

Proposed Action

Alpha Spruce Dieback Project

USDA Forest Service
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest
Medford-Park Falls Ranger District
Price County, Wisconsin

June 15, 2004

Background

In mid to late 2003 a disease (fungus) called spruce needle drop (SNEEDS) was identified as occurring on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. The origin of the disease is unknown, but preliminary surveys indicate that the disease may be wide spread in the white spruce plantations on the Park Falls landbase of the Medford-Park Falls Ranger District. In addition to this fungus, several other diseases, insects, environmental factors, and genetic factors appear to be playing a role in rapid decline and death of white spruce plantations in the Park Falls area. SNEEDS (along with other needle pathogens) result in needle death or drop in the interior portion of the crowns of spruce. While the trees are still living, the SNEEDS fungus continues to produce spores which can spread to other areas. Spruce budworm (an insect) is also present in many of the spruce plantations. This insect destroys the new needle growth affecting the needles at the tips of the tree branches. The resultant combination (inner crown death from disease and outer crown death from insect infestation) results in a relatively rapid decline and death of the spruce trees. For more information on white spruce plantation decline and mortality and its potential causes, see the May 1, 2004 issue of Lake States Forest Health Watch published by the USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry Branch, Northeastern Area, St. Paul, MN (<http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/>). Recent surveys indicate that over half of the spruce plantations on the Park Falls landbase are experiencing signs of decline and mortality. Further field studies indicate that some of the white spruce plantations have already declined to the point where mortality is already heavy and remaining trees are continuing a rapid decline.

Based on field inventory information, three areas (white spruce plantations) that are already experiencing heavy decline and mortality are being proposed for salvage timber harvest at this time (see attached vicinity maps).

Purpose and Need for the Proposal

The purpose of this action (salvage timber harvest and tree regeneration) is to meet the goals of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, 2004 (Forest Plan or Plan):

Goal 1.4 Terrestrial Ecosystems - Provide terrestrial ecosystems in healthy, diverse, and productive conditions (Plan page 1-3).

Goal 2.5 Forest Commodities - Contribute toward satisfying demand for wood products (Plan page 1-8).

The need for this action is related to the mortality of white spruce plantations caused by disease and insect infestations and to satisfy the demand for wood products by salvaging the trees before insects, disease, and rot render them useless for utilization. Salvage harvest will also reduce fuel loads in the area, somewhat reduce the potential for the SNEEDs fungus to spread to uninfected areas, and restore healthy, regenerating forest to the sites. Two of the proposed project areas have natural regeneration that is well established. The third area does not. For this reason, it is being proposed for tree planting following salvage harvest.

The Proposal

In the three project areas shown in the table below and on the three attached project area maps, only spruce greater than 4.9 inches in diameter at chest height (except as specified in the Project Design Measures listed in the next section) would be cut, and removed. In addition, the project area specified as 108 would be mechanically prepared and planted to red pine at about 700 trees per acre.

Connected actions associated with the salvage harvest would be the construction and use of log landings and skid trails. Only existing roads and motorized trails will be used to access the salvage activity areas. No new permanent or temporary road construction would occur. Existing roads and trails that are currently closed with a berm or gate would be closed again following project activities.

The table below lists basic information for each of the 3 project areas.

PROJECT AREA	STAND	CURRENT FOREST TYPE	ACRES	AGE	PROPOSED ACTION	REGENERATION
53	053004	White Spruce	54	70	Salvage Harvest	aspen
53	053060	White Spruce	18	70	Salvage Harvest	aspen
108	108002	White Spruce	94	57	Salvage Harvest and Plant	red pine
143	143017	White Spruce	73	67	Salvage Harvest	hardwood
		Total:	239			

Project Area 53 is located in T40N, R2E, Section 36. Project Area 108 is located in T40N, R3E, Section 20. Project Area 143 is located in T38N, R3E, Section 19.

Project Design Measures

This section contains Forest Plan standards and guidelines and other design measures that would be implemented with this proposal. These measures, when implemented with the project, reduce or eliminate the potential for adverse environmental or social effects to occur. Additional measures may be developed as the analysis progresses.

- a) Heritage resource surveys would be conducted prior to implementation and if any sites are discovered, they would be avoided. There have been previous timber harvest activities in the three project areas. Heritage surveys have been done in the past, and there are currently no known sites. See Forest Plan, page 2-29.
- b) The location of landings and main skid trails will be designated by the Forest Service in all project areas. These will not be placed in areas infested with non-native, invasive plant species. There are no known populations of non-native, invasive plant species currently in the project areas. See Forest Plan, page 2-25.

- c) Wisconsin’s Forestry BMPs (Best Management Practices) will be used to maintain water quality and hydrologic wetland functions. See Forest Plan, pages 2-2 and 2-3. Stand 053004 contains some wetland pockets and 143017 contains an unnamed drainage.
 PROJECT AREA 143:
 - Skid trails and landings will be located a minimum of 35 feet from the ordinary high-water mark of the unnamed tributary in Project Area 143.
 - If present, leave 60 square feet of basal area in live trees (non-spruce) 5 inches in diameter at chest height (and larger) adjacent to the unnamed tributary in Project Area 143.
 PROJECT AREAS 53, 108, AND 143:
 - Skid trails and landings will be established outside of wetlands.
 - Logging and site preparation equipment will be kept out of wetlands.
 - Logging slash will not be moved into a wetland.
 - Logging slash will be kept out of open water.
- d) In all project areas, operate logging equipment only when soils are not saturated or when the ground is frozen. See Forest Plan, page 2-3.
- e) In stand 108002, minimize topsoil displacement into piles or windrows if machine piling slash and debris prior to planting. See Forest Plan, page 2-3.
- f) In stand 108002, the seedling source will be known and the seedlings planted will be produced from seed collected within the climatic zone of this area. See Forest Plan, page 2-5.
- g) In all project areas, leave and protect existing downed logs greater than 10 inches in diameter (small end diameter) consistent with providing for management access (e.g. skid trails). See Forest Plan, page 2-14.
- h) In all project areas, reserve dead snags and live den trees up to 10 trees/snags per acre, unless they present a safety concern. Emphasize the largest snags and den trees available. Those snags felled for safety reasons should be left on site as coarse woody debris wherever possible. See Forest Plan, page 2-14.
- i) In all project areas, reserve 2 to 5 live trees per acre greater than 11 inches in diameter, or select the largest trees available. See Forest Plan, page 2-14.
- j) In stands 053004, 053060, and 108002, additional areas will be reserved from cutting at the rate of ½ acre per 10 acres of cutting/salvage. See Forest Plan, page 2-14. Where there are clumps of live trees (non-spruce) within the stands, retaining those clumps would be preferred. Where live trees are not present in clumps, dead and dying spruce will be utilized. Where possible, live clumps of trees should be left along FR 148 and FRs 131 and 136 in order to reduce visual impacts along these travelways.
- k) In all project areas, apply tree-marking paint on the sides of trees that face away from classified roads and trails. See Forest Plan, page 2-31. Classified roads and trails are shown on the attached project area maps.
- l) Along FR 148 and adjacent to private property, establish a 10-foot slash removal zone. See Forest Plan, page 2-32.
- m) In addition, the following slash disposal guidelines apply to FR 148, FR 131, FR 135, FR 136, and FT 118 for the visible area up to 100 or 150 feet as shown in the table below.

SIO* Slash Height		
SIO	Slash Height Less Than or Equal To (inches)	Distance Applied (100 feet for motorized areas and 150 feet for non-motorized)
High (FR 148)	24	100
Moderate (FR 131, 136)	24	150
Low (FR 135, FT 118)	36	100

*SIO equals Scenic Integrity Objective (SIO). The higher the SIO, the less noticeable management activities should be. See Forest Plan, page 2-32.

- n) Along FR 148 and FRs 131 and 136 special care in logging operations will be needed to reduce impacts to advanced regeneration during logging operations. Regeneration will help provide a vegetation screen from travelways with high and moderate Scenic Integrity Objectives.
- o) Locate landings a minimum of 100 feet from FR 148, FR 131, FR 135, and FR 136.
- p) Existing classified and unclassified, temporary roads will be used to access the project areas. Some of these access roads were used in previous thinnings within the past 10 years, and may need to be reopened. Once logging is completed, all temporary roads (non-classified) used for access to the project areas will be closed off again. Temporary roads are shown on the attached project area maps.
- q) In all project areas, temporary roads, skid trails, and landings will be seeded with a native seed mix following use. See Forest Plan, page 2-3.

Additional Project Area Information

PROJECT AREA	STAND	ACRES	Approximate Volume	Cords per Acre	2004 Forest Plan Management Area	
53	053004	54	540 cords	10	1A	Plan Pages 3-3 & 4
53	053060	18	180 cords	10	8D	Plan Pages 3-42thru49
108	108002	94	1880 cords	20	4A	Plan Pages 3-17 & 18
143	143017	73	1022 cords	14	1A, non-motorized	Plan Pages 3-3 & 4

The above table shows the approximate volume of wood expected to be salvaged with implementation of this proposal. The volume per acre for Project Area 53 is substantially less than the volume expected to be salvaged in the other 2 areas. All 3 areas are previously managed and thinned plantations; however, Project Area 53 was recently damaged by a windstorm and those damaged trees have already been removed (Park Falls Blowdown Decision Notice, June 2, 2002).

Forest Plan Management Area direction guides how parts of the National Forest are to be managed. In general, most of the project area falls within management area (MA) prescriptions that would be considered intensively managed (1A and 4A). Simply structured early successional forests (primarily aspen) characterize MA 1A. Coniferous, mixed coniferous-hardwood and aspen forests dominate MA 4A. Natural and plantation conifer stands are most prevalent, but both hardwood and aspen are well represented in this landscape.

A portion of Project Area 53 falls in Management Area 8D. MA 8D is characterized by free-flowing rivers and associated corridors in a natural condition identified for special management on a federal or state level. In this case the South Fork Flambeau River is eligible for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The segment of river adjacent to Project Area 53 is eligible for scenic designation. Activities in 8D areas are conducted to protect and enhance the values of candidate national wild, scenic, and recreational rivers that are eligible for designation or have been identified for study by Congress. In determining acceptable activities, the area visible from the river is an important management consideration. Stand 053060 in Project Area 53 is within a ¼ mile of the river, but is not adjacent to or visible from the river.

Project Area 53 is adjacent to Forest Road (FR) 148 which is also coincidental with a horse trail. A motorized trail (FT 118) also passes through this area and the Smith Rapids Campground is adjacent to this area on the north. The Scenic Integrity Objective (SIO) for FR 148, and Forest Trail (FT) 126

(horse trail) is high. The SIO for the campground is high. The SIO for the motorized trail is low. In areas with a high SIO, the intent is to keep a live, healthy, and mature forest canopy. In this case, the dead and dying spruce do not meet this objective. The tradeoff with visual quality is that following the proposed salvage harvest, there would be a regenerating, healthy forest rather than a dying, mature forest.

As stated earlier in this document, Project Area 108 has little to no natural forest regeneration at this time, and so, is being proposed for planting. Both jack pine and red pine were considered as species suited to this site. The current preference for regenerating the area to red pine is associated with terrain and operability. The terrain in this area is flat and would be ideal for the intermediate management activities (thinnings) needed for red pine.

Decision Space

The scope of the decision focuses on salvage harvest of dead and dying white spruce, within the scope of management direction in the 2004 Forest Plan. The decision on this proposal is limited to:

- ✓ Salvage harvest of merchantable forest products and connected actions of road maintenance and construction of log landing and decking areas.
- ✓ Project design measures needed for resource protection.
- ✓ Site preparation and forest regeneration (planting trees) in areas where natural regeneration is not likely to occur within the next 5 years.
- ✓ Location of the above actions.

This proposal will not address general travel management or land use objectives, nor will it address amendments to the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. No road construction is needed for accomplishment of this project.

The Responsible Official for this decision is the Medford-Park Falls District Ranger, Bob Hennes.

Decision Documentation

It is expected that this project will be documented in a Decision Memo.

This type of action falls under Section 31.2 (13) and 31.2 (5)-Categories of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo Are Required, of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. Category 13 includes: “Salvage of dead and/or dying trees not to exceed 250 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction.” Proposals in this category may include incidental removal of live or dead trees for landings, skid trails and road clearing. Category 5 includes: “Regeneration of an area to native tree species.” Proposals in this category include site preparation and planting or seeding.

This proposal is routine and no extraordinary circumstances have been identified that might cause the proposed activities to have adverse effects to the environment.

- a) Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species will not be adversely affected by this action. Preliminary biological evaluation information indicates that there would be no impact to any species provided that reserve tree guidelines are implemented.

These guidelines would maintain the area as potential habitat for black-backed woodpecker, a Regional Forester Sensitive Species.

- b) Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds would not be adversely affected by the salvage activity. There are no municipal watersheds on the Medford-Park Falls District. Streams and wetlands in the project area are protected by BMPs. See Project Design Measures.
- c) This action does not take place in congressionally designated areas such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or National Recreation Areas.
- d) There are no Inventoried Roadless Areas near the activity areas.
- e) There are no Research Natural Areas or proposed areas near the projects.
- f) Archaeological sites or historic properties will not be affected by these actions. The area will have completed surveys for heritage resources prior to implementation and any discovered sites would be avoided.

Public Participation

For those who are interested in this proposal or wish to express a concern about the environmental impacts that could occur if the proposal is implemented, a form has been provided below. Those not replying to this proposal will be removed from the mailing list for receiving additional information on this project. Comments or requests for information may be sent to Jim Lalonde at:

Mailing Address: Attn.: Jim Lalonde Medford-Park Falls Ranger District 1170 4 th Ave., South Park Falls, WI 54552	<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Email Address:</td> <td style="width: 50%;">jlalonde@fs.fed.us</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Phone:</td> <td>(715)762-5118</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="text-align: center;">For Info:</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Chequamegon-Nicolet Web Page:</td> <td>www.fs.fed.us/r9/cnnf</td> </tr> </table>	Email Address:	jlalonde@fs.fed.us	Phone:	(715)762-5118	For Info:		Chequamegon-Nicolet Web Page:	www.fs.fed.us/r9/cnnf
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For Info:									
Chequamegon-Nicolet Web Page:	www.fs.fed.us/r9/cnnf								

Reply Requested By: July 9, 2004

- Remove my name from the mailing list for this project.
- Keep me on the mailing list for this project and send me a paper copy of the Decision Memo.
- Keep me on the mailing list for this project and send a notice for accessing the Decision Memo on the internet.

I have the following comments on the proposed action for the Alpha Spruce Dieback Project: