainages would eliminate ground cover and impact soil permeability. The potential for excessive soil erosion from a short-duration, high-intensity precipitation event could result in flooding and mudslides from the area, and result in sediment transport into the Tibble Fork Reservoir, which lies at the bottom of the canyon below Silver Lake Flat and the canyon wherein the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract lies.

Impacts to fish and other aquatic species would be dependant on the amount of sediment that actually entered the river. Water from the Tibble Fork Reservoir is used for irrigation downstream. The storage capacity of the reservoir would be impacted should a large fire burn through the area and result in excessive sediment transport into the reservoir.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of this proposed action is to address the hazardous fuel conditions that surround the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tracts. The need for the proposed action is:

1. Improve safety for the public trying to leave the area in case of a fire.
2. Improve safety for fire fighters responding to an incident in this area.
3. Alter fuel characteristics (arrangement and density) to keep fire intensities low enough to improve opportunities for fire control.
4. Provide additional protection from fire for the recreational summer homes at Tibble Fork and in the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tracts, and facilities in the Granite Flat Campground.
5. Reduce potential for excessive soil erosion and flooding following a fire incident in this area.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Issues initially identified during development of the proposed action include:

1. Effects of prescribed burning vs. mechanical treatment. Are we missing an opportunity to re-introduce fire back into the area?
2. What effects might there be on potential habitats for threatened, endangered or sensitive plant and wildlife species.

CONSISTENCY WITH LAW, FOREST SERVICE POLICY AND DIRECTION, AND THE UINTA NATIONAL FOREST LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

This proposed project is consistent with the following:

1. National Fire Plan – a long-term investment that will help protect communities and natural resources, and most importantly, the lives of firefighters and the public.
2. Healthy Forests Initiative - This is to improve the health of our nation's forests and rangelands by expediting high-priority fuel-reduction and forest restoration projects in National Forests and Grasslands. The primary goal of these projects is to reduce the fire danger and return our forests and grasslands to a healthier state.
3. Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 – The project will help reduce the threat of destructive wildfires while upholding environmental standards and encouraging early public input during review and planning processes.
4. Area is identified as being in Fire Regime IV, Condition Class 2, and meets criteria for priority funding and treatment as per the HFRA.
5. Addresses one of the Forest Service’s Four Threats - Fuels and Fires - The absence of periodic, low-intensity surface burning in fire-dependent ecosystems has resulted in forest characterized by dense, overstocked stands that result in forest health problems and uncharacteristically severe, large-scale wildfires. The changes in vegetative structure, species composition, and accumulated fuels have predisposed extensive high-intensity wildfires that threaten nearby communities, watershed values, and key ecological components.
6. The 2003 Forest Plan states:
 - a. “The fuel management aspect of the fire management program is emphasized through application of hazard reduction activities.” (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-1, pg 2-5)
 - b. “Ecosystem resilience is maintained by providing for a full range of seral stages and age classes (by cover type) that achieve a mosaic of habitat conditions and diversity to meet a variety of desired resource management objectives. Recruitment and sustainability of some early seral species and vegetation communities in the landscape are necessary to maintain ecosystem resilience to perturbations.” (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-8, pg 2-6)
 - c. “Management actions maintain ecosystem health and encourage conditions that are within the historic range of variation. Management actions remain within the variability of size, intensity, and frequency of native disturbance regimes.” (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-10, pg 2-6)

ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

The following alternatives have been developed to address the identified issues, and will be considered in detail as part of the environmental analysis.

1. No Action Alternative - Forest Service direction for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) states that a no action alternative should be considered in detail in each environmental analysis (FSH 1909.15). Under this alternative, no fuels treatment activities would be initiated in the identified project area. Issues identified with this alternative include: not meeting the purpose and need for fuels treatment.
2. Prescribed Fire Alternative – Under this alternative, the use of prescribed fire would be evaluated as a tool to meet the purpose and need for fuels treatment in the project area. Issues preliminarily identified associated with this alternative include: impacts on air

quality; impacts on soil stability; potential impacts to water quality and the Tibble Fork reservoir; potential effects to threatened, endangered or sensitive wildlife and plant species or their habitats.

HOW CAN YOU BE INVOLVED?

Send substantive comments relative to this proposal to the Responsible Official for this project, Pam Gardner, District Ranger, 390 N 100 E, Pleasant Grove, UT 84062; phone 801-342-5241; or you may hand deliver your comments during normal business hours from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Email comments may be sent to comments-intermtn-uinta-pleasantgrove@fs.fed.us. The opportunity to comment ends 30 days following the date of publication of the notice for this project in the *Provo Daily Herald*. Your comments need to be as specific as possible and contain the following:

1. Your name, address, and (if possible) telephone number;
2. Title of the document(s) on which comment is being submitted; and
3. Specific facts or comments along with supporting reasons that the person believes the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.

SCHEDULE FOR COMPLETION OF ANALYSIS

1. Scoping and public review and comment on the proposed action would begin with publication of notice of the project in the Provo Daily Herald, and end 30 days later.
2. The environmental analysis is tentatively scheduled to be completed and appropriate decisions made in the late fall, early winter of 2004.

Thank you for your interest in management of the Uinta National Forest. If you have questions regarding this proposal, please contact John Hendrix, Acting Natural Resources Staff, at the Pleasant Grove Ranger District at the address above, or by phone at 801-342-5257.

Sincerely,

/s/ PAMELA J. GARDNER
Pleasant Grove District Ranger

Enclosure: Project Area Maps