

December 3, 2007

Hello-

The Forest Service is proposing management activities in the Blue Alder Resource Area to reduce hazardous fuels, establish healthy resilient forests, perform stand rehabilitation, and aquatic restoration activities through vegetation management, road decommissioning, and recreation management. The Resource Area is located on the western edge of National Forest System Lands within the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNFs) and is located in the drainages of Blue Creek, Wolf Lodge Creek, and Alder Creek. The Blue Alder Resource Area is located in the wildland-urban interface as defined by the Kootenai County Fire Mitigation Plan. Being in the 'WUI' means that the Blue Alder Resource Area's location, just east of Coeur d'Alene, is very near to private land, homes, and community infrastructure. A severe wildfire could result in the loss of structures and private land values, as well as environmental values such as forest cover, wildlife habitat, soil productivity, water quality, visual quality, and timber value.

#### Public Involvement and Collaboration

This project was developed with considerable input from the Coeur d'Alene Forest Coalition, a non-profit collaborative group that represents a broad spectrum of special interests and local citizens. The coalition spent over a year looking at management opportunities within the resource area and held many meetings and three field trips to become acquainted with the resource area first hand. Some of the key issues that arose during these meetings were:

- Unauthorized motorized access and illegally pioneered trails
- Water quality and peak flows in the lower Wolf Lodge Basin
- Fuels reduction in the wildland urban interface
- Visual effects of using regeneration harvest techniques
- Road densities

#### Stewardship Contracting Opportunities

The Forest Service is authorized to use Stewardship Contracting which is a contracting method that emphasizes on-the-ground results and up-front collaboration with local communities in project development. Stewardship Contracting allows for the revenues from commercial vegetation management treatments to fund projects to: improve forest health; restore or maintain water quality; improve fish and wildlife habitat; and reduce hazardous fuels. The District has discussed using Stewardship Contracting with the collaborative group during the initial development of the range of management opportunities within the resource area. The activities listed in the "Proposed Actions" section below can potentially be addressed through Stewardship Contracting provisions.



*The Need for Action*

Hazardous Fuels Reduction

Based on Kootenai County GIS data there are approximately 196 private structures within a mile of the resource area boundary and 346 within 1.5 miles of the resource area. Since the area is on the edge of the forest and so close to the community it has been designated as being within the wildland-urban interface (WUI) by the Kootenai County Fire Mitigation Plan. 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 threatening Wildland Urban Interface values. 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 increase early seral species such as western larch and ponderosa pine which will increase forest resiliency to the wildland fire threat.

Establish and Maintain Long Lived Early Seral Species and Resilient Structure

The vegetative patterns that currently make up the Blue Alder Resource Area have been influenced by climate, topography, fire, and human activity. Over time, past harvesting practices and the exclusion of wildfire has changed the current species composition from that which was found in the early 1900s. Fire, insects, and disease were historically the primary agents of change in the resource area. Structure varied from young to mature to old. This structure ranged in areas, or patches, from 100 acres to 1000's of acres depending on the scale of disturbance. Root disease is currently influencing the disturbance pattern with minor contributions from insects, creating large openings dominated by shrubs. Prior to fire suppression, low intensity ground fires were frequent which suppressed growth of shade tolerant species in the understory, promoting fire resilient, long lived early seral species like ponderosa pine and western larch in the overstory. Additionally root diseases were factors in reducing the competition from Douglas-fir and grand fir promoting resilient white pine on moist sites. Maintaining an appropriate balance of species composition in the resource area including ponderosa pine, western larch, and white pine will contribute to better forest health and increased resilience to disturbances like fire, insects, and diseases.



In the absence of fire, shade tolerant late successional species began to compete with early seral species and eventually out competed them; dominating the stand composition. Late successional species like grand fir and Douglas-fir are much more susceptible to root disease and are drought sensitive which in the long term will result in more frequent mortality due to insects and disease.

The picture to the right illustrates this point; in the background you can see remnant larch and pine, in the foreground Douglas-fir and grand fir crowd the understory while Douglas-fir and grand fir overstory trees are suffering from insects and disease.



Maintain and Improve Dry Site  
Wildlife and Big Game Habitat

A regional study by the National Fire Plan Cohesive Strategy Team in Region 1 suggests that only 12 – 18% of the historical pine stands currently exist. The Geographic Assessment determined that historic amounts of dry-site large/mature and old growth ponderosa pine and large, old Douglas-fir were more common in the Coeur d’Alene River Basin than under current conditions. Historically, the Rathdrum Prairie had much larger and continuous stands of ponderosa pine. Much of



*Historic ponderosa pine stand on the Rathdrum Prairie.*



the historic ponderosa pine habitat on the Rathdrum Prairie is now gone, due to agriculture and urban expansion. This loss of habitat places greater importance on National Forest dry forest habitat like that found in the Blue Alder Resource Area. Species such as the flammulated owl and pygmy nuthatch are dependent upon dry forest habitat. Within the resource area 28% of the land potentially could become flammulated owl and pygmy nuthatch habitat whereas only 4% is currently useable. Increasing useable dry forest habitat will benefit species which are dependant upon this habitat. Fire suppression and reductions in harvesting activities have decreased the amount of disturbance that has occurred historically in the Coeur d'Alene Basin. Reduced disturbance (natural fires, prescribed fires, & timber harvesting) has decreased the amount of palatable browse for big game. Regeneration of unpalatable browse will provide additional food sources for the exiting big game population in the resource area.

### Maintain and Improve Water Quality and Aquatic Habitat

Streams in the resource area feed directly into Lake Coeur d'Alene which is critical habitat for Bull Trout. Currently the Wolf Lodge Creek basin has good aquatic habitat and a strong population of western slope cutthroat trout. Section 303 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) requires the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) to adopt, with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approval, water quality standards, and IDEQ must monitor Idaho waters to identify those not meeting water quality standards. For those waters not meeting standards, IDEQ must establish total mean daily loads (TMDLs) for each pollutant impairing the waters. Further, the agency must set appropriate controls to restore water quality and allow the water bodies to meet their designated beneficial uses. These requirements result in a list of impaired waters, called the "303(d) list." This list describes water bodies not meeting water quality standards. Wolf Lodge Creek, from headwaters to mouth, is currently listed under section 303(d) of the CWA which establishes impaired water bodies, or waters not meeting Idaho water quality standards. The Wolf Lodge Creek watershed has an EPA approved TMDL for sediment.

Thirteen miles of road have been decommissioned in the resource area in support of aquatic restoration. An additional 22 miles, which were identified through the roads analysis process, are no longer needed for long term management of the resource area. By rendering these roads hydrologically inert the risk of sediment delivery either through culvert failure or run-off directly from the road surface would be eliminated. Additionally, front end obliteration and re-contouring around draws would eliminate the risk of unauthorized use from off road vehicles, further reducing the risk of sediment delivery into streams. Most of the bottom lands within the drainage, outside of Forest Service ownership, have been converted to agriculture or have had residential development, placing an increased emphasis on maintaining and improving stream quality and aquatic habitat within the resource area.

### Decrease Unauthorized Motorized Use and User Conflicts

Currently in the Blue Alder Resource Area motorized vehicles (ORV, ATV, etc) are illegally accessing established routes and creating new unauthorized routes into areas.



This illegal access is contributing to soil compaction, increased run-off and sediment delivery to streams, vegetative damage, and wildlife disturbance. Preventing this illegal access will help protect resource values.

The parking area for TR 241 is currently undersized for the user demand. Part of the trail is currently collocated on FR 202 puts non-motorized users in conflict with motorized users. Relocating this portion of the trail will decrease user conflicts.

### **Blue Alder Goals and Objectives**

The Blue Alder proposed action is designed to accomplish the following objectives:

- Reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland urban interface
- Establish and maintain long lived early seral species and resilient structure
- Maintain and improve dry site wildlife habitat
- Maintain and improve water quality and aquatic habitat
- Decrease unauthorized motorized use and user conflicts

### *The Proposed Action*

The proposed action includes prescribed burning to reduce fuels and provide big game habitat, stand rehabilitation, timber harvesting, pre-commercial thinning, road decommissioning, and recreation management. The areas proposed for treatment integrate multiple objectives concentrating vegetative treatments to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of benefits.

### Prescribed Burning

Prescribed fire is used to approximate the natural vegetative disturbance of periodic fire occurrence. This vegetative management tool is used to maintain fire dependent ecosystems and restore those outside their natural balance. Generally, low intensity prescribed fire, is applied by trained experts to clear the ground of fuels like dead wood and brush. This low-intensity fire is vital to the life cycles of fire-dependent forest lands. Most prescribed fires are lit by crews using



the drip torch, a hand-carried device that pours out a small stream of burning fuel. Some fires are ignited by helicopters carrying a gelled fuel torch (helitorch) or a sphere dispenser machine that drops material to ignite the surface fuels in forests. Prescribed fire is proposed on 960 acres. Prescribed burning has been proven effective at slowing large wildfire spread and at reducing wildfire severity. The prescribed burning would be conducted at times of the year when risk of escape is minimal and when soil moisture is high

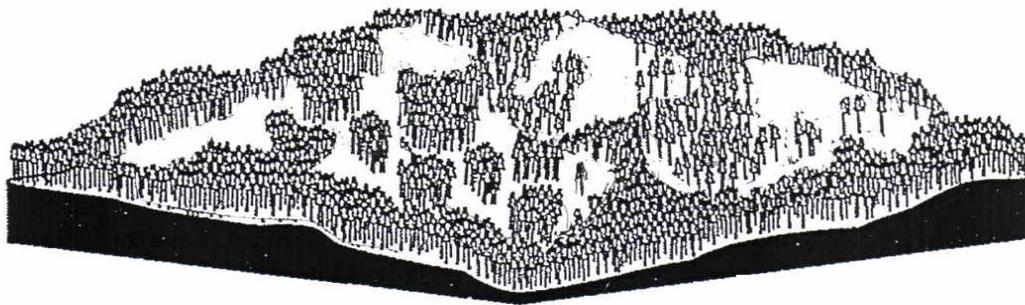


so productivity is protected. Burns would be implemented in a manner that would protect and enhance wildlife habitat by maintaining open stands that are currently being encroached upon by ladder fuels and brush. Similarly, old brush fields that have grown to a height where ungulates can no longer reach palatable browse will be burned to regenerate shrubs. Prescribed burning would help restore stand structures more characteristic of dry-site stands shaped by periodic fire. Burning would be implemented in a manner that would comply with applicable regulations such as the Clean Air Act and the Inland Native Fish Strategy.

Prescribed burning will also take place in most harvesting units to reduce fuels and prepare the harvest units for regeneration. The prescribed burning outside of the harvest units have been designed to be adjacent to other treatments in order to maximize the effectiveness of fuels reduction and create large patch sizes. Many of these patches are adjacent to private property or critical travel routes, reducing risk to private property and providing safer ingress and egress to National Forest Lands in the event of a wildfire. Additionally, there is an existing fuel break on the ridge south of Marie Creek that will be maintained mechanically as part of this proposal.

### Timber Harvesting

Timber harvesting would be used to re-establish long-lived early seral species such as ponderosa pine, western larch, and white pine which have declined significantly over the last 80 years. Harvesting is proposed on 1532 acres. Many stands are now dominated by Douglas-fir and grand fir, which must be harvested in order to regenerate the stand to long-lived early seral species. The silvicultural prescription for harvesting is a variable retention irregular shelterwood. This prescription will require that 40 percent of a harvest unit will not have any harvesting activities and 60 percent of the harvest unit will have limited retention of vegetation ranging from individual trees to large clumps of trees. The diagram below is an illustration of the proposed prescription.



Once the units have been harvested, prescribed burning would reduce fuels and prepare the site for planting of long-lived early seral species. The result of all of the timber harvest activities would be a reduction in hazardous fuels, a more balanced landscape with a greater number of younger stands, and a more resilient, sustainable, productive forest.



Some of the partial retention areas will be classified by silvicultural definitions as a regeneration opening. Forest Service policy normally limits the size of regeneration openings to 40 acres or less. With some exceptions, creation of larger openings is allowed with Regional Forester approval. Under the Blue Alder proposal, some regeneration openings within variable retention areas may exceed the 40-acre size to create more effective fuel reduction treatments and to accomplish the goals of improving species composition, stand structure and landscape structure at meaningful scales. As part of the project planning, the project silviculturist will seek Regional Forester approval for any regeneration opening larger than 40 acres. It is important to note that the regeneration openings that exceed 40 acres will most often not be greater than 40 acre blocks but smaller areas that may be interconnected with corridors which when totaled will exceed 40 acres.

In order to access some proposed harvest units, road construction will include 3.2 miles of new permanent road, and 2 miles of temporary road\*. Roads that are currently in storage that are needed for project implementation will have a variety of temporary stream crossings (culverts or bridges) and permanent structures (armored rock fords) applied to them. New construction will be designed with armored rock fords where possible, other wise culverts will be installed then removed following use. Temporary roads will be re-contoured and new permanent roads will be put into storage following use.

Timber harvesting would be completed using helicopter, skyline, and tractor yarding systems. All timber harvesting and road building has been carefully planned to comply with all regulatory requirements such as the Forest Plan, Clean Water Act, Inland Native Fish Strategy, and the Endangered Species Act. Activities would be completed using Best Management Practices (BMP's) as identified in the Idaho Water Quality Standards. Measures to reduce the spread of noxious weeds, protect wildlife security and protect soil productivity are incorporated into the proposed action. Reforestation is a crucial aspect of meeting the purpose and need of this project, and is also required by the National Forest Management Act.

**The following** proposed actions which have been identified within the resource area are non-commercial activities. The extent to which the activities will be completed is dependant upon revenue generated from timber receipts. The minimum acceptable bid for the timber will determine the minimum amount of work that can be completed. Once the contract is put out for bid we will be able to determine the maximum amount of work that can be completed based on bid premiums.

\* The new permanent road construction was highlighted by some members of the CDA Forestry Coalition as a preliminary issue.



Vegetative Rehabilitation

Vegetative rehabilitation is proposed on 667 acres to re-establish long-lived early seral species on stands which have deteriorated to the point of becoming brush fields. This rehabilitation will consist of prescribed burning to prepare the site prior to planting of ponderosa pine, white pine, and western larch.

Pre-Commercial Thinning

Pre-commercial thinning is proposed on 648 acres that have been previously reforested through planting and / or natural regeneration. As the established regeneration developed the stands have become overstocked and crowded due to the in-growth of trees originating from local seed sources. If stocking density is not managed competition for available light, soil moisture, and soil nutrients will result in reduced species resiliency and stand productivity, and increased susceptibility to insects and disease. These stands typically have over one thousand stems per acre which will be thinned to 300 – 500 trees per acre. The trees have not reached a size which makes them marketable. White pine, ponderosa pine, and western larch will be favored during thinning operations.

Additional Proposed Activities

We are also proposing to create additional parking for the trail head for trail 241 which currently is congested. Additionally we are proposing to relocate the trail which is collocated along forest road 202 to reduce user conflicts and provide for the safety of forest users. We plan to decommission 22 miles of administrative use roads that were determined, through the roads analysis process, to be no longer needed for the long term management of the Blue Alder Resource area. We also plan to barrier and rehab illegally pioneered trails that are located in the resource area.

<b>Acres of Prescribed Burning</b>		<b>960</b>
<b>Acres of Timber Harvesting</b>		<b>1532</b>
Acres by Harvest Method	Variable retention	1532
Acres by Yarding System	Helicopter	49
	Skyline	684
	Tractor	470
	Forwarder	329
Miles of Associated Road Construction	Perm Road	3.2
	Temp Road	2.0
<b>Acres of Vegetative Rehabilitation Treatment</b>		<b>667</b>
<b>Number of Culvert Upgrades</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>Miles of Road Decommissioning</b>		<b>22</b>
<b>Pre-Commercial Thinning</b>		<b>648</b>
<b>Number of Barriers to Illegal Off-Road Travel</b>		<b>5</b>
Number of Barriers by Type	Debris Barriers	3
	Ditches	1
	Front End Obliterations	1



## Blue Alder Project

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If you are interested in providing comments on this proposal, please send written comments to the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, Fernan Office, 2502 East Sherman Avenue, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814. Comments may also be submitted electronically. Electronic comments must be submitted in rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc) or Word Perfect format to [comments-northern-idpanhandle-coeur-dalene@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-idpanhandle-coeur-dalene@fs.fed.us). The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated receipt, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt of comments by other means. Your comments will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the Coeur d'Alene Press newspaper. If you have any questions, please contact Project Team Leader Matt Bienkowski at (208) 769-3065 or [mbienkowski@fs.fed.us](mailto:mbienkowski@fs.fed.us).

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