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Northern Region

**Idaho Panhandle
National Forests**

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Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District

Placer Resource Area Project Decision Notice

Under Authority of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act



Placer Decision Notice

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ATTACHMENT A – Finding of No Significant Impact

ENCLOSURE - Map of Activities under the Selected Alternative

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PLACER RESOURCE AREA

Decision Notice

Idaho Panhandle National Forests
Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District

Responsible Official:
Ranotta K. McNair, Forest Supervisor

1.1. Overview of the Resource Area

Fuel reduction and stand improvement activities have been proposed on public lands in a 9,955-acre area of the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, identified for the purposes of this analysis as the Placer Resource Area. An estimated 68 percent of lands (approximately 6,770 acres) within the project boundary are managed by the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF). The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 18 percent of lands (approximately 1,790 acres) within the boundary, and the remaining 14 percent (approximately 1,395 acres) are privately owned lands. Under the IPNF Forest Plan, 69 percent of the National Forest System land is managed for timber production and is to be managed for the long-term growth and production of commercially valuable wood products; 5 percent is to be managed for big-game winter range as well as to produce wood products; 24 percent is not managed for timber production or is non-forest; and 2 percent is along streams and is to be managed for riparian-dependent resources (fish, water quality, vegetation and wildlife communities) while producing other resource outputs at levels compatible with objectives for dependent resources (USDA 1987, PF Doc. CR-001).

The Placer Resource Area includes all or portions of T48N, R4E, sections 27, 32, 33 and 34; T47N, R4E, sections 1-6, and T47N, R5E, sections 7-9 and 16-19, Boise Meridian. The Placer Resource Area is located south of Interstate 90 and the community of Wallace, Idaho (Figure DN-1). The BLM boundary is less than 250 yards from the community of Wallace. (National Forest lands are shown in green; BLM lands are in orange.) The Placer Resource Area also includes 2,763 acres of the 81,000-acre Big Creek Roadless Area #1143 (depicted by the hatched area in Figure DN-1).

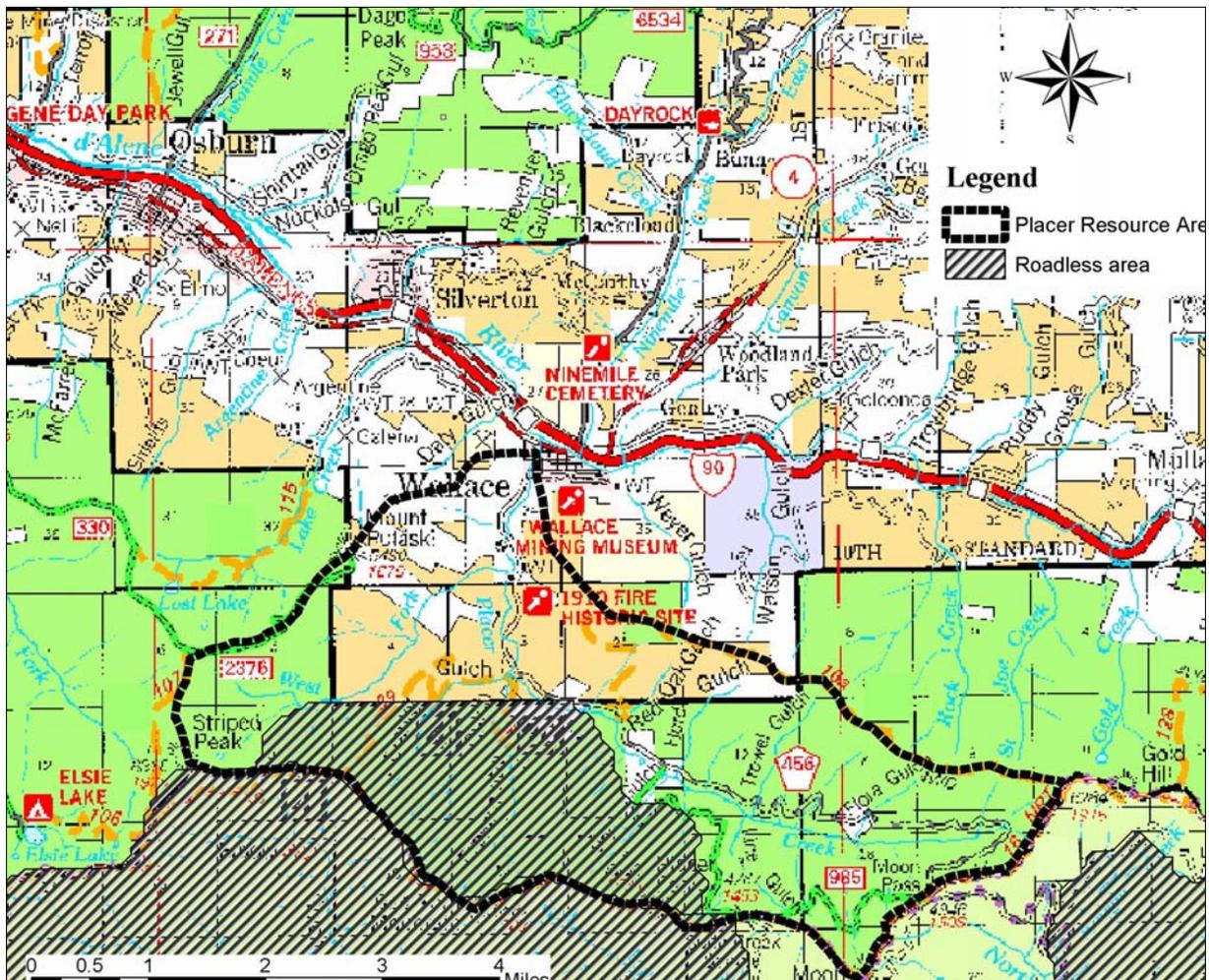


Figure DN-1. Vicinity Map of the Placer Resource Area. The dashed black line represents the analysis area boundary; the area hatched with black represents an overlapping adjacent inventoried roadless area.

Although there are few people left who lived through the event, area residents are very familiar with the history of the Placer Creek watershed, situated in Shoshone County's Silver Valley. The 1910 fire burned over 2.5 million acres of northern Idaho and western Montana in a period of only 36 hours when a windstorm fanned the flames of several fires burning during that drought year. The fire that burned virtually the entire Placer Creek watershed started near the St. Joe River, several miles south of the Silver Valley.



Figure DN-2. Wallace, Idaho, after the 1910 fire.

The town of Wallace, which sits at the mouth of Placer Creek, was evacuated. By the time the fire passed, one-third of the town had burned (Figure DN-2).

In 1928, another fire began in the St. Joe drainage and burned in a northeasterly direction, scorching 450 acres at the southeastern edge (5 percent of the Placer Resource Area) that had already burned during the 1910 fires. These two large fires had at least three similarities: they originated in the St. Joe drainage, were wind-driven in a northeasterly direction, and occurred during drought years. This is important because all of these conditions could occur simultaneously in the area today. The situation is made more critical by the current level of hazardous fuels, the importance of the area as a community water supply, and the number of homes in and near communities located along the eastern side of the Interstate 90 corridor (Specialist's Report on Fire/Fuels, page FF-2).

As a result of the 1910 fire, the majority of trees in the Placer Creek watershed are of the species, age and diameter range most susceptible to insects and diseases (Specialist's Report on Forest Vegetation, p. VEG-9). Currently, approximately 40 percent of the Placer Resource Area is dominated by Douglas-fir cover types. Douglas-fir is the species most susceptible to root diseases in the Placer Creek watershed. Long-lived seral species that are more resistant to insects and diseases (white pine, western larch and ponderosa pine) have declined as a result of changes in the role of fire, white pine blister rust, and timber harvesting. Combined, these species represent only 14 percent of the forest cover sites (about 1,200 acres) in the Placer Resource Area (Specialist's Report on Forest Vegetation, p. VEG-7).

Lodgepole pine occupies about 1,300 acres (15 percent) of the Placer Resource Area. All of the lodgepole pine is 80 to 100 years old and averages about 8 inches diameter at breast height. Based on current conditions in the lodgepole pine, there is a "high to very high" mountain pine beetle hazard rating for these stands in the Placer Creek watershed. High levels of mortality in lodgepole pine stands would increase fuels as well as the likelihood of high intensity or high severity wildfire in the urban interface and immediately adjacent areas.

Large fires and insect and disease mortality have dramatically shaped the structure stages found in the Placer Resource Area today (Specialist's Report on Forest Vegetation, p. VEG-15). Essentially, the 1910 fire created one large patch of new regeneration. The Placer Resource Area has a higher percentage of small to medium-sized timber (86 percent) in comparison to the desired condition (between 20 and 40 percent).

As currently unmanaged stands age and exhibit less resiliency to insects, disease and fire, the opportunities to achieve structural characteristics without starting over with regeneration would be increasingly limited.

Activities are needed to create vegetative interruptions that would reduce the potential for high-intensity fires, reduce fire risks and improve forest composition and structure. No single management prescription will achieve multi-resource objectives across all stands within a landscape. Silvicultural systems using density and species management, along with the judicious use of prescribed fire, are key to managing western forests.

The community of Wallace is one of several communities in the Silver Valley that have been identified as being at high risk from wildfire (USDA Forest Service/USDI BLM, 2001, "Urban Wildland Interface Communities Within the Vicinity of Federal Lands That Are at High Risk From Wildfire," Federal Register pages 43384, 434004; PF Doc. CR-027). Based on the lay of the land, wind patterns, and past history, a large wind-driven fire (even one much smaller than the 1910 fire) could seriously threaten the communities of Wallace, Osburn, and Mullan, as well as many other homes and businesses throughout the area.

Shoshone County has developed a wildfire mitigation plan that recognizes the threat that wildfires pose to the county, and recommended management that would decrease this risk (Shoshone County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan, referred to as the County Fire Mitigation Plan; PF Doc. CR-020). One of their goals is to reduce the rate of fire spread and acres of land burned by forest fires through the implementation of targeted fuel mitigation treatments where the landscape has the potential to sustain fires that threaten communities in the rural urban interface. “While our recommendations for specific communities and neighborhoods will reduce the risk of casualty loss, it must be combined with aggressive, active forest management in the forests that surround these communities to have a substantial impact. Specifically, historic data indicates that fires in this region have spread in a northeasterly direction from their point of origin. Therefore, the forests southwest of each community for a distance of 5 to 10 miles should be targeted initially to reduce the potential of fire spreading with full force into populated places,” (Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Plan, p. 85; PF Doc. CR-020).

The Plan identifies Placer Creek as a priority treatment area for Shoshone County, describing the south-facing areas of Placer Creek as being at moderate to high risk for possible wildfire ignition and spread because of the forest fuels, southerly aspect, potential for lightning strikes, and potential for ignition from human causes.

Approximately 80 percent of the Placer Resource Area is in Fire Regime Condition Class 2 (which represents a moderate risk of losing key ecosystem components such as native species, large trees and soil), with the remaining 20 percent in Condition Class 3 (at high risk of losing ecosystem components). None of the area is identified as Fire Regime Condition Class 1 (which represents a low risk of losing key ecosystem components). See Figure DN-3.

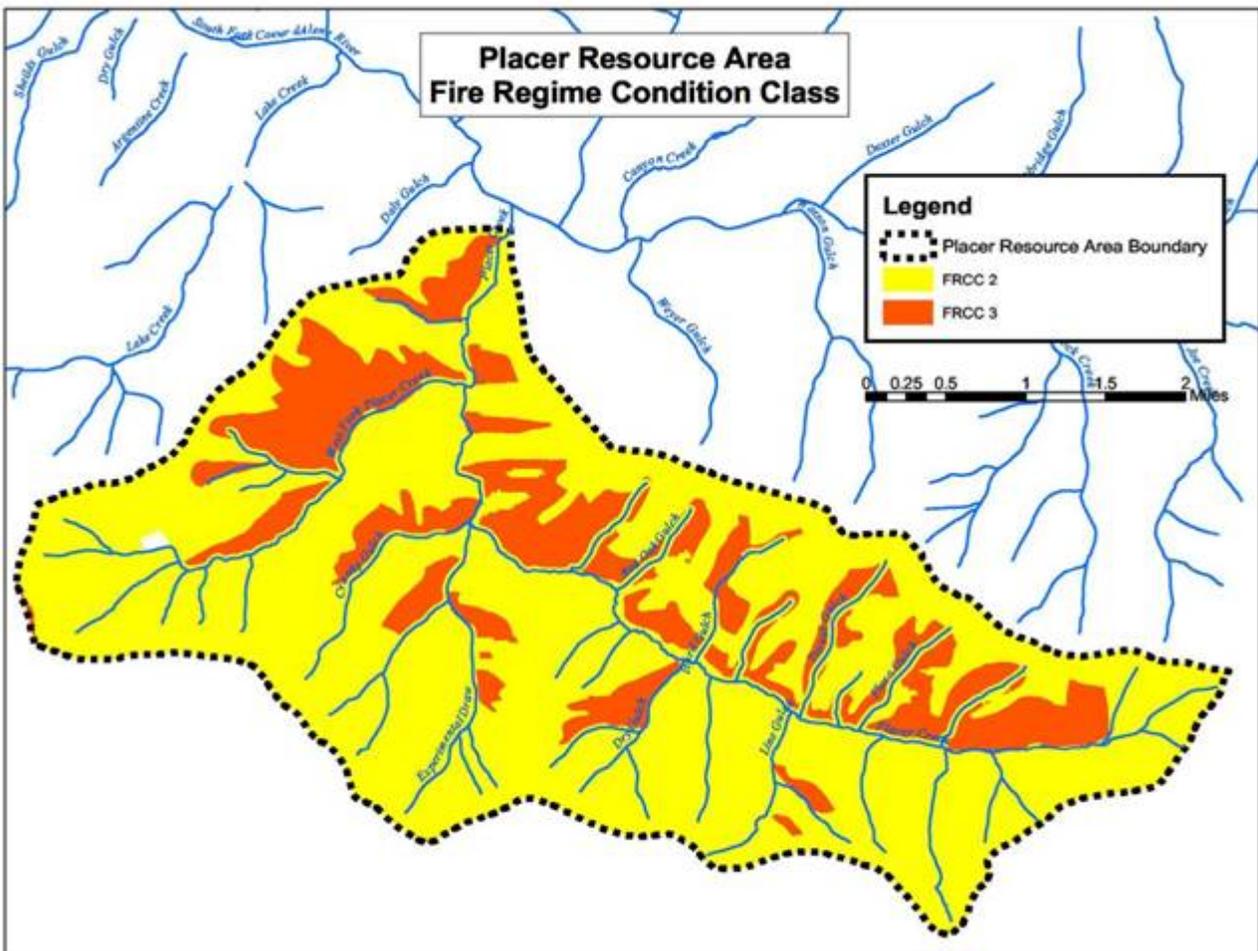


Figure DN-3. Map displaying Fire Regime Condition Classes in the Placer Resource Area.

1.2. Purpose and Need for Action

Actions Needed to Achieve Desired Fire/Fuel Conditions:

A combination of tree removal and fuels reduction treatments is needed to reduce forest fuels. Thinning is needed to reduce ladder fuels, making it harder for a fire to climb into the crowns of trees. Reducing horizontal fuel continuity (brush, low vegetation, and the woody fuel layer) would disrupt the progress of surface fires, limit buildup of fire intensity, and reduce the probability of a spot fire ignition. Thinning would also reduce crown fuels and the crown fire potential of the stand. Prescribed burning is needed in brush fields to reduce fuels and to facilitate their use as fuel breaks. A fuel break is needed along Road 456 to further reduce the risk to homes and communities as recommended by the Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Plan (page 80; PF Doc. CR-020).

Actions Needed to Achieve Desired Species Composition:

Stands need to be tended or reforested to increase the amount of long-lived, fire-resilient western larch and fire-dependent white pine, decreasing the amount of Douglas-fir and grand fir that are more susceptible to insects and diseases. Timely regeneration is needed in lodgepole pine stands that have a high risk of loss to insects and diseases to reduce this risk (which would also help trend the stands toward desired structural stages). Thinning and prescribed burning are needed in stands of western larch that are approaching the 80 to 100-year age class to maintain the larch over the long term, resulting in healthier stands with less fire risk. Rehabilitation and regeneration activities are needed in stands with high tree losses to insects and disease.

Actions Needed to Achieve Desired Structural Stages:

A combination of thinning, regeneration, burning, and site rehabilitation activities is needed to trend toward a mosaic of different forest successional stages and patch sizes that would help disrupt the spread of a wildfire. Activities are needed that would increase the longevity of middle-aged stands to ensure stands of potential mature and old, long-lived seral species are maintained

1.3. Alternative Development and Environmental Assessment

Public interest and input were solicited through the use of area newspapers (legal ads and news articles), the Forests' Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions, letters to interested members of the public, meetings with the Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Working Group and the public, and field trips to the area. More detailed information about these scoping efforts and the comments received during scoping were provided in the April 2006 EA (Appendix C).

Development of alternatives was based on the existing condition of resources and the purpose and need identified by the project team, other agencies, and the public (EA, Part 3 - Alternatives). Two alternatives were considered in detail – the No-Action Alternative and the Proposed Action Alternative. Although agencies are not expected to develop a full no-action alternative (USDA Forest Service, 2004, p. 10), consideration of the No-Action Alternative was suggested during project scoping (see The Lands Council letter dated December 1, 2003; PF Doc. PI-08, p. 1). The No-Action Alternative analyzed for this project represents the effects of not implementing the proposed activities, as well as the effects of past, ongoing and reasonably foreseeable activities. The Proposed Action Alternative represents the effects of implementing the proposed activities, as well as the effects of ongoing and reasonably foreseeable activities.

During project scoping and the collaborative process, two alternatives were suggested by the public. However, as discussed in the EA (Section 3.D), neither of these alternatives would meet the objectives identified as the purpose and need for this project in accordance with regulations put into effect by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ); therefore they were not considered in further detail. Based on this information, the range of alternatives is consistent with the direction provided by HFRA (Sec. 104[c][1]).

Detailed descriptions of the alternatives, existing conditions, and environmental effects that would occur under each alternative were analyzed and documented in the Placer Environmental Assessment (EA), which was mailed to the public in April 2006.

1.4. Objection Process

The HFRA provides a pre-decisional administrative review process (referred to as the "objection" process) pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subpart A (it is not subject to notice, comment and appeal provisions pursuant to 36 CFR 215; see 36 CFR 218.3). One objection was received from Mike Mihelich on behalf of the Kootenai Environmental Alliance, Lands Council, and WildWest Institute (formed in April 2006 through a merger of the Native Forest Network and Ecology Center). Their issues related to 1) violation of environmental laws, regulations and policy; and 2) concerns related to the implementation of the project and its consistency with the HFRA (PF Doc. PI-52). The Project Team's response to these issues and concerns is provided in the Project File (PF Doc. PI-53).

Reviewing Officer Kathleen A. McAllister (USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, Regional Forester's Office) considered the Placer Resource Area project and determined that the project is in compliance with laws and regulations, and clearly demonstrates how the project is consistent with the HFRA, including use of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, preparation of an annual program of work, retention of large trees, and monitoring requirements (PF Doc. PI-54). As stated pursuant to 36 CFR 218.10(b)(2), this is not subject to further administrative review by the Forest Service or the Department of Agriculture.

2. The Selected Alternative

2.1. The Decision

The information provided in the EA clearly indicates that the Proposed Action would be the most effective approach to meeting the stated purpose and need in the Placer Resource Area; therefore, I have decided to implement those activities proposed on lands managed by the Forest Service under the Proposed Action as described in the April 2006 EA (please refer to the enclosed Selected Alternative Map). **Should the BLM decide to implement the activities proposed on lands in the Placer Resource Area that are managed by the BLM, they will issue a separate decision. This decision approves only those activities that will occur on National Forest System lands.**

Table DN-1. Summary of activities on National Forest System lands under the Selected Alternative.

Proposed Vegetative Treatment (acres) Commercial thinning during construction of the Road 456 fuelbreak Prescribed burning in brush fields Daylight thinning in western larch stands Regeneration activities in lodgepole pine stands Regeneration/site rehab. activities (incl. 27 acres of rehab. only)	
Yarding systems (acres) Skyline Cable Forwarder Tractor Helicopter	
Helicopter log landings constructed Road reconditioning (miles) Road reconstruction (miles) Temporary road construction (miles) System road construction (miles)	
Estimated timber harvest volume (million board feet – MMBF) Estimated cunits (CCF – one cunit is equal to one hundred cubic feet)	

2.2. Specific Activities That Will Occur Under the Selected Alternative

Road 456 Fuel Break (approx. 237 acres)

Construction of the fuel break was recommended in the Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Plan (page 80; PF Doc. CR-020) to reduce fuels immediately adjacent to the heavily traveled Road 456 and along Placer Creek, which provides the water supply for the community of Wallace (managed by the East Shoshone County Water District).

The intent of this work is to increase the safety of Road 456 in providing access into and out of the area in the event of a wildfire. Fuels will be treated 150 feet from each side of the road where it crosses National Forest System lands (a total of 237 acres). Noncommercial thinning will remove trees smaller than six inches diameter. On larger trees, lower limbs will be removed to reduce the potential for fire to climb into the canopy. Surface fuels will also be cleaned up. Commercial thinning will also occur on approximately 95 of the 237 acres, to reduce canopy closure to slow the progress of a wildfire through the area. There will be very little change in the area visually, since activities along the road will remove primarily fuels from the ground, lower limbs, and small trees.

Prescribed burning in brush fields (approx. 692 acres)

Prescribed burning will occur in brush fields in the Placer Resource Area on about 692 acres managed by Forest Service. The objective is to reduce fuels and fuel continuity on broader landscape scales, which will also rejuvenate the brush species desirable for wildlife. Pile burning will be allowed in riparian areas. Broadcast burns will not be *ignited* in the riparian areas, although such prescribed fires could back down into riparian areas.

Note: In the 2006 Placer Environmental Assessment, Page EA-10, the acres of proposed brush field burning on lands managed by the Forest Service (659) and those managed by BLM (524) were incorrect. There was a 33-acre difference – the actual acres managed by the Forest Service should have been 692, with 491 acres managed by BLM. This error was limited to the specific statement on Page EA-10 and the effects analysis was based on the correct information; therefore, this error did not affect the level of effects disclosed in the environmental assessment..

Daylight thinning in western larch (approx. 295 acres)

The daylight thinning will reduce the shading and crowding of the western larch crowns to allow this resilient species to grow and dominate stands over the long term. Treatments focus on stands with the healthiest and highest representation of larch. This activity meets the definition of commercial thinning from below (in the lower crown classes), with approximately 40 to 60 percent or more of the existing canopy remaining after treatment.

Table DN-3. Daylight thinning in western larch on NFS lands.

9	6	Tractor	Underburn
10	7	Skyline	Underburn
10a	5	Tractor	Underburn
12	7	Helicopter	Underburn
12a	7	Tractor	Underburn
14	8	Helicopter	Underburn
15	18	Skyline	Underburn
16	22	Helicopter	Underburn
17	15	Skyline	Underburn
21	28	Skyline	Underburn
21a	4	Helicopter	Underburn
22	7	Skyline	Underburn
23	16	Skyline	Underburn
25	11	Forwarder	Underburn
26	13	Skyline	Underburn
27	23	Skyline	Underburn
28	53	Forwarder	Underburn
29	25	Forwarder	Underburn
30	7	Helicopter	Underburn
31	13	Skyline	Underburn
<i>295 acres on NFS lands</i>			

Regeneration in lodgepole pine (approx. 242 acres)

About 20 percent of the lodgepole pine in the Placer Resource Area will be treated, focusing only on the “high to very high” hazard rating stands, which are at high risk of mortality of trees greater than 6 inches diameter at breast height. Units will retain up to 20 trees per acre in groups (one-half to five acres in size) and single trees at irregular spacing, resembling a variable retention arrangement as described by Franklin (PF Doc. VEG-R37). The largest and healthiest western larch and white pine will be retained in compliance with white pine guidelines and snag protocol (PF Doc. VEG-20, VEG-21, and VEG-22). Lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir will be retained when no other options exist. Harvest of individual large-diameter trees may occur in such places as skyline corridors; however the effort is to leave the largest and most resilient trees.

During unit layout, timber harvest, and prescribed burning, tools such as landscape arrangement, fuel arrangement and burn parameter adjustment will be used to ensure at least half of the leave groups survive prescribed burning. Sites will be regenerated with a combination of natural regeneration and, in some cases, lodgepole pine planting.

Table DN-4. Regeneration (shelterwood) in lodgepole pine on NFS lands.

1	19	Skyline	Underburn
1a	22	Forwarder	Underburn
2	53	Skyline	Underburn
2a	41	Forwarder	Underburn
3	10	Skyline	Underburn
3a	16	Helicopter	Underburn
4	10	Skyline	Underburn
5	12	Tractor	Underburn
8	23	Skyline	Underburn
8a, b	19	Tractor	Underburn
11	17	Skyline	Underburn
<i>242 acres on NFS lands</i>			

Regeneration and Site Rehabilitation Activities (approx. 114 acres)

These activities will focus on stands with the most serious risk of mortality. Most of these stands are experiencing mortality due to root diseases; treatments on these sites will meet the definition of a shelterwood or seedtree harvest.

Leave trees will remain over the long term to serve as a seed source and structure, and to maintain the visual aesthetics of the area. The shelterwood units will have up to 20 trees per acre on sites in groups (one-half to five acres in size), with single trees retained at irregular spacing. The seedtree units will have up to 12 trees per acre on sites in groups. The largest and healthiest western larch, white pine and ponderosa pine will be left, consistent with large tree retention requirements of the HFRA (PL 104-148, Section 102[f]; PF Doc. CR-024). Douglas-fir will be retained only when no other options exist. Harvest of individual large-diameter trees may occur, however the effort is to leave the largest, most resilient trees over the long term. Allocated old growth will not be affected, because there is no allocated old growth within the Placer Resource Area. Leave groups will be positioned on the landscapes to ensure that at least 80 to 90 percent of the trees/groups do not have high mortality during prescribed burning treatments. Variability will be substantial within treatment areas, because the amount of tree retention will depend on what is available on the site.

Table DN-5. Regeneration and site rehabilitation units on National Forest System lands.

6	40	Group Shelterwood	Helicopter	Underburn
7	27	Rehabilitation	None	Slash/Underburn
13	37	Group Shelterwood	Skyline	Underburn
24	10	Group Shelterwood	Skyline	Underburn
<i>114 acres regeneration and site rehabilitation on NFS lands</i>				

2.3 Specific Features Designed to Protect Resources

Features Related to Fire and Fuels Management (EA, page EA-14)

After harvest is complete, a fire/fuels specialist and silviculturist will assess fuel conditions in the unit and determine whether prescribed burning can be implemented safely and effectively without further fuels treatment, or if additional fuel treatment methods (such as slash piling or slashing) are needed to meet the objectives of the silvicultural prescription before prescribed burning occurs. Prescribed burning will only occur when soil moistures are above 25 percent. Tree mortality associated with fuels treatment will be retained to provide wildlife habitat and as a source of nutrients (EA, p. EA-14).

Features Related to Vegetation Management (EA, pages EA-14 and EA-15)

A site-adapted species/seed source will be utilized in all regeneration areas. Site preparation, fuel treatment and tree planting will occur within five years of harvest in areas treated with regeneration harvest. Site preparation and/or fuel treatment may include a combination of slashing, pruning, prescribed burning or grapple piling, depending on post-harvest conditions that meet both site preparation and hazard reduction objectives. The largest and healthiest western larch and white pine will be retained consistent with large tree retention requirements of the HFRA (PL 104-148, Section 102[f]; PF Doc. CR-024).

Should rare plants be located during implementation, one or more of the following protective measures will be implemented: the activity unit will be dropped; the unit or activity will be modified; a 100-foot slope distance buffer will be implemented; and/or Timber Sale Contract provisions for "Protection of Endangered Species" and "Settlement for Environmental Cancellation" will be implemented.

Prescribed fire ignition will not occur within riparian habitats, although fire may be allowed to back down into riparian areas. To limit ground disturbance, fire line will not be constructed in riparian areas unless needed to keep a burn from getting out of control.

To reduce the spread of noxious weeds, all roads used for implementation of harvest and burning activities will be treated for noxious weeds prior to and after use. Measures to protect rare plant populations and habitat capability will be implemented during noxious weed treatment, following guidance under the Noxious Weed Final Environmental Impact Statement. To help prevent the spread of noxious weeds and prevent the introduction of new invader species, contract provisions regarding equipment washing will be included in all construction and timber sale contracts.

Specific Features Designed to Protect Aquatic Resources (EA, page EA-15)

All activities are designed to protect water quality and aquatic resources through the use of site-specific Best Management Practices (BMPs), which are the primary mechanism to enable the achievement of water quality standards.

On roads, spot gravelling (with approximately 6 inches of gravel) will be required at all stream crossings, rolling dips, and in any wet areas.

Standards and guidelines of the Inland Native Fish Strategy (1995; pages A-6 through A-15; PF Doc. AQ-9) were used specifically to protect water and aquatic biota within the resource area with the application of streamside buffers. If Threatened or Endangered fish species are located during project implementation, protective measures would be implemented in compliance with the Inland Native Fish Strategy.

All known or discovered wetlands, seeps, bogs, elk wallows and springs less than one acre in size will be protected with a 100-foot "no activity" buffer or as prescribed by district specialists.

Features Designed to Protect Soils (EA, page EA-15)

On units designated for tractor harvest, planned skid trails will be established at approximately 150-foot spacing to reduce overall soil compaction and displacement; skid trails will converge at the landings. On units designated for forwarder harvest, machines will be required to operate on a slash mat to protect soils. Harvest activities will be scheduled to occur when the soil profile is dry to reduce effects from compaction (Poff, 1996, p. 482; PF Doc. SOIL-42). Only log-length yarding will be allowed in harvest units to improve nutrient recycling (no whole-tree yarding). Prescribed broadcast burning and underburning will be of low intensity and will occur when the soil's surface horizon has at least 25% moisture content in order to protect the site's surface organic component. The amount of fine organic matter and large woody debris retained on the ground for sustained nutrient recycling in harvest units will be consistent with the recommendations of Graham et al (1994; PF Doc. SOIL-25). The optimum level of fine organic matter is 21 to 30 percent, which equates to 1 to 2 inches of surface litter and humus. The optimum amount of large woody debris varies widely by habitat type, ranging from less than 3 to more than 30 tons per acre (PF Doc. SOIL-25, page 8).

Features Designed to Protect Wildlife Habitat (EA, page EA-16)

Snags will be retained to meet the Northern Region Snag Management Protocol (PF Doc. VEG-20 and VEG-21). White pine and western larch of all sizes will be favored for retention on site, especially large trees (18 inches or greater in diameter) of these species, unless removal is unavoidable due to safety reasons or special circumstances.

All roads opened, constructed or reconstructed for the project will be closed with a gate or barrier during project activities to protect wildlife security. All of these roads will be effectively closed following project activities (not to exceed 3 years). If project

activities are not completed within 3 years, a partial replacement of obliterations or other closure structures (such as a gate, jersey barrier, Kelly hump etc.) will be installed. At the end of project activities, all partial obliterations and closure structures will be re-instated in as good as or better condition than currently exists. Temporary roads will be recontoured following harvest activities.

Prescribed burning will be implemented in a manner that would avoid disturbance of roosting bats by preventing fire within 400 meters of the entrance of a cave or mine adit when bats are present, unless a site-specific assessment indicates a more appropriate distance to avoid effects of heat and smoke on bats (PF Doc. WL-58). Incidental trees charred during prescribed burning operations will be retained on site for black-backed woodpecker habitat. If any Threatened or Endangered wildlife species is observed in the resource area during implementation, the district wildlife biologist will determine the need for any project modifications based on applicable laws, regulations, and management recommendations for the species. If any Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive species is found to be nesting in an area scheduled for prescribed fire or silvicultural manipulation, activities will be modified in the area as recommended by the wildlife biologist (for example, timing of activities, buffers etc., depending on species affected).

Features Designed to Protect Recreation Trail Facilities (EA, page EA-16)

To protect the groomed snowmobile route, log haul will not be allowed on Forest Road 456 between December 15 and April 1 of each year.

2.5 Monitoring

The Selected Alternative is consistent with specific monitoring requirements identified by the Forest Plan (Forest Plan, Chapter IV). Monitoring specific to this project (EA, page EA-17) includes:

Water Quality Monitoring: The BLM has completed monitoring of turbidity and sediment levels from before and after prescribed fire activities on lands they manage within the Placer Creek watershed (Stevenson, personal communication; PF Doc. AQ-54). Idaho Department of Environmental Quality has conducted similar analysis (East Shoshone County Water District Source Water Assessment Report, November 9, 2000; PF Doc. AQ-55), and will continue to monitor water quality. The East Shoshone County Water District performs daily water quality monitoring with independent lab analysis to assure water quality standards are met (Scheel, personal communication; PF Doc. AQ-56).

Monitoring of Permanent Stream Channel Cross-sections: Cross-sectional profiles, fish presence, and dominant substrate have been measured in Placer Creek (PF Doc. AQ-43). The Forest Service will continue these measurements on an annual basis for three years following completion of post-treatment activities, then bi-annually in the fifth and seventh years following completion, to determine whether any changes in stream channel morphology occur as a result of water or sediment yield increases.

Monitoring of Noxious Weeds: Monitoring of weed treatment and post-activity noxious weeds will occur as funds are available.

3.1 Comparison of Effectiveness in Meeting the Purpose and Need

The table below provides a comparison of the effectiveness of the No-Action and Proposed Action Alternatives in addressing key issues and achieving desired conditions in the Placer Resource Area:

- ▶ **Fire and Fuel Hazards** – measured through predicted changes to fire behavior (flame length, torching index, crowning index, and rate of spread)
- ▶ **Species Composition** – measured through percent forest cover types and health of lodgepole pine stands
- ▶ **Structural Stages** – measured through percent in each structural stage, changes in patch size, and predicted stand growth

Fire/Fuel Hazards

Desired Conditions: In the near future, the amount of forest fuels in the Placer Resource Area would be reduced, with brush fields acting as fuel breaks in the event of an uncontrolled wildfire. Potential fire intensity and severity would be less than currently exists. There would be a reduced risk to life, property and natural resources; and increased safety for fire suppression crew. These conditions are consistent with Forest Plan Goal #23 and Objective S (Forest Plan, pages II-2, II-8 and II-10; PF Doc. CR-002).

No-Action Alternative: The No-Action Alternative would not be effective in trending the area toward this desired condition. Because the area is in a domestic watershed, fire suppression would continue, as would the effects of long-term fire suppression, increasing the amount and continuity of material (both living and dead) that fuels fires (Saveland, 1998, p. 4; PF Doc. FF-3).

The lack of activities would allow the landscape to slip further into Condition Classes 2 and 3. There would be increased risk to life, property and natural resources as surface fuels and flame lengths increase across the landscape resulting in a greater likelihood of crown fire. Crown fires have the largest immediate and long-term ecological effects and the greatest potential to

threaten human settlements near wildland areas (Graham et al, 2004, p. 20; PF Doc. FF-6). Fires would continue to be more intense and therefore more dangerous to firefighters (Brackebusch, 1973; PF Doc. FF-8). Stands where insect and disease problems are increasing would also contain more snags, which are particularly dangerous for firefighters.

Selected Alternative: The Selected Alternative will be substantially more effective in trending the area toward the desired condition. Prescribed burning is an important feature of the Selected Alternative, and can effectively alter potential fire behavior (Graham et al. 2004, pp. 23-24; PF Doc. FF-6). Activities will interrupt the trend away from historical fire and fuel conditions. Thinning treatments will reduce ladder fuels, making it harder for a fire to climb into the crowns of trees. Reducing horizontal fuel continuity (brush, low vegetation, and the woody fuel layer) disrupts growth of surface fires, limits buildup of intensity, and reduces the probability of spot fire ignition. Thinning will also substantially reduce crown fuels and the crown fire potential of these stands. Regeneration treatments will have positive effects on fire behavior by removing canopy and disrupting the continuity of canopy fuels. This effect is not permanent however, and will only last until crown fuels build back up (a period of about 80 years). Harvest treatments will have a short-term increase in surface fuels until slash created by the harvest operation is treated.

Species Composition

Desired Conditions: Western larch, white pine and ponderosa pine forest type stands would account for at least 35% of the area to provide a level of ecosystem resilience, trending toward sustainable forest conditions.

No-Action Alternative: The No-Action Alternative would not be effective in trending the area toward the desired condition for species composition. Western larch, white pine and ponderosa pine would continue to account for about 14% of the species composition in the area, well below the desired range. The ongoing loss of fire-resilient species would continue to lead to forests that could experience more pronounced fire effects and an increased amount of tree mortality associated with a wildfire (PF Doc. FF-32). Stand growth would continue to be considerably less than modeled under the Forest Plan, actually declining over time. Where lodgepole pine is a desired species, as it is in some of the Placer Resource Area, losses due to mountain pine beetle cannot be totally avoided; only the hazard can be managed. The risk rating for mountain pine beetle in lodgepole pine would remain high to very high until all the susceptible trees are killed (a period of 20 to 50 years). This mortality would increase fuel loadings and the potential of severe, high-intensity fires in the wildland urban interface and areas immediately adjacent

Selected Alternative: The Selected Alternative will be more effective in trending the area toward the desired species composition. Western larch, white pine and ponderosa pine will increase from 14% to about 19% of the area, still well below (but trending toward) the desired range. The Selected Alternative will treat about 20 percent of the lodgepole pine in the Placer Resource Area, focusing only on the "high to very high" hazard ratings. In areas treated under the Selected Alternative, mountain pine beetle hazard will drop from the current "high to very high" hazard condition to a "very low" hazard level and then, as stands again mature in the next 80 to 100 years, mountain pine beetle hazard would begin to increase to the "very high" hazard level (EA, page VEG-13).

Structural Stages

Desired Conditions: Approximately 10 to 30% of stands would be in the young stages, 20 to 40% in the middle-aged stages, and 40 to 55% in the mature and old forest stages. Patch sizes would range from 100's to 1,000's of acres, with a minimum of 300 to 700-acre patches with connectivity where possible.

No-Action Alternative: The No-Action Alternative would not be effective in trending the area toward this desired condition. There would be no change from the current structural stages. There would still be about 14% of stands in the young stages, which is within the desired range. Approximately 86% would remain in the middle-aged stages, which is well above the desired range. Average patch size for all structural stages would be 918 acres.

Selected Alternative: The Selected Alternative will begin trending the area toward the desired structural stages. Approximately 18% will be in the young stages, well within the desired range. The amount within the middle-aged stages will decrease from 86 to 82%; still well above the desired range. There will be no change in the amount of mature and old forest stages, which is well below the desired range (this is a function of the severity and extent of the 1910 Fire).

3.2 Comparison of Effects to Other Resources

The purpose and need discussed above focused on fire/fuel and forest vegetative conditions. The following compares the effects of the No-Action and Selected Alternatives on other resources.

Effects to Rare Plants

Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no direct effects to any Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive species; any Forest Species of Concern (FSOC); or any Special Status Plant Species (SSPS) because none of the proposed activities would occur (PF Doc. SR-03, p. TES-10). Forest Plan standards and legal mandates would be met. However, indirect effects to Threatened, Sensitive, FSOC, and SSPS plant habitat and populations are likely for certain guilds and species (there are no Endangered plants identified for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests or the Coeur d'Alene Field Office of the BLM). The No-Action Alternative would not implement any management activities to trend the watershed toward the desired condition, identified risks associated with certain roads and road channel crossings would not be addressed and hydrologic conditions would not be improved.

Indirectly, there would be an increased risk to sensitive plants and habitat due to the gradual increase in fuel loads through time with continuing fire suppression. The greater the fuel loading, the greater the risk of a high intensity burn and stand replacing fire, with possible loss of rare plants and habitat. The increase in ignition risk and a resulting fire would also have an array of likely effects for sensitive plant species, ranging from beneficial to intolerant, depending on factors like the intensity of the fire, the species ability to survive the event, and compete in early successional habitat. In stands with declining canopy cover due to mortality from insects and diseases, the likely effects to certain sensitive plant guilds and species present could range from a beneficial response, due to factors like increased levels of light and available moisture, a neutral response, species persist but there is no evident change in population levels, to an intolerant response because of factors like loss of shade and decrease in relative humidity (PF Doc. SR-03, pp. TES-10 through TES-12).

Under the Selected Alternative, consideration of cumulative effects indicates that implementation of activities will not have significant impacts to sensitive plants or habitat, trending watershed and vegetative conditions toward the desired future condition (PF Doc. SR-03, pages TES-16).

Effects to Noxious Weeds

Under the No-Action Alternative, the lack of fuels treatment would further increase the risk of high severity conditions in the event of a wildfire because there are no activities proposed to reduce fuels or increase the amount of long-lived, fire-resistant western larch and fire-dependent white pine. This is a concern to management of noxious weeds because high severity burned areas have more exposed mineral soil, which would be susceptible to weed invasion. Areas where mortality results in substantial canopy loss would be at greater risk of weed spread, particularly in dry habitats that are already in an open to semi-open condition and dominated by grass-forb understories. Stands with higher rates of fuels accumulation would be at increased risk of a severe wildfire, exposure of mineral soils, and increased risk of weed spread (PF Doc. SR-04, pp. NW-4, NW-5).

Direct and indirect effects under the No-Action Alternative would include a natural reduction in forest canopy cover due to forest insect and disease induced mortality. Canopy loss would make conditions in the dry Douglas-fir and western larch cover types more suitable to certain common weed species such as St. Johns wort, thistles, toadflax, and spotted knapweed (PF Doc. SR-04, pp. NW-4, NW-5). Where these species are already established in affected areas, they would likely increase. However, these effects would be limited because of the lack of ground disturbance occurring with this natural event. The direct effect of the loss of canopy and resulting indirect effect of increased light and a warmer, drier micro-environment would be most pronounced on dry, Douglas-fir, western larch habitat types. There would be little direct, indirect, or cumulative effect to moist forest and riparian habitats. In habitats with a developed shrub layer, the shrub cover would increase, limiting the risk of weed encroachment. Douglas-fir cover types with grass/forb understories would be affected to a greater degree by invading weeds. Indirectly, the lack of fuels treatment under the No-Action Alternative would, over time, increase the risk of high severity fire in the event of a wildfire. High severity burned areas have more exposed mineral soil that would be susceptible to weed invasion.

Cumulatively, areas where continued tree mortality results in substantial canopy loss would be at greater risk of weed spread, particularly in dry habitats which are already open to semi-open and dominated by grass-forb understories. Stands with higher rates of fuels accumulation would be at increased risk of a severe wildfire, exposure of mineral soils and increased risk of weed spread. The cumulative effects of the No-Action Alternative are expected to be low.

Under the Selected Alternative, most of the harvesting will occur in grand fir/Douglas-fir cover types. This alternative will increase the risk of weed invasion on harvested acres, newly constructed roads, and in burned areas, particularly on the drier cover types. However, activities will reduce (but not eliminate) the risk of weed spread by applying specific design features, including roadside pre-treatment, grass seeding and equipment washing (described in Section 2.3). The District is working on an ongoing basis with the State of Idaho, county officials, and members of the public to control noxious weeds within the Inland Empire Cooperative Weed Management Area (PF Doc. SR-04, p. NW-6), which includes the Placer Resource Area. Post-activity monitoring for weeds and weed treatment will occur as funds are available.

Effects to Aquatics

Under the No-Action Alternative, the risk of wide-spread, high severity fire would be greater than under the Selected Alternative because a fire of this type could damage soils, increase surface run-off, and increase sediment into Placer Creek and its tributaries. This would have a detrimental effect on water quality (impacting beneficial uses), altering stream channel morphology, impacting fish habitat, and disrupting efficiency of the water system that supplies drinking water to the city of Wallace. The additional sediment pulse could result in adverse effects to fish populations and habitat. Fish populations could experience a short-term decline due to mortality resulting from such a fire. Placer Creek has a poor ability for fish populations to re-colonize due to fragmented habitat (specifically, culverts that block fish movement), and a dam near Wallace that disconnects Placer Creek with the South Fork Coeur d'Alene River fish populations (PF Doc. SR-05, page AQ-25).

Under the Selected Alternative, treatment activities will have little to no risk of measurable effects to the magnitude, intensity and duration of peak flows and sediment yields. The risk of stream channel changes will be low to none (PF Doc. SR-05, page AQ-28). The temporary road construction and road reconstruction will occur on a ridge-top road far from streams; therefore these activities will create sediment during reconstruction but, due to location, routing of sediment to any stream course will be unlikely and a very low risk. Salmonid redds, aquatic life, and associated habitat will not be affected by the anticipated changes in conditions (PF Doc. SR-05, p. AQ-27). Cumulatively, the ongoing and reasonably foreseeable activities will not have any effect on sediment yield, water yield, peak flows, stream channel morphology, or fisheries populations or habitat; therefore this project will not impair beneficial uses within the Placer Resource Area or downstream in the South Fork Coeur d'Alene River (PF Doc. SR-05, p. AQ-35, AQ-36).

Effects to Soils

Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no direct impacts to soils because no new road construction, logging or fuel treatment activities would occur (PF Doc. SR-06, page SOIL-10). Throughout the landscape, tree mortality from insects, diseases and weather events would continue, increasing organic matter. In moist habitat sites the increase in organic matter is beneficial to overall soil productivity. In dry habitat types, increases of organic matter mean an increase in fuel loading, which may result in a high severity fire. In the event of a severe wildfire, there would be a greater loss of the soil's organic matter, nutrient availability, water infiltration, all of which affect the soil's productivity (PF Doc. SR-06, page SOIL-10).

Under the Selected Alternative, soil-disturbing activities will not exceed Forest Plan standards (PF Doc. SR-06, pp. SOIL-12, SOIL-13). Minor disturbances will occur on skyline and helicopter-yarded harvest units and where hand line is constructed around specific units. Forest monitoring indicates these activities typically result in minor detrimental effects (USDA 1991; PF Doc. SOIL-40; PF Doc. SR-06, p. SOIL-11). Activity areas that propose tractor yarding, new roads, road reconstruction, and/or new helicopter landings will have the highest probability of detrimental effects to the soil resource. Skyline and helicopter logging systems occurring in conjunction with spring underburning and with no new road construction will have much lower detrimental effects (Niehoff 2002; PF Doc. SOIL-34; PF Doc. SR-06, p. SOIL-11).

There will be a total of approximately 28 acres of disturbance on national forest system lands under the Proposed Action (Tables SOIL-3 and SOIL-4; PF Doc. SR-06). Cumulatively, the percent of activity area disturbance will range from 1 to 16 percent on national forest system lands (with an average of 2.3 percent). In terms of cumulative effects, fuels reduction and stand improvement activities will reduce the effects that a wildfire would have on soils, because there will be a reduction in the surface fuels on treated sites (PF Doc. SR-06, p. SOIL-13).

Effects to Wildlife

The analysis of wildlife included effects on twelve species: Canada lynx, gray wolf, black-backed woodpecker, fisher, wolverine, Coeur d'Alene salamander, Townsend's big-eared bat, fringed myotis, pileated woodpecker, pine marten, northern goshawk, and Rocky Mountain elk. The Forest Service has developed a conservation assessment of the northern goshawk, black-backed woodpecker, flammulated owl and pileated woodpecker in the Northern Region (Samson, 2005; PF Doc. WL-67). The conservation assessment shows that short-term viability (less than 100 years) is not an issue in Region 1 for these species. Because habitats are trending away from historic range, long-term viability (more than 100 years) is low.

Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no direct or indirect effects to these species because no activities are proposed. Over the long term, habitat could improve for some species. Effects of a potential stand-replacing fire would vary by wildlife species. For example, such a fire could create forage habitat for species such as lynx, black-backed woodpeckers, and elk; set back the positive trend in habitat for fisher, pileated woodpeckers, and pine marten; and produce smoke at levels that could be fatal for bats occupying mines.

Under the Selected Alternative, there will be no significant impact to any of the twelve species considered, and no loss of viability to populations or species. Direct and indirect effects will displace some species over the short-term (during activities); however, the long-term benefits to wildlife species (including improved forage habitat) will outweigh the short-term disturbance to species during implementation of project activities.

Effects to Recreation

Existing recreation developments and opportunities would not be affected over the short term under either alternative. However, the continued risk of severe wildfire **under the No-Action Alternative** does pose a long-term risk to the quality of recreation opportunities in the area, since burned trees and possible erosion caused by vegetation burnout could damage area trails, visuals, and sense of enjoyment (SR-08, page REC-3).

Under the Selected Alternative, there will be only temporary impacts to recreation (smoke, dust and noise could impact recreation experiences in the area). Over the long term, the intensity of potential wildfires will be reduced following treatment. Prescribed burning of a brush field within a portion of the Big Creek Roadless Area is consistent with management direction for the area, and will not involve ground-disturbing vehicles or activities. Integrity and manageability of the roadless area will be unchanged (SR-08, page REC-3).

Effects to Scenery

Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no immediate effects to scenery in the vicinity of the Placer Resource Area, because no activities are proposed. However, over the long term, increased vulnerability to severe wildfire could bring detrimental changes to the scenic conditions, such as blackened landscape and loss of vegetation (SR-09; page SCE-2).

Under the Selected Alternative, none of the proposed management units will be visible from any high sensitivity locations in the Silver Valley or along Interstate 90. However, several harvest and prescribed burn units will be visible from Road 456 and segments of trails in the area. Effects to scenic resources will be short term. As seasons change, vigorous growth of grasses and new brush will be supported in the treatment areas (SR-09, pages SCE-2, SCE-3).

3.3 Findings and Consistency with Laws, Regulations and Policy

National Forest Management Act and IPNF (1987) Forest Plan: The Selected Alternative is 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 planned in the Placer Resource Area are consistent with the Forest Plan because they will 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 management activities will be in compliance with Management Area direction (see page EA-1), including all goals and objectives, as described in the Specialists' Reports.

Forest Plan old-growth standards will be met or exceeded. There is no allocated old growth within the Placer Resource Area, but the area is within the larger Old Growth Management Unit (OGMU 119), which does include allocated old growth (PF Doc. SR-02, p. VEG-3). A detailed review of old growth in OGMU 119 occurred in conjunction with the Placer Resource Area analysis (PF Doc. SR-02, p. VEG-15). Forest-wide analysis of old growth, which is disclosed in the 2004 Monitoring Report (PF Doc. CR-026), concludes that 12 percent of the IPNF is allocated old growth, with the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District exceeding its' share of the allocated acres (PF Doc. SR-02, p. VEG-26).

NFMA consistency requirements include the need to protect species viability and Management Indicator Species habitat. The Selected Alternative was designed to be implemented in a manner that will protect wildlife and fisheries resources in the Placer Resource Area (EA, pp. EA-12 through EA-14; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-7). No activities will occur in allocated old growth (there is no allocated old growth in the Placer Resource Area). There will be no significant impact to any species, and no loss of viability to populations or species. The long-term benefits will 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 are silviculturally appropriate and are within the timber and vegetation practices outlined in the Forest Plan.

NFMA requires that the necessity of roads be documented and that road construction be designed to standards appropriate for the intended uses, considering safety, cost of transportation, and impacts on land and resources (16 USC 1608). NFMA also requires that roads are planned and designed to re-establish vegetation cover on the disturbed areas within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 10 years unless the road is determined necessary as a permanent addition to the National Forest Transportation System (16 USC 1604, Sec. 8). The Roads Analysis Process (RAPs) was used to identify the condition of (and recommendations for) each road system in the project area (PF Doc. TRAN-1). Under the Selected Alternative, no new system roads will be constructed in the Placer Resource Area. Less than one mile of temporary ridge-top road will be constructed to allow access to units along the northeastern edge of the project area. The construction will be completed using Best Management Practices to protect aquatic and soil resources (EA, p. EA-15; and Aquatics Appendix A, PF Doc. SR-05). At the completion of its intended use, the temporary road will be decommissioned and revegetated with native plants.

Potential physical, biological, aesthetic, cultural, engineering and economic impacts of the Selected Alternative have been assessed and are disclosed in the Environmental Assessment (Part 4 and the Appendices) with supporting information in the Project Files.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act: Activities meet the requirements for authorization under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (EA, p. 3). A community wildfire protection plan (the Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Plan) has been developed and includes a list of priorities (PF Doc. CR-020). This project's objective is to protect the at-risk community of Wallace and rural residents in Placer Creek drainage, and implements the recommendations of the County Fire Mitigation Plan. Placer Creek is the drinking water supply for the communities of Wallace, Silverton, and Woodland Park, and areas in between. The entire project is within the wildland urban interface as defined by the Fire Mitigation Plan (PF Doc. FF-046). A collaborative process was used in developing the Placer Resource Area proposal and involved the Bureau of Land Management, State of Idaho Department of Lands and Department of Environmental Quality, Shoshone County Fire Chiefs, Shoshone County Commissioners, the East Shoshone County Water District, and interested individuals and organizations (EA, p. EA-3, Appendix C).

Clean Water Act: The Specialist's Report on Aquatic Resources (PF Doc. SR-05) evaluated potential adverse impacts to water resource and project compliance with the Clean Water Act, and determined that the Selected Alternative is consistent with the Clean Water Act (EA, Section 4.F). Sediment and metals (the pollutants of concern) will not increase in the water quality-limited South Fork Coeur d'Alene River segment (from Placer Creek to Big Creek). There will be no change in risks to beneficial uses in any stream in the Placer 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. The Selected Alternative will be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act as amended (EA, pp. EA-12 through EA-14; PF Doc. SR-03, p. TES-17; PF Doc. SR-05, p. AQ-38; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-45).

Migratory Bird Treaty Act: Although some current habitat may be lost over the short term as a result of activities, taking no action could have similar effects (EA, p. EA-27; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-44). 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 will eventually benefit nongame and land bird species.

Environmental Justice Act: The Selected Alternative was assessed to determine whether they would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898. 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, the Selected Alternative complies with Executive Order 12898.

3.4 Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

I have reviewed the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the project activities as documented in this Decision Notice, the Environmental Assessment (Chapter 3 and Appendices), and the Project File. The setting of this project is in a localized area, with implications only for the landscape, drainages and stands in the analysis area. My consideration of the Selected Alternative is based on its impact on the ecosystem, local communities, county, and at the affected resource level. It does not have any large or lasting effect on society as a whole, the nation, or the state.

I find that there are no significant beneficial or adverse impacts on the physical, biological, or social portions of the human environment, and therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. Please refer to the Finding of No Significant Impact (Attachment A).

4. Documents and Project Files

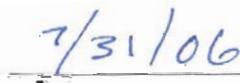
This Decision Notice summarizes analyses that have led to this point in the process. More reports and analyses documentation have been referenced or developed during the course of this project and are part of the Project Files. All project files for the Placer Resource Area project are available for review by the public. The project files may be reviewed at the Fernan Office of the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, or are available on compact disk upon request. To review the files, please contact the NEPA Coordinator at the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District (Fernan Office), (208) 664-2318.

5. Appeal Rights and Implementation

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 218.10(b)(2). I am the Responsible Official for this decision. For more information regarding this project, contact District Ranger Randy Swick or Ecosystems Staff Officer Sherri Lionberger at the Fernan Office of the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, (208) 664-2318.



RANOTTA K. McNAIR
Forest Supervisor,
Idaho Panhandle National Forests



Date

ATTACHMENT A

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Introduction

The Forest Service has two types of decisions: programmatic (such as the Forest Plan) and project level (which implements the Forest Plan). The Placer Resource Area Environmental Assessment is a project-level analysis; its scope is confined to addressing the significant issues and environmental effects of the project.

Two alternatives were considered in detail - the No-Action Alternative and a Proposed Action Alternative. The No-Action Alternative analyzed for this project represents the current and expected future condition given the past, ongoing and reasonably foreseeable activities (EA, Section 3.B and Appendix B). The Proposed Action Alternative represents the expected future condition based on the effects of proposed fuel reduction and stand improvement activities as well as past, ongoing and reasonably foreseeable activities (EA, Section 3.C and Appendix B). The Proposed Action implements Shoshone County's recommendations (PF Doc. CR-020, pp. 57-62 and 78-85) in the Placer Resource Area.

After considering the environmental effects described in the Placer Environmental Assessment (EA), I have determined that the Proposed Action will not 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 context of this proposal is limited to the locale of the Placer Resource Area. Project activities are limited to the specific fuel and vegetation treatments proposed on lands managed by the USDA Forest Service in the Placer 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, this proposal would not 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, Section C, and Specialists' Reports, PF Doc. SR-01 through SR-09).

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.**

Activities would substantially improve hazardous fuels conditions and reduce potential wildfire intensities in the local area and watershed, but would not be widespread enough to be beneficial at the Coeur d'Alene River Basin scale or larger. For example, in the event of a wildfire the roadside fuel break would result in reduced fire intensities near the road to allow safe travel and decrease the rate of fire spread, and fuel reduction activities would make substantial progress toward reducing potential intensities of wildfire and fire behavior that could threaten human life and property in the resource area, but these activities would not have any substantial effect at the Coeur d'Alene River Basin scale or larger. The EA also documents beneficial effects of implementing activities

that would increase the long-lived early seral species (western larch and white pine) composition by 5 percent. While this change is advantageous for the Placer Resource Area, the change is such a small percentage of the Coeur d'Alene River Basin that no change would be reflected at the overall basin scale (p. EA-23; PF Doc. SR-02, page VEG-13). The Selected Alternative would treat about 20% of the lodgepole pine in the Placer Resource Area, focusing only on the "high to very high" hazard rating stands (PF Doc. SR-02., page VEG-13). Again, this would be advantageous in the treated areas, but would not reflect a change at the Coeur d'Alene River Basin scale.

Activities would not pose any significant short- or long-term effects because the Proposed Action was designed with specific features to 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, Section C, and Specialists' Reports, PF Doc. SR-01 through SR-09).

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

The Proposed Action 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 in the resource area (EA, Section 4.A). In the event of a wildfire, the roadside fuel break would reduce fire intensities near the road to allow safe travel and decrease the rate of fire spread, and give fire crews more time to control the fire (pp. EA-8, EA-9, EA-22; PF Doc. SR-01, pp. FF-19, FF-20). Prescribed burning in brush fields would substantially reduce the rate of spread and flame length, further increasing safety for both the public and fire suppression crews (pp. EA-8, EA-9, EA-22). The Placer Resource Area project has the endorsement of the Shoshone County Fire Wildland Urban Interface Mitigation Program (PF Doc. PI-35).

The 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 complies with federal, state and local regulations (EA, p. EA-14). Management practices include but are not limited to burning under spring-like conditions (high fuel, soil, and duff moistures) to reduce emissions and provide for retention of large woody debris. Prescribed burning during spring or fall will generate less smoke than would occur during a much hotter stand-replacing summertime wildfire. For these reasons, there would be no significant effects on public health and safety.

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 (EA, p. EA-16). With regard to wetlands, the proposed action would exclude all Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) from proposed treatment areas, consistent with Forest Plan guidelines (EA, p. EA-15; PF Doc. CR-002) 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 the Proposed Action would not pose any significant impacts to wetlands or riparian areas within the Placer Resource Area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment 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. The effects of the activities in the Placer Resource Area on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial as defined by the Council on Environmental Quality. 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. Scientific references recommended by the public have been reviewed and considered. The use of science is key to environmental analysis. The best available science is not necessarily the *latest* science, but the science that best applies to the geographic scale, setting and conditions most similar to the project area. Forest Service specialists continually consider new science or scientific findings that are brought to their attention. The project team for the Placer Resource Area has considered relevant scientific references and used the best available science (see PF Doc. PI-52, Issues 3, 13, 22, 24, 27, 28, and 33).

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

The proposed action is similar to other fuel reduction activities 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 Proposed Action is consistent with management direction provided by the Forest Plan. Design features would minimize the potential impacts; there are no impacts that might be uncertain, unique or unknown.

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 (EA, p. EA-16; PF Doc. HR-01). Assessment of historic and cultural resources in the Placer 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 Proposed Action was designed to be implemented in a manner that would protect wildlife resources in the Placer Resource Area (EA, pp. EA-16, EA-28 through EA-34; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-7). No activities are proposed in allocated old growth (there is no allocated old growth in the Placer Resource Area). 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 proposed action is 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 Placer 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 (see page EA-1), including all goals and objectives, as described in the Specialists' Reports.

Forest Plan old-growth standards would be met or exceeded. There is no allocated old growth within the Placer Resource Area, but the area is within the larger Old Growth Management Unit (OGMU 119), which does include allocated old growth (PF Doc. SR-02, p. VEG-3). A detailed review of old growth in OGMU 119 occurred in conjunction with the Placer Resource Area analysis (PF Doc. SR-02, p. VEG-15). Forest-wide analysis of old growth, which is disclosed in the 2004 Monitoring Report (PF Doc. CR-026), concludes that 12 percent of the IPNF is allocated old growth, with the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District exceeding its' share of the allocated acres (PF Doc. SR-02, p. VEG-26).

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 Placer Resource Area (EA, pp. EA-14 through EA-16; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-7). No activities are proposed in allocated old growth (there is no allocated old growth in the Placer Resource Area). 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.

NFMA requires that the necessity of roads be documented and that road construction be designed to standards appropriate for the intended uses, considering safety, cost of transportation, and impacts on land and resources (16 USC 1608). NFMA also requires that roads are planned and designed to re-establish vegetation cover on the disturbed areas within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 10 years unless the road is determined necessary as a permanent addition to the National Forest Transportation System (16 USC 1604, Sec. 8). The Roads Analysis Process (RAPs) was used to identify the condition of (and recommendations for) each road system in the project area (PF Doc. TRAN-1). Under the Selected Alternative, no new system roads will be constructed in the Placer Resource Area. Less than one mile of temporary ridge-top road will be constructed to allow access to units along the northeastern edge of the project area. The construction will be completed using Best Management Practices to protect aquatic and soil resources (EA, p. EA-15; and Aquatics Appendix A, PF Doc. SR-05). At the completion of its intended use, the temporary road will be decommissioned and revegetated with native plants.

Potential physical, biological, aesthetic, cultural, engineering and economic impacts of the Proposed Action have been assessed and are disclosed in the Environmental Assessment (Part 4 and the Appendices) with supporting information in the Project Files.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act

Activities proposed in the Placer Resource Area meet the requirements for authorization under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (EA, Appendix A). A community wildfire protection plan (the Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Plan) has been developed (PF Doc. CR-020). The project's objective is to protect the at-risk community of Wallace and rural residents in Placer Creek drainage, and implements the recommendations of the County Fire Mitigation Plan. Placer Creek is the drinking water supply for the communities of Wallace, Silverton, and Woodland Park, and areas in between. The entire project is within the wildland urban interface as defined by the Fire Mitigation Plan (PF Doc. FF-046). A collaborative process was used in developing the Placer Resource Area proposal and involved the Bureau of Land Management, State of Idaho Department of Lands and Department of Environmental Quality, Shoshone County Fire Chiefs, Shoshone County Commissioners, the East Shoshone County Water District, and interested individuals and organizations (EA, Appendices A and C).

Clean Water Act

The Specialist's Report on Aquatic Resources (PF Doc. SR-05) evaluated potential adverse impacts to water resource and project compliance with the Clean Water Act, and determined that the proposed action is consistent with the Clean Water Act (EA, Section 4.F). Sediment and metals (the pollutants of concern) would not increase in the water quality-limited South Fork Coeur d'Alene River segment (from Placer Creek to Big Creek). There would be no change in risks to beneficial uses in any stream in the Placer 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. The Proposed Action would be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act as amended (EA, pp. EA-14 through EA-16; PF Doc. SR-03, p. TES-17; PF Doc. SR-05, p. AQ-38; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-45).

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

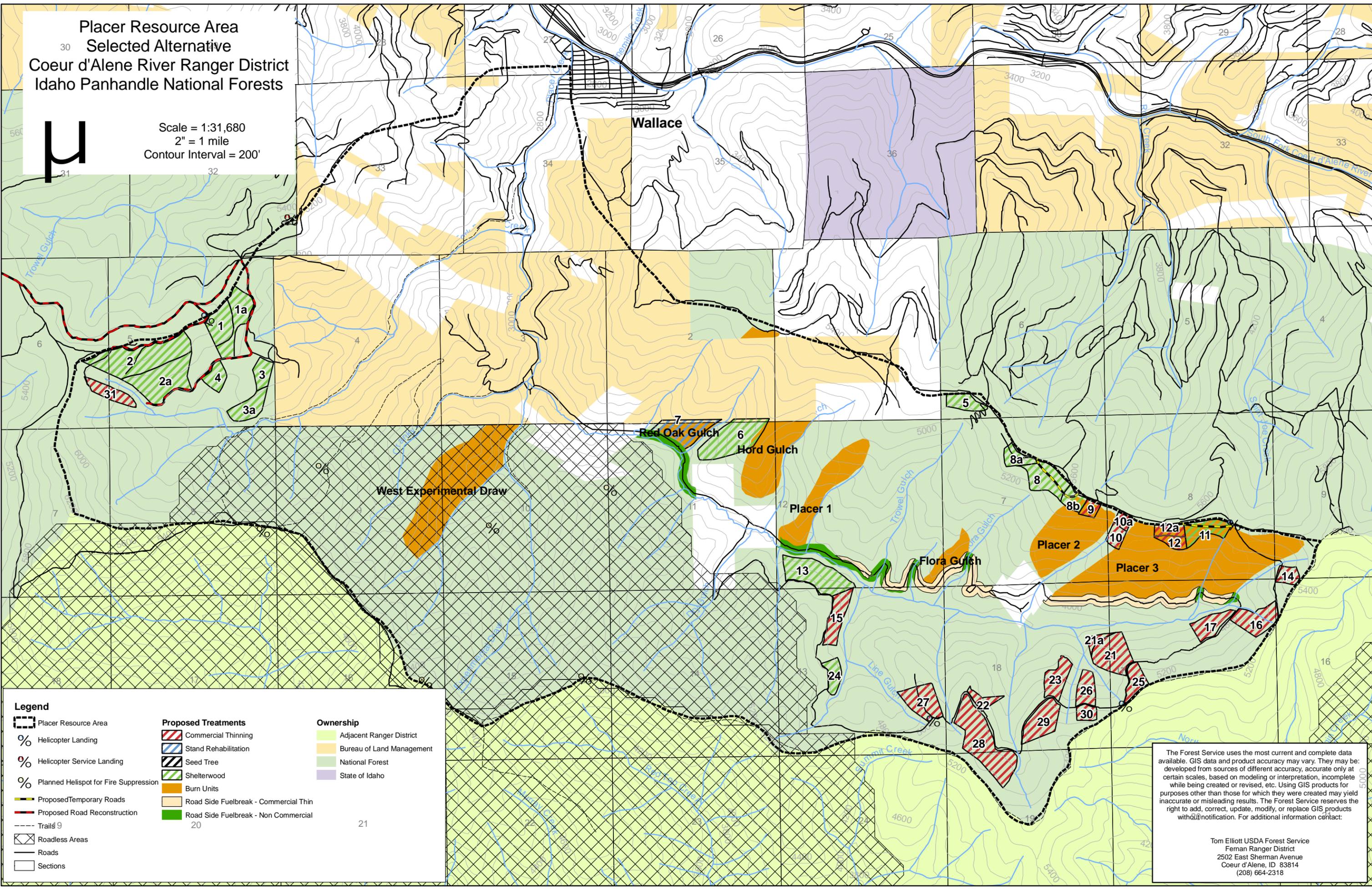
Although some current habitat may be lost over the short term as a result of proposed activities, taking no action could have similar effects (EA, p. EA-34; PF Doc. SR-07, p. WL-44). Efforts to trend stands in the resource area toward historic species composition and age structure and to maintain the ecological processes that created these conditions would eventually benefit nongame and land bird species.

Environmental Justice

The Proposed action was assessed to determine whether they would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898. 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, the Proposed Action complies with Executive Order 12898.

Placer Resource Area
 Selected Alternative
 Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District
 Idaho Panhandle National Forests

Scale = 1:31,680
 2" = 1 mile
 Contour Interval = 200'



Legend

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placer Resource Area Helicopter Landing Helicopter Service Landing Planned Helispot for Fire Suppression Proposed Temporary Roads Proposed Road Reconstruction Trails Roadless Areas Roads Sections | <p>Proposed Treatments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercial Thinning Stand Rehabilitation Seed Tree Shelterwood Burn Units Road Side Fuelbreak - Commercial Thin Road Side Fuelbreak - Non Commercial | <p>Ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjacent Ranger District Bureau of Land Management National Forest State of Idaho |
|--|---|--|

The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be developed from sources of different accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created may yield inaccurate or misleading results. The Forest Service reserves the right to add, correct, update, modify, or replace GIS products with notification. For additional information contact:

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