



United States
Department of
Agriculture

June 2003

Type of Document: **Decision Memo**

Project: **Ironton Roadside Fuels
Reduction**

Administrative Unit: **Ironton Ranger District
Wayne National Forest
USDA – Forest Service**

Geographic Location: **Scioto, Lawrence and Gallia
Counties, Ohio**

I. Decision to be implemented

A. Description of Decision

I have decided to implement the Ironton Roadside Fuels Reduction Project. This project is in response to damage to vegetation caused by a severe ice storm during the weekend of February 15, 2003. The damage has created a fire hazard on Forest Service land along public roads close to private land and structures.

In this project, we will be treating an area approximately 200 feet on either side of the public roads in the identified treatment areas (see following table and the map attached to the last page). Branches smaller than one inch would be left on the ground. Woody debris one inch to six inches in diameter would be either chipped and removed from National Forest land to off-site disposal areas, or lopped and scattered to a depth of less than two feet over the treatment sites. On approximately 100 acres within the five roadside areas, trees over 6 inches in diameter would be removed and may be sold commercially to reduce the hazardous fuel levels. Only trees that are now on the ground or are more than halfway down (less than 45-degree angle from level ground) would be removed. If a tree is a safety hazard to work crews, it can be taken down regardless of angle.

No new roads would be constructed to remove this material. Equipment use would be limited to small vehicles such as all-terrain vehicles, Bobcats and low ground pressure equipment. In order to maintain traffic flow on local roads and to protect public and worker safety, small landings of up to ¼-acre would be cleared along roadsides where the material can be concentrated and loaded for removal onto trucks. Some trees may be cut to create these concentration areas. Landings and skid trails with bare soil would be seeded and/or mulched after use.

Table 1-1: Ironton Fuels Reduction Project

Hazardous Fuels Treatment Areas				
Site Name	Township	Adjacent Road	Legal description	Approx Acres
Thompson Cemetery	Decatur, Lawrence County	T-160 T-140 / FR 5	T3N R18W, Section 25 and 36	68
Peckerwood	Symmes, Lawrence County	CR 210 T-154, CR47	T5N R17W, Sections 15,16,21,22, 23& 27	107

Site Name	Township	Adjacent Road	Legal description	Approx Acres
Cadmus	Perry Gallia County	CR58 (formerly CR12) SR 141	T5N R16W, Sections 29, 30, 31 & 32	62
Pine Creek	Decatur Lawrence County Bloom Scioto County	CR 34 T-162 (Lawrence) CR 10 (Scioto)	T3N R18W, Sections 3, 4, 5, & 6 T4N R18W, Section 31 & 32 T4N R19W, Section 36	175
Peniel	Greenfield Gallia County	CR 76, CR70, T-602, CR 68 (formerly CR1, 2, 10, and T-7)	T6N R17W Sections 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 34	143
TOTAL				554

In order to reduce the hazard and protect heritage and biological resources, the following mitigations will occur:

Mitigations as part of the Proposed Action

1. Survey for two federally listed plant species will be completed before ground disturbing activities take place. Mitigation is proposed to a) place landings as close to roads as possible to minimize length of temporary access roads; b) halt the project in areas where populations of either of the federally listed species are found until formal consultation with USFWS can be undertaken; c) allow no skid trails, landings, or equipment operations within 50 feet of the top or 50 feet of the base of any rock structures (for monkshood (*Aconitum noveboracense*)); d) do not remove any healthy butternut trees. (USFS 2003c)
2. Known heritage sites will be flagged on the ground prior to ground-disturbing activities and sites will be avoided during operations. Due to the inability to survey all treatment sites prior to implementation because of safety concerns, a heritage monitor will be on site during implementation to inspect for evidence of additional heritage sites in the un-surveyed areas.
3. Trees with bat roost tree characteristics will not be cut between April 15 and September 15. For the purpose of this project, bat roost trees include those that are at least six inches in diameter and are dead or hollow, or have major splits or broken tops, or large areas of loose bark, or are shagbark or shellbark hickory. This restriction applies to any trees not laying on the ground or parallel to the ground. Any bat roost trees which are identified as safety hazards may be cut any time, but if cut during the above time period, a tally will be kept in accordance with the Biological Opinion issued by the USFWS. (USFS 2003b)
4. Landings will be located as close to roads as possible to minimize temporary road construction. Landings will be seeded and/or mulched after use.

In addition, due to large infestations of invasive, non-native species, several practices are recommended to prevent significant spread of these non-natives throughout the treatment area.

1. Retain native vegetation in and around project activities to the maximum extent possible consistent with project objectives.
2. Minimize soil disturbance to the extent practical.

3. Re-vegetate disturbed soil in a manner that optimizes plant establishment for that specific site. Re-vegetation may include topsoil replacement, planting, seeding, fertilization, liming, and weed-free mulching as necessary. Use native material where appropriate and feasible. Use certified weed-free or weed-seed-free hay or straw where certified materials are reasonably available. Where practical, stockpile weed-seed-free topsoil and replace it on disturbed areas (e.g., road embankments or landings). A seed mix that contains annual rye (a non-native species), Virginia rye (*Elymus virginicus*), and bottlebrush grass (*Elymus hystrix*) is recommended.
4. In order to prevent kudzu from spreading further into the Peckerwood Hollow area, no ground disturbing activities should take place within a 100-foot buffer of the current infestation. (Larson 2003)

A map showing the treatment areas appears at the end of this memo. Detailed maps of the individual treatment areas are in the Project File and are available upon request.

B. Purpose of Decision

During the weekend of February 15, 2003, a winter storm struck the Ohio River Basin, reaching north into southern Ohio. While two feet of snow fell on the northern parts of the Wayne National Forest, six inches of ice coated trees on the southern end of the Forest near Ironton, Ohio. Of 100,000 acres on the Ironton Ranger District, the storm caused some level of damage on an estimated 40,000 acres with the worst damage seen in stands including naturally-occurring Virginia (*Pinus virginiana*) and short-leaf pine (*Pinus echinata*). Further field review of conditions identified approximately 550 acres along public roads with extreme amounts of woody debris and with private structures located within ½ mile. The woody debris created by this storm is expected to cure during the summer and create unacceptable burning conditions in the fall of 2003. The proposed reduction in fuels is necessary to effect an immediate change in fire behavior to reduce potential rates of spread and intensity, to maintain conditions that support desirable fire behavior, and to protect improvements to private property.

It is also necessary to reduce the risk of wildland fire in the wildland-urban interface to individual residences and structures along local roads. There are 1,880 structures in the ice storm impacted area. All five townships in the treatment areas have been identified as Communities at Risk by the National Association of State Foresters at the request of Congress. These communities are within the vicinity of federal lands that are at high risk from wildfire (See Project File J-5). Areas affected by the ice storm will present a much more complex and dangerous suppression problem as the large amounts of downed material impede line construction. This could result in considerably more acreage being allowed to burn before containment can be accomplished as well as increased complexity of the suppression effort. With the interspersed ownership of private and federal land, there is a greater chance that more fires will spread from federal to private land.

Fall and spring fires are predictable in the southern unit of the Wayne NF, but high winds and low humidity could cause an increase in fire potential. Changes in weather conditions could cause spotting and torching and, in dense fuel concentrations, would lead to crowning out of individual trees. Fire control is very difficult when downed trees have fallen across each other, sawyers cannot cut through downed trees safely, and handline is impossible to construct due to large woody debris. The increased intensity of fire in these areas would cause firefighters to back off and establish control lines at varying distances from the actual fire, further jeopardizing private homes and small communities adjacent to the Forest. Wildfire occurrence on the Ironton District over the last 10 years ranges from a low of 9 fires in 1996 to a high of 80 fires in 2001 that

burned 865 acres. Ninety percent of all wildfires occurring on the Wayne National Forest are human-caused.

The Wayne National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan sets a goal to “minimize the risk of damage from flood, wind, wildfire, and erosion” and to “suppress all wildfire by taking action commensurate with values at risk, management area goals and agreed upon standards found in the cooperative fire agreement with the State of Ohio for interspersed private land” (USFS 1988, pg 4-4).

C. Alternative Actions Considered but Dismissed

As the storm-related fuel build-up was being assessed, the interdisciplinary team discussed the possibility of taking no action. The fire history in the Ironton area (up to 80 fires in one season), the proximity of private residences, the potential damage to habitat for endangered species and heritage resources, and the inability to control fires in the damaged area caused this alternative to be eliminated.

The proposed action initially kept all woody debris over 6” in diameter on site. This alternative was modified due to the cost of treatment and the loss of economic opportunity for the local area. It was also considered to do prescribed burning in the treatment areas. The high volume of woody debris makes burning prior to removal prohibitive due to the potential for extreme fire behavior, the existing hazards to control, and the proximity of adjacent residences.

II. Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the US Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

The Department of Interior and Agriculture reviewed over 3,000 hazardous fuels reduction and rehabilitation/stabilization projects completed between FY 1998 and 2002 in order to determine the environmental impacts of these activities. The result of this study was that, in the absence of extraordinary circumstances, these types of activities do not result in significant cumulative effects on the human environment, and therefore, should be categorically excluded from further documentation.

I have concluded that this decision is appropriately categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it is a routine activity within a category of exclusion and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment. I find this project was developed in a collaborative framework as described in the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan, and that the project is within the wildland-urban interface. The project is also in compliance with the Wayne Forest Plan. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the Project File.

A. Category of Exclusion

The activity falls with the categorical exclusion category 31.2, number 10, which states: “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.” (Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Environmental Policy and Procedures, Interim Directive (ID) 1909.15–2003–1). This category was published in the Federal Register June 5, 2003 and was effective immediately.

B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

The mere presence of one or more of the following resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist.

1. Threatened and Endangered Species or Their Critical Habitat

The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species’ designated critical habitat. In accordance with Section 7(c) of this Act, a list of proposed, threatened or endangered species that may be present in the project area was provided to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFS 2003b, USFS 2003c). In the analysis of impacts from this project, it has been determined and concurred with by USFWS that, if the mitigations are followed, implementing the proposed action should not cause any direct, indirect or cumulative adverse effects which could jeopardize the continued existence of any Federal Threatened or Endangered Animal Species, or contribute to the loss of viability or cause to move toward federal listing any Regional Sensitive Animal Species, which may occur on the Wayne National Forest.

Mitigations are as follows:

- Trees with bat roost characteristics are not cut during the non-hibernation season (April 15 to September 15). Roost trees are those that are at least six inches in diameter and are dead or hollow, or have major splits or broken tops, or large areas of loose bark, or are shagbark or shellbark hickory. Trees lying on the ground or parallel to the ground (elevated by other fallen trees) are not subject to this restriction.
- Any bat roost trees which are identified as safety hazards may be cut any time, but if cut during the non-hibernation season, a tally must be kept to ensure the total number on the Wayne National Forest does not exceed 125 trees before September 2006. (USFS 2003b)

It was also determined that, if botanical surveys are completed at the end of May and early June for the small-whorled pogonia and running buffalo clover, and no individuals of either species are found, the project may affect habitat, but would not likely adversely affect these species. If individuals of either species are discovered, the project must be halted in the resident areas until formal consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service can be initiated. Due to the unlikely occurrence of the monkshood in the project area, a determination of “not likely to adversely affect” was made for this species (USFS 2003c).

2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

There is no wetland habitat within the treatment sites. There are no municipal watersheds within the treatment areas. A small portion of the Pine Creek Treatment area (refer to Map) is in the floodplain that extends out from the creek channel. Fallen trees over 6” in diameter will either be removed from the floodplain or left whole in the floodplain. Use of low ground pressure equipment and the presence of summer vegetation will minimize disturbance near the floodplain. No treatment will occur in floodplain areas. No long-term adverse direct, indirect or cumulative effects are expected to occur to the floodplain as a result of implementing this project (Ewing 2003a).

3. Congressionally Designated Areas

There are no designated wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas on the Wayne National Forest.

4. Inventoried Roadless Areas

There are no inventoried roadless areas (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE) II) on the Wayne National Forest.

5. Research Natural Areas

There are no research natural areas in or near the project area. The Waterfall Cove Special Area was excluded from the Pine Creek Treatment Area.

6. American Indian native religious or cultural sites

Consultation with seven tribes has occurred on this project and no tribal concerns were identified.

7. Archaeological sites or historic properties or areas

Known archaeological sites in two of the treatment areas will be marked for avoidance prior to project implementation. The volume of woody debris on the ground impedes further survey in the remaining three treatment areas until implementation, at which time archaeological monitors will be on site with work crews to survey as debris is removed. This process has been established through a Memorandum of Understanding with the State Historic Preservation Office (see Project File E-1).

8. No other extraordinary circumstances related to this project were identified.

III. Public Involvement

Invitations to comment on the proposed action were mailed to approximately 300 individuals on April 17, 2003. Twelve comment letters were received. The scoping letter and map were available on the Wayne National Forest public website. Twenty individuals representing the local communities, wood industry, local government, and the environmental community participated in a field tour of damaged areas on April 21, 2003. Every house within ½ mile of the proposed treatment areas was visited and received a scoping invitation either during the week of April 17 or April 24. The Ohio Division of Forestry has shared in the planning of this project as its own nearby state properties were similarly affected.

Concerns were raised about habitat in the treatment areas for federally threatened or endangered and Regional Forester Sensitive Plant Species and known heritage sites in two treatment areas. Some members of the public are concerned that removal of the downed woody debris represents an economic opportunity to the local community and want to see commercial removal as an option. Others are concerned that there should be no removal of commercial products from our national forests and no new roads built. There is concern that large woody debris left in the floodplain near stream channels could cause downstream damage to bridges, culverts, roads and human safety if floodwaters move it into and down Pine Creek. Some comment letters recommended utilizing the storm-damaged timber stands to create new early succession habitat.

These comments were used to refine the proposed action, to further identify mitigations to the proposed action, and to identify the need for more analysis. Comments were also used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources.

Documentation of how specific comments received were used is shown in correspondence to the District Ranger (see Project File C-7).

IV. Findings Required by and/or Related to Other Laws and Regulations

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below.

This project complies with the **National Forest Management Act (1976)** through adherence to guidance in the **Wayne National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan)**. A Goal in the 1988 Forest Plan is to suppress all wildfire by taking action commensurate with values at risk. Standards and Guidelines for Fire Management recommend that activity fuels (slash) will be treated to a level commensurate with the allowable fire intensity and rate of spread that meets resource objectives. Wildfire prevention, detection, and suppression, as well as fuels management, including hazard reduction, will be planned, based on an analysis of probable fire location, expected fire intensities, potential net resource value change, and risk to health and safety (USFS 1988). Although no natural event such as the ice storm was foreseen, the treatment of fuel hazards is consistent with this recommendation for similar reasons.

This project is consistent with the **National Fire Plan's Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan**, in that communication with landowners and government officials generated the urgency for debris clean-up along public roads in the wildland-urban interface. The resulting project improves suppression capability over 550 acres of the heaviest storm-related fuel loading on the Ironton District, it reduces hazardous fuels in the treatment areas near local residences and communities, and it reduces the potential for catastrophic fire so that natural fire can burn without disastrous results. Community input was received through personal contact with local officials and other citizens, a public field tour, mailing to interested parties, and visitation of homes within ½-mile of the treatment areas. Local residents voiced support for the project in order to protect their property improvements. Local officials and industry representatives supported the project and requested that any salvage be made available for commercial removal so as not to deny economic opportunity to the local community.

Endangered, threatened and sensitive species have been considered in this analysis as required by the **Endangered Species Act**. Potential effects of this decision on sensitive species have been analyzed and documented in the Biological Evaluations for Animals (USFS 2003b) and for Plants (USFS 2003c). Mitigations for protection of these species can be found in Section II.B.1 of this document.

This decision complies with the **Clean Water Act** by incorporating best management practices including the use of low ground pressure equipment, the treatment of storm debris in streams, and the treatment of debris in floodplains (see Section II, Item B3 of this document). No storm debris will be removed from streams and the possibility of storm debris moving into the Pine Creek floodplain is minimized by specifications leaving debris in full-length pieces near Pine Creek or skidding it out of the floodplain. No other floodplains are in the treatment areas.

This decision complies with Section 106 of the **National Historic Preservation Act**. See Section II, Item B7 of this document.

This decision has considered whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations as required in **Executive Order 12898: Environmental Justice**. Public

involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision. Public involvement did not identify, nor is this decision expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

The entirety of this document and the Project File supports compliance with the **National Environmental Policy Act**.

V. Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f) (published June 4, 2003) which states that decision for actions that have been categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS pursuant to FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31 are not subject to appeal.

VI. Implementation Date

This decision may be implemented immediately.

VII. Contact Person

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Ironton District Ranger Gloria Chrismer during normal office hours (weekdays 8 am to 4:30 pm) at the Ironton District Office, 6518 State Route 93, Pedro, Ohio 45659; Phone (740) 534-6500.

VIII. Bibliography

Cramer, Ann. Heritage Evaluation for Ironton Fuels Treatment Area. 5/5/2003.

Ewing, Rebecca (2003a). Ironton Ice Storm – Hazard Fuel Removal Wetland and Floodplain Determination). 4/25/2003.

Larson, Erin. 2003. Non-native Invasive Species Risk Assessment for Ice Storm Fuels Reduction in Pine Stands. 4/25/2003.

USFS 1988. Wayne National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

USFS 2003a, Fuels Analysis for the Ice Storm Damage on the Ironton District, Pedro Ohio. Terrell, Bennie, 4/1/2003.

USFS 2003b, Ice Storm Damage Fuels Reduction Biological Evaluation (Animals), Flegel, Kathy. 4/28/2003.

USFS 2003c, Ice Storm Damage Fuels Reduction in Pine Stands, Botanical Biological Evaluation, Larson, Erin. 4/30/2003.

IX. Signature and Date

/s/John W. Brown

June 5, 2003

for GLORIA CHRISMER
Acting District Ranger
Ironton Ranger District

Date

