

**DECISION MEMO**  
USDA FOREST SERVICE

**“2004 Tipler Fuels Reduction Project”**

Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest  
Eagle River-Florence Ranger District  
Florence County, Wisconsin  
T40N R15&16E

**DECISION**

I have decided to treat hazardous fuels on 465 acres of red pine and white spruce in Sections 29 and 30, T40N R16E and Section 25, T40N R15E. Treatment will be accomplished through the following activities:

- 88 acres of commercial red pine thinning under modified prescription combined with precommercial ladder fuel treatment for fuels reduction, fire control, and fire suppression objectives
- 80 acres of commercial red pine thinning under modified prescription for fuels reduction and fire suppression objectives
- 70 acres of commercial red pine thinning for forest health and productivity objectives
- 21 acres of commercial spruce thinning under modified prescription combined with precommercial ladder fuel treatment for fuels reduction, fire control, and fire suppression objectives
- 115 acres of commercial spruce thinning under modified prescription for fuels reduction and fire suppression objectives
- 91 acres of precommercial ladder fuel treatment for fuels reduction and fire control objectives

All roads necessary for access are currently in place. Stands 47-9 and 47-12 will be winter harvested for access using undesignated roads. The remaining system roads will be bladed and spot-graveled as needed to maintain drainage, preserve road-bed integrity, and protect soils. The open/closed status of roads will not change subsequent to the treatments.

Two heritage resource sites within the project vicinity will be protected by a 20 meter buffer and excluded from commercial harvest operations. Within the buffer zones ladder fuels will be treated by hand, as warranted (Attachment D, Archaeologist's Report).

A project map and detailed explanation of treatments are presented in Attachment A. Slash (activity fuels) will be treated as specified. The stands to be treated through heavy thinning will be monitored for hardwood regeneration response and for wind and ice damage. These actions will begin in 2005 and will be completed within 3 years, in compliance with 2004 Forest Plan guidelines for Management Area 6B.

**REASONS FOR THE DECISION**

**Background:** Consistent with Goal 2 of *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risk to Communities and the Environment: 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* (and the companion 10-Year Implementation Plan) and the National Fuel Treatment Priorities identified by Forest Service Chief Dale N. Bosworth in his January 14, 2003 letter, hazardous fuels treatments conducted within the wildland-urban interface are given high priority. The project area falls within the wildland-urban interface on the Eagle River-Florence Ranger District. The 2004 Forest Plan (p 2-25) directs that fuels reduction activities be focused within the urban interface.

With the exception of one stand, the project area falls within Management Area (MA) 2B (uneven-aged northern hardwoods, interior forest) with an MA 6B (semi-primitive non-motorized, moderate disturbance) constraint. The excepted stand (47-41) falls within MA 1C (early successional aspen

and hardwood). While allowing for a small percentage of conifers, the primary emphasis in these areas is management of hardwoods (2004 Forest Plan, pp 3-5, 3-9, and 3-33).

**Purpose and Need:** Immediately to the east of the project area eighty acres are held in parceled private ownership. These properties contain numerous seasonal dwellings and continue to be developed, creating an intermixed wildland/urban situation. One of the dwellings previously burned due to a lightning strike to a nearby conifer tree. Hunters widely use the surrounding national forest land, elevating the potential for human-caused ignitions. The red pine and spruce stands under consideration for treatment were last thinned over 20 years ago and now are so dense that fire suppression equipment would not be able to maneuver within them. This presents a potentially untenable situation, should wildfire break out in the vicinity.

Through collaboration with State and local fire control managers, the purpose of this project has evolved from that of strictly reducing crown fire potential to that of 1) addressing an issue of fire suppression tactics and safety, 2) addressing an issue of site potential for fire resistant species, and 3) addressing fuel continuity, thus incorporating a limited timber harvest purpose.

The Forest Service has identified the need to 1) reduce the stocking density of the pine and spruce to allow for safe tactical maneuvering for fire suppression; 2) reduce the crown density to encourage hardwood undergrowth, thus providing vegetative resistance to surface fire and naturally enhancing fire suppression; 3) remove sub-canopy conifers and thin areas within the sub-merchantable conifers to remove/reduce ladder fuels; and 4) create shaded fuel breaks along FR 2551 and along the private property boundaries to enhance fire control.

Of the 465 project acres, two stands totaling approximately 70 acres contribute nominally to the fuels treatment objectives of the project due to their orientation on the landscape and distance from the proposed fuel break. These red pine stands are in need of thinning to bring the stocking levels in line with Forest Plan guidelines to promote tree vigor and encourage within-stand diversity. Thinning these stands will still contribute to a reduction in standing live fuels in the project area, so for these two stands fuels reduction is a secondary objective.

**Rationale:** My decision to precommercially and commercially treat vegetation is a common and routine practice and will not result in significant adverse environmental effects. The modified thinning prescriptions call for crown separation and thinning to stocking levels below those recommended in the Forest Plan for red pine and white spruce (2004 Forest Plan, pp 2-10 and 2-13). Opening the canopy in this manner will not only reduce live fuel loading and continuity, it will encourage hardwood undergrowth—a desired outcome both for fire suppression and forest composition objectives. Monitoring will allow for future adjustments in residual stocking and crown closure for fuels reduction prescriptions. Felling sub-merchantable conifers and pruning branches will reduce within-stand structure; however, this will not affect critical habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive species (Attachment B, Biological Evaluation) and will promote the objective of removing ladder fuels. Ladder fuel reduction and the establishment of fuel breaks are widely employed techniques for containing surface fires. Taking no action would perpetuate the current undesirable fire risks, as well as compromise forest productivity and tree vigor.

## **CATEGORY OF EXCLUSION**

I have determined this action falls under the following categories of action that are normally excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement pursuant to FSH 1909.15:

***31.2 #10: Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres.***

**and**

***31.2 #12: Harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction.***

## **FINDING OF NO RELATED EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES**

I have considered conclusions by resource specialist reviews of conditions at the affected sites (Attachment C). I find there are no extraordinary circumstances that may result in significant and adverse, individual or cumulative environmental effects on the following:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. The treatment sites have been evaluated for Federally listed, proposed or sensitive species, or their critical habitat (Attachment B, Biological Evaluation). No TES species or critical habitat is found on the affected sites. The potential for species presence or habitat would not be adversely affected.
2. Floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds. The project area does not lie adjacent to or include floodplains or wetlands. Neither will be adversely affected. Localized wetland inclusions are excluded from treatment. No municipal watersheds are affected by my action.
3. Congressionally designated areas. These actions will not occur in a wilderness or other congressionally designated site.
4. Inventoried roadless areas. The project area does not lie within an inventoried roadless area.
5. Research Natural Areas. The project area does not lie in or near a Research Natural Area.
6. American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. Local and affected American Indian tribal representative were contacted concerning this action. No effects to religious or cultural sites were identified.
7. Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas. A cultural resource inventory was completed and reviewed by the Forest Archeologist. Two heritage sites lie within the project vicinity. In compliance with alternative 1 presented in the archaeologist's report (Appendix D), these sites will be excluded from mechanical treatment by a 20-meter buffer. Ladder fuels will be treated as needed by hand.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The public was informed of the proposed action through the Forest's quarterly schedule of proposed actions (January 2004), through a mailing to potentially affected parties (Attachment E), and through announcement at a Florence County Forestry and Parks Committee meeting. Six comments were received. Based upon public and agency scoping, no extraordinary circumstances have been identified. Parties, agencies, and tribes contacted are listed in Attachment E.

## **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS**

I have considered relevant laws, regulations and agency direction. I find my decision complies with the National Forest Management Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act. I have considered direction in the FSM 1950 and FSH 1909.15 and find the analysis and my decision consistent with that direction.

I have reviewed this action in accordance with Executive Order 12898 (consideration of environmental justice). I find scoping was adequate to inform low income and minority populations that may be affected by this action. No concerns of disproportionate health or environmental effects surfaced. Adverse effects of this action will be very minor or not apparent. Therefore, I find my decision will not disproportionately create high and adverse health or environmental effects to low income or minority populations.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW AND IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

My decision is not subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f). This decision may be implemented immediately.

## SIGNATURE AND DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
Debra P. Kidd  
District Ranger

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Attachments

Attachment A: Description and Map project area

Attachment B: Biological Evaluation

Attachment C: Checklist--Extraordinary Circumstances

Attachment D: Archeologist's Report

Attachment E: Persons Contacted

### Other records:

Tribal consultation responses

Public comments

USFWS response letter

Individual stand prescriptions

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 familial 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, 1400 Independence Ave. SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice or TDD).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.