

# Blue Alder Resource Area Environmental Assessment Draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

USDA Forest Service  
Idaho Panhandle National Forests  
Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District

The Blue Alder Resource Area is in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and as such, uncontrolled wildfire poses a threat to life and property. Based on Kootenai County GIS data there are approximately 196 private structures within a mile of the Resource Area, with new development in the planning stages. Various infrastructure such as roads, powerlines, a natural gas pipeline, and Interstate 90 are near the Resource Area. An uncontrolled wildland fire in the WUI could threaten lives, homes, infrastructure, air quality, and tourism. A deficit in the number of naturally occurring fires in this area has led to increased fuel loading, changes in stand structure, and changes in species composition. Overall, this deficit has led to increased potential for large, intense, severe fires which could threaten lives and the wildland urban interface values which are particularly prevalent near the Blue Alder Resource Area. A severe wildfire could result in the loss of environmental values such as forest cover, soil productivity, water quality and visual quality. Financial losses could include homes, timber value, and fisheries. Based on the current conditions, which have resulted from the exclusion of wildfire and past harvesting practices, there is a need to reduce fuels and increase early seral species such as western larch and ponderosa pine which will increase forest resiliency and reduce the wildland fire threat.

In contrast to current conditions, desired future conditions in the Blue Alder Resource Area would include a considerable reduction in hazardous fuels, both at the stand and landscape scales. This reduction in fuels would allow for the protection of human life and property, as directed in the Forest Plan (Fire Management Standard 2b, Page II-38). Stand-level reductions in hazardous fuels will reduce fire intensity, severity, and resistance to control, while landscape-level fuel reduction would slow the spread of large fires. The desired future condition would reduce the risks of fires burning from the forest and into communities, but would also reduce the risk of fires starting near the community and burning uncontrolled into the forest. The Blue Alder Resource Area would consist of a variety of structural stages, limiting landscape fuel homogeneity which would limit the spread of fires in many conditions. In this landscape, both the WUI values and the environmental values such as forest cover, wildlife habitat, soil productivity, water quality, visual quality, and timber values would be protected.

The objectives of the project are to:

- *Reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland interface*
- *Establish and maintain long lived early seral species and resilient structure*
- *Maintain and improve dry-site wildlife habitat*

Three alternatives were considered in detail - the No-Action Alternative and two action alternatives. **Alternative 1**, the No-Action Alternative, represents the current and expected future condition given the past, ongoing and reasonably foreseeable activities (EA, Section 2.2.2).

**Alternative 2**, the Proposed Action, was developed to respond to current stand conditions and trend them towards the desired future condition. The proposed action includes prescribed burning to reduce fuels and maintain dry-site wildlife habitat, stand rehabilitation, timber harvesting, pre-commercial thinning, and road decommissioning. The areas proposed for treatment integrate multiple objectives concentrating vegetative treatments to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of benefits.

Under Alternative 2, new system road construction has been proposed to access treatment units in an economically viable manner. During the collaborative process, Idaho Conservation League and The Lands

Council expressed concerns with adding to the current road system. Their concerns were based on road maintenance back logs and declining budgets for road maintenance.

In order to address their concerns Alternative 3 has been developed which does not include new system road construction and consequently has resulted in a reduction of 243 acres of commercial harvesting.

The Forest Service has prepared this EA to determine whether or not implementing the activities proposed under either action alternative would result in significant effects warranting preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement. After considering the environmental effects described in the Blue Alder EA, I have determined that neither of the action alternatives would have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment based on the context and intensity of its impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following disclosures.

#### A. Context

**The significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts, such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27).**

The Blue Alder Resource Area EA is a project-level analysis. Its scope is confined to addressing the significant issues and environmental effects of the project, and the context of this proposal is limited to the locale of the Blue Alder Resource Area. Project activities are limited to the specific fuel and vegetation treatments proposed on lands managed by the USDA Forest Service in the Blue Alder Resource Area, although some analyses (such as aquatics and wildlife) considered the extent of effects beyond the project boundaries. While substantially improving hazardous fuels conditions and reducing potential wildfire intensities in the local area and watershed, neither alternative would pose any significant short- or long-term effects. Design features included in this proposal would limit adverse effects to such an extent that any adverse impacts are almost undetectable and immeasurable, even at the local level (discussed in EA Part 3).

#### B. Intensity

**This refers to the severity of the impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following are considered in evaluating intensity (40 CFR 1508.27):**

- 1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if, on balance, effects are believed to be beneficial.**

*and*

- 7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.**

Any of the action alternatives would make substantial progress toward reducing potential intensities of wildfire and trending stands away from potential fire behavior that could threaten human life and property. There would also be a trend to establishing and maintaining long-lived early seral species and structure (p. EA-2-1). **Impacts to other resources as a result of implementing proposed activities would be negligible under any of the action alternatives:**

- *While there would be direct and indirect effects to sensitive plants there would not be a trend to federal listing or loss of species or habitat (p. EA 3.7). Activities would meet Forest Plan standards and legal mandates.*

- *Existing infestations of certain weed species may continue to increase on Federal lands within the project area and adjacent private lands; however, activities under either alternative would minimize (but not eliminate) the risk of weed spread by application of design features (pp. EA-3.8).*
- *There would be no direct or indirect effects to fish habitat or populations based on water yield interpretation, because these modeled increases are within the historic range of variability for magnitude, intensity and duration when compared with what naturally occurred in these subwatersheds (EA 3.4)..*
- *Activities would reduce the potential severity of effects that a wildfire would have on soils, because there would be a reduction in the tons per acre of fuels on treated sites (p. EA-3.5). With implementation of mitigation measures for soils, the soil disturbing activities would not exceed Regional or Forest Plan standards under either action alternative.*
- *Effects to wildlife species vary - habitat conditions that favor one species may be detrimental to another. However, specific design features of the action alternatives would minimize the impacts to any given species in the Blue Alder Resource Area (pp. EA-3.6), and there will be no loss of viability to populations or species. The long-term benefits to wildlife would outweigh the short-term disturbance to species during project activities.*
- *The activities proposed under both action alternatives would have little effect on recreation. The Marie Creek Trail would only briefly be affected by prescribed burning on some open slopes, north of the trail. Access to the Forest will remain unchanged from the existing condition. However, the proposals would facilitate closure of illegal access routes created by ATVs. The physical blocks coupled with the travel management plan should help in reducing the access problems (p. EA 3.10).*
- *Effects to scenic resources would be slight and short term. As seasons change, vigorous growth of grasses and new brush would be supported in the treatment areas (p. EA 3.11).*

For these reasons, there would be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects to resources under any action alternative.

## **2. The degree of effects on public health or safety.**

The reduction in fire fuels under either action alternative would substantially reduce the rate of spread and flame length, increasing safety for both the public and fire suppression crews (EA 3.2). Risk of smoke intrusion into Class I airsheds or non-attainment areas from prescribed burning in the Resource Area would be minimal due to distance and prevailing winds (PF Doc. FF-42). All burning would comply with federal, state and local regulations (EA 3.2). For these reasons, there would be no significant effects on public health and safety under any action alternative.

## **3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas.**

No parklands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas would be affected by any of the proposed treatments. The project area has been surveyed and analyzed for historic and cultural resources (PF Doc. HR-01). Results of that work indicate that the proposed action would not have any effect on any historical or cultural resources (PF HR-01). With regard to wetlands, the proposed action would exclude all Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) from proposed commercial treatment areas, consistent with Forest Plan guidelines (EA, 3.4) as amended by the Inland Native Fish Strategy (PF Doc. CR-003), and state and federal law. These design features would reduce riparian impacts to the extent that none of the action alternatives would pose any significant impacts to wetlands or riparian areas within the Blue Alder Resource Area.

**4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environmental are likely to be highly controversial.**

As used in the Council on Environmental Quality's guidelines for implementing NEPA, the term "controversial" refers to whether substantial dispute exists as to the **size, nature or effect of the major federal action**, rather than the existence of opposition to a use. Extensive public scoping and an extended period of interaction between the project interdisciplinary team and interested individuals, groups and agencies was an integral part of this environmental assessment. Review of public input, of the potential issues raised in scoping of the proposed action, and the standards, guidelines and design features related to the proposed action have resulted in a limited and focused proposed action. While some opposition to the proposed activities does exist due to the proposed road construction in Alternative 2, most comments were supportive in nature. The effects of the activities in the Blue Alder Resource Area on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial as defined by the Council on Environmental Quality.

**5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.**

The action alternatives are similar to other fuel reduction projects that have been implemented without significant impacts on the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District and other districts of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. Documentation of past successes with similar projects can be found in the IPNFs' annual monitoring reports (PF Doc. CR-004 through CR-018, CR-022). The action alternatives are consistent with management direction provided by the Forest Plan. Design features would minimize the potential impacts under any action alternative.

**6. The degree to which the action may establish precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.**

This action would not establish a precedent for any future action, nor would it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.**

A record search, field survey, and resource inventory Heritage Resource Report have been completed for this project in compliance with Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act (PF Doc. HR-01). Assessment of historic and cultural resources in the Blue Alder Resource Area indicates implementation of this project would not affect any heritage resource eligible for listing in the National Register of historic places, nor would it cause loss or destruction of any significant cultural or historical resources. If any new heritage resources are discovered during project implementation, operations would cease in the area of discovery until adequate protection measures had been agreed upon with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.**

The action alternatives were designed to be implemented in a manner that would protect wildlife resources in the Blue Alder Resource Area (EA 3.6). There would be no significant impact to any species, and there would be no loss of viability to populations or species. The long-term benefits to wildlife would outweigh the short-term disturbance to species during project activities.

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

**National Forest Management Act and IPNF (1987) Forest Plan:** The action alternatives are consistent with the NFMA and other applicable federal, state and local laws that protect the environment, including the IPNF (1987) Forest Plan, as amended. The activities proposed in the Blue Alder Resource Area are consistent with the Forest Plan because they would help to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically intense fire and associated risks to life, property, and natural resources; and reduce the danger to fire suppression crews. All proposed management activities would be in compliance with Management Area direction, including goals and objectives, as described in the EA Part 3.

Forest Plan old-growth standards would be met or exceeded. Both alternatives 2 and 3 propose prescribed fire and timber harvest activities within allocated old growth stands. The stands with noncommercial and commercial thinning/improvement harvest treatments would continue to be maintained as allocated old growth, as activities are designed to maintain the characteristics that meet the old growth definitions.

NFMA consistency requirements include the need to protect species viability and Management Indicator Species habitat. The Proposed Action was designed to be implemented in a manner that would protect wildlife and fisheries resources in the Blue Alder Resource Area (EA 3.6, 3.4). There would be no significant impact to any species, and there would be no loss of viability to populations or species. The long-term benefits would outweigh the short-term disturbance to species during project activities. Technology and knowledge exists to ensure that lands are adequately restocked within five years after final harvest. Effects on residual trees and adjacent stands have been considered. Harvest will not occur on sites identified as not suitable for timber production. All treatments that would occur under the Proposed Action are silviculturally appropriate and are within the timber and vegetation practices outlined in the Forest Plan. Potential physical, biological, aesthetic, cultural, engineering and economic impacts of the action alternatives have been assessed and are disclosed in the Environmental Assessment with supporting information in the Project Files.

**Healthy Forests Restoration Act:** The Blue Alder project was originally conceived out of collaboration with the Kootenai County Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Task Force, and has gone through extensive collaborative efforts, which are described in Appendix G. Activities proposed in the Blue Alder Resource Area meet the requirements for authorization under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (EA, Appendix A). The project was initiated by the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District in response to the Kootenai County Fire Mitigation Plan. The County Fire Mitigation Plan recognizes the threat that wildfires pose to the county, and recommends management that would decrease this risk (EA 3.2). A collaborative process was used in developing the Blue Alder Resource Area proposal and involved members of the conservation community, timber industry, adjacent landowners and interested members of the public.

Alternative 1 would not reduce fuels, and therefore would not reduce the risk to communities. Alternative 2 would treat more acres commercially trending more acres towards resiliency to insects, disease, and fire over Alternative 3. Large tree retention will be accomplished by establishing an upper diameter limit of 21" DBH for all commercial treatment units.

**Clean Water Act:** Section 3.4 on Aquatic Resources evaluated potential adverse impacts to water resource and project compliance with the Clean Water Act, and determined that any action alternative would be consistent with the Clean Water Act (EA 3.4). There would be no change in risks to beneficial uses in any stream in the Blue Alder Resource Area.

**Endangered Species Act:** Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act directs that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by federal agencies do not jeopardize the continued existence of any Threatened or Endangered species, or result in adverse modification of habitat critical to these species. There would be no significant impact to any Threatened, Endangered, or Candidate species under any alternative. All action alternatives would be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act as amended (EA 3.6).

**Migratory Bird Treaty Act:** Although some current habitat may be lost over the short term as a result of proposed activities, taking no action could have similar effects (EA, 3.6). Efforts to trend stands in the resource area toward historic species composition and age structure and to maintain the ecological processes that created these conditions would eventually benefit nongame and land bird species.

**Environmental Justice:** In accordance with Executive Order 12898, the action alternatives were assessed to determine whether they would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. No impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or any other portion of public involvement during the course of this analysis. Based on this, any action alternative would comply with Executive Order 12898.

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