



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

Idaho Panhandle  
National Forest

Coeur d'Alene River  
Ranger District

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Hello –

I would like to share some information with you about a project we are considering in the Twomile watershed north of the community of Silverton, Idaho (please refer to the enclosed vicinity map). In order to understand why we are proposing these activities, I first need to tell you a little more about how we identified the Twomile area as needing such treatment.

Just a few years ago, we watched the televised scenes of frantic families leaving their homes, their livestock, and often their businesses as fire devastated the forests of Montana and other parts of the western United States. In the Idaho Panhandle, we had the good fortune to have rain with our lightning, and in areas where fires did ignite we were able to suppress the flames before dry winds kicked up to push them out of control. However, continued drought, ice and wind storms, insects and disease, and historical activities have changed our forests to a condition that is at risk to catastrophic wildland fire.

The extreme fire season of 2000 and the increasing incidence of large scale high-intensity fires triggered a response from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior. The result was the *National Fire Plan*. As part of the Plan's direction, Congress mandated several reporting requirements including the creation of a 10-year comprehensive strategy to be accomplished by a variety of individuals, organizations and agencies. The strategy emphasizes measures to reduce risks to communities and to the environment. Local city and county governments have met with area residents, agencies and organizations to develop such a strategy for the Silver Valley, and have identified communities where the surrounding forests pose an increased risk in the event of a wildfire.

### **Background**

In addition to the direction from the National Fire Plan, the Idaho Panhandle National Forests use several other planning documents to aid in assessing and implementing prudent land management. At a broad scale, findings from the *Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP)* are used to identify scientifically sound and ecosystem-based strategies for forest management. ICBEMP recommends reducing risk to ecological integrity and species viability. At a finer scale, findings from the document titled "Toward an Ecosystem Approach: An Assessment of the Coeur d'Alene River Basin" (*Geographic Assessment*) identifies current and historical conditions in the Coeur d'Alene River basin. The Geographic Assessment identifies the Twomile watershed as "functioning but at risk," recommending that areas with this designation be among the highest priority for watershed and aquatic restoration (for example, restoring wider riparian zones at the bottom of stream drainages).



## Current Conditions

According to the Geographic Assessment, ponderosa pine has declined as a stand component throughout the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, and individual stands are dense compared to historical conditions. Drier south-facing slopes once contained mixed, open stands of ponderosa pine, western larch and Douglas-fir with a sparse understory. These same stands now have a more dense tree cover with a higher component of Douglas-fir and grand fir trees (Figure 1). These stands also have dense understories of shade tolerant reproduction (vegetation that will establish and grow in the understory despite low levels of sunlight). These vegetative conditions exist on many areas with southern aspects in the Twomile watershed and in stands directly adjacent to the community of Silverton.



Figure 1: Encroaching fir trees in a ponderosa pine stand in the Twomile watershed.



Figure 2: Low intensity surface fire.

Historically, shade-tolerant vegetation was periodically killed by wildland fires that freely burned at low intensities (with flame lengths that were generally less than 2 feet high) (Figure 2). Without the recurring wildland fires, shade-tolerant vegetation continues to grow in the understory, acting as “ladder fuels” that contribute to fire behavior that has the potential of 300 foot flame lengths (Figure 3). These fires are described as being lethal crown fires, fires that burn the entire stand. Frequent fire prevents the significant buildup of such vegetation. Tree species such as ponderosa pine have the characteristics to survive low intensity fires, such as thick bark and the ability to self prune lower canopy limbs that could spread fire into the tree’s canopy.

In the Twomile watershed, suppressing fires has changed the pattern or *regime* of historic fires, and changed the stand structure. Past timber harvest on private land and a small amount of USFS land within the analysis area has also changed the forest structure by removing some of the large diameter trees and increasing the understory vegetation component. Today, many stands are characterized by dense mature Douglas-fir, with some grand fir

trees that are prone to damage by forest insects and disease. These can rot or kill trees and branches, increasing the risk for large, high-intensity crown fires. Besides posing a threat to life and property, hot-burning fires often scorch the soil, reducing its productivity (the ability to grow vegetation). A very hot fire also creates a condition where the soil develops a water-repellant layer. When rain falls, more water runs off the site than is being infiltrated into the soil



Figure 3: High intensity crown fire.



Figure 4: The downstream results of erosion and sedimentation in a watershed with high burn severity.

profile, contributing to soil erosion. The culmination of water yield and hillside erosion from a watershed can destroy stream channels, fish habitat, and contribute to water quality concerns (Figure 4).

### Proposal

Tree thinning, prescribed burning and/or other fuel reduction methods can reduce the hazard of intense wildland fires and maintain key ecosystem components. The opportunity to restore a regime of frequent, low-intensity fire then exists. In areas adjacent to communities, treatments such as these can reduce unplanned fire behavior to enable successful fire suppression while protecting life and property. By

reducing the hazardous fuels, we have the opportunity to re-introduce frequent, low-intensity fires that will help to maintain the forest in a mosaic of relatively open stands that are resistant to disturbances such as fire, insects, and disease.

In stands that have a high density of trees, continuous canopies, and ladder fuels, a thinning treatment is often necessary to initially prepare the site for a low-intensity ground fire. Following thinning slash must be arranged to facilitate the type of burn desired, be it scattering it on the surface for consumption, piling it for burning, or removing it from the site. Stands that do not require commercial or precommercial thinning prior to burning may still need some treatment of surface fuels to achieve the desired results prior to the application of fire. Thinning activities that include merchantable material could temporarily increase traffic on roads in the area to allow for transport of the material. Prescribed burning activities implemented either in the spring or fall months when fire behavior could be managed will also produce smoke.



Figure 5: An example of a successful low intensity burn that aids in sustaining a ponderosa pine stand structure.

There are a number of options available for management of the Twomile area:

- *Utilizing various stand treatments that decrease existing fuels so that low-intensity surface fires can be reintroduced into the system. Harvesting suppressed Douglas-fir and grand fir trees by helicopters, skidders, line systems, or by hand to reduce the understory vegetation and provide for adequate crown spacing.*
- *Implement techniques for reducing slash in order to facilitate prescribed burning. These treatments could include piling, lop and scatter, and/or whole tree yarding, yet still maintaining enough material to provide nutrients for the site.*
- *A regular program of burning could be considered over the long-term so that mechanical methods are not needed to maintain the existing trees or newly established desired tree species in the watershed.*
- *A long-term road analysis could be explored to treat stream crossings that may be at risk to failure or to decommission roads that are threatening water quality.*

We are considering these treatments in the Twomile watershed because it is near urban communities (Silverton, Osburn, Shirttail, Nucklols, and Revenue Gulch residents), it has limited access (which would strongly hamper firefighting efforts in the event of a fire), is already experiencing damage due to insects and disease, and has a relatively high level of hazardous fuels.

### **Providing Comments**

We can best use your comments if we receive them by **February 21, 2003**. Over the next few months, we will take a closer look at conditions in the area, and develop and analyze the potential benefits and effects of alternative management strategies. We will document our findings in an Environmental Assessment that will be provided to other agencies, organizations, and interested members of the public for a 30-day review period. After hearing back from the public, I will decide which activities to implement, if any, with documentation provided in a Decision Notice.

When submitting comments, please include your name, address, telephone number, and the organization you represent (if any); the title of the document on which the comment is being submitted; and facts and reasons specific to this proposal for us to consider. Comments received on the proposed project (including names and addresses of those who comment) will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. We can accept and consider comments submitted anonymously; however, people who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision (36 CFR 215). Any person may request that we withhold submitted comments from the public record (pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d)) by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. However, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. We will inform the requestor of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality. If the request is denied, we will return the submitted comments and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted, with or without name and address, within a specified time.

In addition to hazardous fuels reduction projects on National Forest System lands, there are also opportunities for private landowners to reduce hazardous fuels on their land. Funding is available through the National Fire Plan to do similar work in the urban interface. The State of Idaho is coordinating grant applications and distribution of funds to areas identified as having a high risk to wildland fire. In order to be successful in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildland fires, coordinating treatments with adjacent landowners is imperative. If you are interested, please contact me.

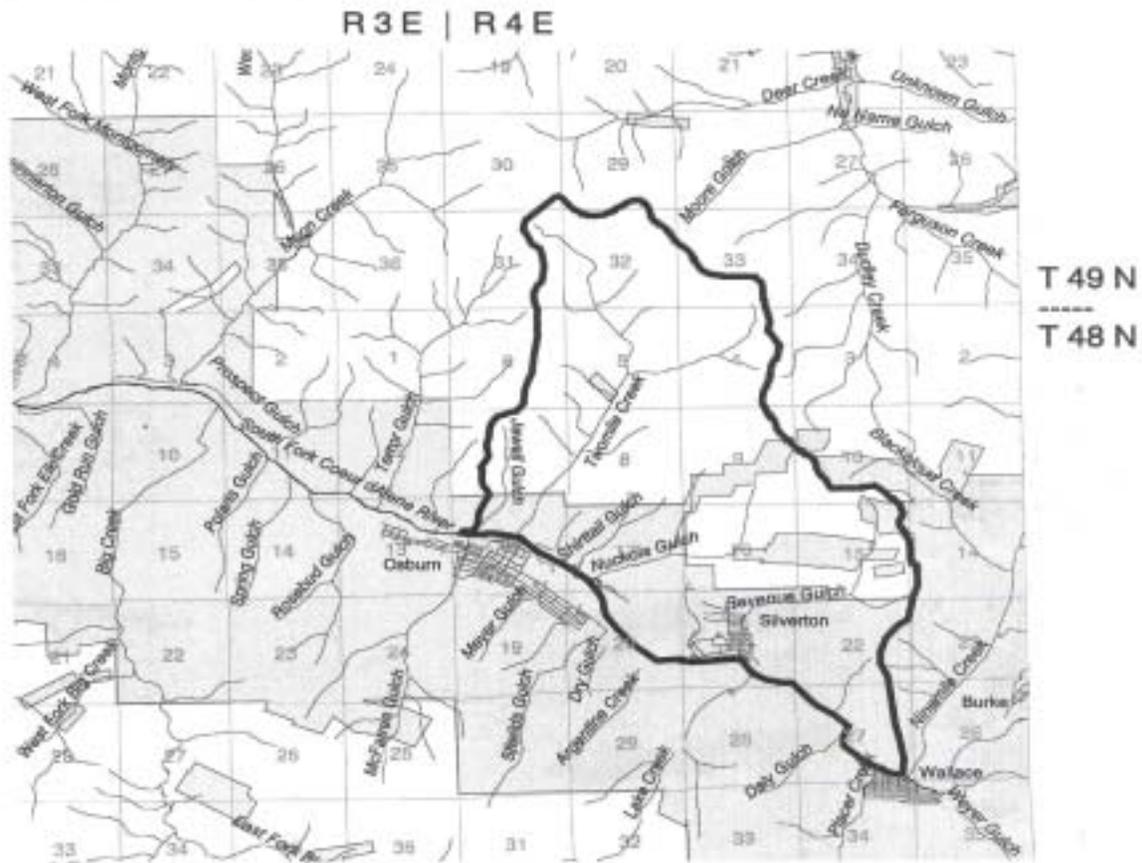
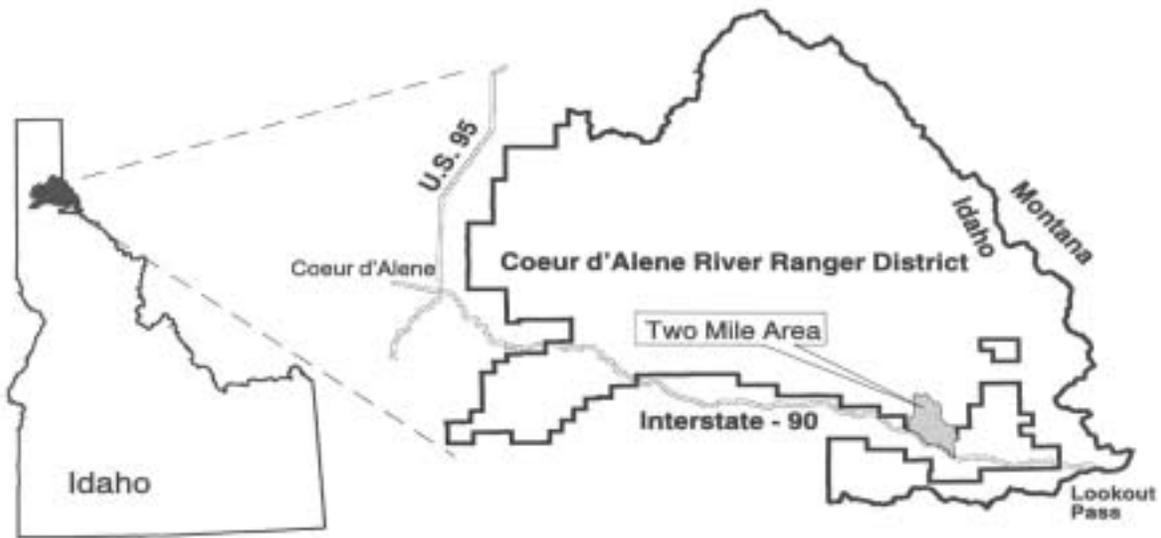
Please send written comments to the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, 2502 East Sherman Avenue, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814. If you have any questions about this proposal or are interested in obtaining more information about reducing hazardous fuels on your property, please contact Project Team Leader Lonnie Newton at (208) 765-7494. To obtain this and further information as it is developed, view our web page at <http://www.fs.fed.us/ipnf/eco/projects.html>.

Sincerely,

JOSEPH P. STRINGER  
District Ranger

enclosure

## Two Mile Area Vicinity Map



## Ponderosa Pine Twomile Restoration Project Vicinity Map