

*A Request for Comments on the*  
**Rolling Hills Larch Project**

**Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District  
Idaho Panhandle National Forests**

November 2008

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**Introduction**

The Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District is considering a proposal to implement vegetation management activities in the Shoshone and Lost Creek drainages, identified for purposes of analysis as the Rolling Hills Larch Resource Area. The following describes condition in the area, past and current management, proposed activities, opportunities to accomplish additional work, and how you can provide comments about the proposal.

**Overview of the Area**

Portions of the country associated with the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River system experienced stand-replacing wildfires in 1910. Many of these forest areas have become re-established with dense stands of second-growth timber. If a seed source was present, early seral species such as western larch, western white pine, and lodgepole pine were often first to become well-established in these areas due to their fast growing character. Depending on the habitat type, more shade-tolerant species such as western hemlock and grand fir also became established but often as an understory component. One such area where this has occurred is located in the vicinity of Lost and Shoshone Creeks along the North Fork River corridor (Figure 1).



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

Both the Forest Plan and the Interior Columbia Basin Assessment recommend promoting and maintaining long-lived seral tree species such as western larch, white pine, and ponderosa pine on the forest. These species were once abundant in the basin and are now less common. Western larch is currently the dominant early seral species component in portions of this project area. Western larch trees lose their competitive advantage due to competition from the ingrowth of more shade tolerant climax tree species as the stands mature in age.

Western white pine is also present and widespread, but in much reduced numbers compared to western larch since much of the



white pine component has been lost to blister rust mortality. It is important to promote the remaining healthy white pine trees as they may have natural genetic resistance to the disease given the high occurrence of rust mortality in the area.

In-growth of climax species, such as western hemlock and grand fir, are crowding the dominant western larch and white pine trees (Figure 2). Reducing the crown and moisture competition from these intermediate and understory trees would favor western larch and white pine over the long term and promote forest health and resiliency.

Existing down fuel loads are heavy within many of these second-growth stands (Figure 3). Much of this is a result of the high rate of white pine mortality from blister rust disease. Loss of lodgepole pine (a short-lived, early seral species) is also contributing to the down fuel loading as these trees are crowded and succumb to the ingrowth of shade tolerant climax species. In addition, natural self-thinning is also contributing to down fuels. The down fuel loading in conjunction with the intermediate and understory ingrowth of trees has led to a considerable laddering of fuels which could result in a high intensity wildfire.



The proposed project area (approximately 3,950 acres) is located within a portion of sections 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9, T50N, R4E, and a portion of sections 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, and 34, T51N, R4E, B.M. The project area runs from the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River (southern boundary), up Shoshone Creek and Dam Creek (western boundary), and along Road 442 in the Lost Creek drainage and up Stack Creek (eastern boundary). Most of the proposed treatment activity is within the southern quarter of the project area. The larger boundary provides a logical assessment area because of the transportation system, full consideration of past harvest treatments, and expands the area where opportunities for other resource activities can be considered.

The southern portion of the project area is located within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) as defined by Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Working Group. Shoshone Base Camp, operated by Lutherhaven, is adjacent to this area on the southwest side of Shoshone Creek. Numerous home sites are located along the river corridor approximately one-half mile east of Lost Creek. Over half of the proposed treatment acres are located in the WUI. Reducing fuel loadings within the Rolling Hills area would contribute to reducing the risk of high-intensity wildfire in the Wildland Urban Interface.

Forest System Trail 575 is located within the project area. This trail is designated for non-motorized public use. The trail runs from Shoshone Creek and bisects the southern portion of the project area. It terminates at Road 6545A where it ties into the main road system in the middle of the project area (see map).

There are no inventoried roadless areas within the project area. The Trouble Creek inventoried roadless area #138 (5,981 acres) borders the project area to the south on the other side of Road 208 and the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River. Lost Creek inventoried roadless area #137 (11,606 acres) borders the project area to the east on the other side of Road 442 and Lost Creek.

The majority of the transportation system in this area is closed to public motorized use year-round for wildlife security. Main arterial routes up Shoshone and Lost Creeks are open and designated for motorized use. The remainder of the road network is closed with a gate at the northern tip of the project area.

The project area is located outside of Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs) and outside of areas identified for recovery of grizzly bear and woodland caribou.

The 1987 Forest Plan will provide management direction for this project since the Revised Forest Plan has not been issued. There are two Forest Plan management areas located within the project area. The ridge that divides Shoshone Creek drainage from the Lost Creek drainage also separates the management areas (MAs). The west side of the divide ridge (Shoshone Creek drainage) is located within MA 1 which is to be managed for the production of commercially valuable forest products while protecting other resource values. The east side of the divide ridge (Lost Creek drainage) is located within MA 4 which is to be managed for big game winter range to provide sufficient forage to support projected big game habitat needs, through timber harvest and permanent forage areas.

**Background:** In the mid-1990's, approximately 386 acres of regeneration harvest treatments were implemented in this area under the Clover timber sale to provide future age class distribution. In 2005-2006, the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District implemented approximately 40 acres of commercial thinning to reduce stocking levels and promote western larch and white pine within the project area. The terrain and stand conditions were very similar to areas currently considered for treatment with the Rolling Hills Larch Project. That project (Clover Thin) has given us the opportunity to see end results of thinning treatment in this area before taking a broader scale approach. Design features will be incorporated into the Rolling Hills Project based on some items learned from the previous thinning project. The following pictures display before (photos on the left) and after views (photos on the right) of the Clover Thin Project.



*Middle ground view prior to treatment*



*Middle ground view after treatment*



*A portion of Trail #575 before*



*Portion of Trail #575 after*

## Purpose and Need for Action

The Purpose and Need for the Rolling Hills Larch Project is to:

- **Improve long-term forest health by promoting healthy western larch and white pine trees and by reducing stocking levels in over-crowded, second-growth stands.**
- **Treat fuel loadings within and adjacent to the Wildland Urban Interface to reduce the risk of high-intensity wildfire.**

## Proposed Action

This project would treat forest vegetation, treat fuels, construct roads needed to access treatment areas, and decommission roads no longer needed for future transportation access. The enclosed map illustrates where these treatments would occur in the project area. The Proposed Action for the Rolling Hills Larch Project would include the following activities.

### 1. Commercial thinning of approximately 216 acres of second-growth timber stands.

Commercial thinning on **197 acres** would reduce stocking levels to approximately 90-100 trees per acre and retain the largest and healthiest trees within the stands favoring western larch and white pine. The spacing between the trees would be approximately 20 to 25 feet, however variations would occur to favor retention of the best trees.

Commercial thinning would take place on approximately **19 acres** with a considerable lodgepole pine overstory component. Fading lodgepole pine trees would be removed from the overstory. In these areas, hemlock and grand fir (from sapling to small sawtimber size classes) would be favored over the lodgepole pine because much of this component is in decline due to the increased competition and its short-lived character. The intent is to leave fully-stocked stands. All healthy western larch and white pine that are present would be retained. This treatment would reduce stocking levels and reduce future fuel loadings.

Fuels created by the harvest operation would be grapple-piled and burned or whole-tree yarded to reduce the risk of high intensity wildfire. Slashing of any severely damaged regeneration would also occur with the harvest treatment. In harvest areas where it is economical, some existing down material that is not decayed (generally suspended above the forest floor) would be designated for removal as pulpwood or biomass products. Removal of this down material would reduce fuel loadings.



*View toward proposed units 2 and 3*

At this time, tractor and forwarder yarding treatment areas have been identified as economical for pulpwood extraction.

If market conditions improve, removal would also be considered in skyline and cable units.

Cut-to-length processor and forwarder yarding systems would be utilized over the majority of the project area to commercially thin these stands. Skyline, cable, and tractor systems would also be used in select areas. The proposed action is expected to generate approximately 4,920 ccf (2.5 million board feet) of merchantable sawtimber, roundwood, and pulpwood products from 231 harvest acres.

No harvest would occur within standard riparian buffer areas established under Inland Native Fish guidelines. Existing snags would remain standing unless they needed to be felled for safety reasons.

**2. Approximately 55 acres of prescribed fire (without commercial harvest) treatment and 50 acres of supplemental fuels treatments at specific locations within harvest units would be implemented.**

Prescribed fire operations would be implemented in natural openings and low timber stocking areas to help reduce fire intensities within and adjacent to the Wildland Urban Interface. This treatment would occur outside of harvest areas. Approximately 50 acres of pre-existing down fuels within proposed harvest units would be grapple piled and burned to create strategic fuelbreaks along ridgelines.

**3. Approximately 4.3 miles of new road construction (15 acres of clearing).**

To access the areas where proposed treatment would occur, approximately 4.3 miles of road is proposed for construction. The Roads Analysis Report has recommended that most of this road construction (4.0 miles) be retained as part of the transportation system needed for long-term forest management. The remaining 0.3 miles of road would be temporary. The proposed system roads would be located along the upper hillslope and cross no surface water. Several draws exist along the proposed road alignment with no evidence of overland flow. French-drains or rock fords would be installed in draws to ensure any future overland flow could still occur without erosion. These roads would provide equipment access while providing for erosion control and would implement all best management practices for road construction. Some reconditioning of existing roads, brushing and blading, would also need to occur to access the treatment areas.

The new system roadways would be waterbarred, seeded, and put in a storage status with front-end and trail crossing obliterations after use. The temporary roadway would be recontoured after use.

The proposed new road construction crosses Trail 575 at one location. Design features would be incorporated into the project to reduce impacts to the trail. These would include re-establishment of the trail at the road crossing after construction, obliteration of the new road 200-300 feet either side of the trail after use, a marking scheme to reduce residual paint after harvest, timing restrictions to avoid activities on weekends and holidays, prohibition of equipment working on or crossing the trail, and removal of any slash from the trail tread.

The existing gate at the northern boundary of the project area would be replaced (prior to harvest activities) with a heavier gauge and moved approximately 100 feet to inhibit illegal ATV access.



*Larch (center) crowded by in-growth of hemlock trees*

#### **4. Approximately 4.8 miles of road decommissioning and removal of 2 culverts at stream channel crossings on Trail 575.**

There are ten road segments within the project area that the Roads Analysis Report has recommended for decommissioning. These roads are not needed for future transportation access. Some of these roads have no surface water crossings, no soil instability, and have naturally re-vegetated requiring no further action. Others (approximately 2.3 miles) would require activity to remove stream crossing structures, restore drainage, and reduce risk of erosion.

There are two stream channel crossings on the lower end of Trail 575 that are inhibiting drainage and causing sedimentation. One culvert has plugged and diverted the stream. The other is in a side channel and is partially obstructed. Both culverts would be removed from the site and rock ford crossings would be established. Approximately 50 feet of the trail would be re-routed to shorten the distance that the trail runs parallel to the channel.

### **Opportunities**

Opportunities exist to accomplish additional improvements in the project area. Effects of conducting the following work will be analyzed with this project. These activities are not required for the proposed action to be implemented, but would occur if funding became available.

1. Rehabilitation of user created ATV routes from Lost Creek camping area.
2. Additional grapple pile and burning treatments within proposed harvest units associated with the Wildland Urban Interface.
3. Thirty-three acres of brushfield burning in big game winter range.
4. Pre-commercial thinning of past regeneration harvest treatments.
5. Replacement of two culverts on Road 442 that limit fish passage for tributaries to Lost and Stack Creeks.
6. Commercial firewood offering after harvest that would be limited to down material only.
7. Replacement of two culverts on Road 412 that are undersized or barriers to fish passage for tributaries of Shoshone Creek.

### **Invitation to Comment**

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. The subject line must contain the name of the project (Rolling Hills Larch) 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 most helpful in development of the environmental assessment if received by December 31, 2008.** Those people providing comments should include: (1) their name, address, telephone number, organization represented, if any; (2) title of the document on which the comment is being submitted; and (3) specific facts and supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider. **Copies of the future environmental analysis documentation will be mailed to those people who have submitted comments either before or during the comment period and to those who request a copy.** Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

If you have any questions, please contact Project Team Leader Bob Rehnborg at (208) 769-3054 or [rrehnborg@fs.fed.us](mailto:rrehnborg@fs.fed.us), or District Ecosystem Staff, Sherri Lionberger at (208) 769-3022 or [slionberger@fs.fed.us](mailto:slionberger@fs.fed.us). This document and attachments are available on the following web site: <http://www.fs.fed.us/ipnf/eco/manage/nepa/index.html>

Sincerely,

*/s/ Kimberly Johnson*

**KIMBERLY JOHNSON  
Deputy District Ranger**

Map Enclosure

**Summary of Proposed Treatments by Unit** – (Subunits reflect differences in yarding systems)

Unit	Acres	Prescription	Logging system	Fuels treatment
1a	12	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 12 acres
1b	12	Larch thin	Skyline	*Whole tree/Grapple pile – 3 acre
2a	16	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 11 acres
2b	4	Larch thin	Skyline	*Whole tree
3a	25	Larch thin/LP selection thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 16 acres
3b	4	Larch thin	Skyline/Cable	*Whole tree
4a	24	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 14 acres
4b	4	Larch thin	Skyline/Cable	*Whole tree
5a	6	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 6 acres
5b	10	Larch thin	Skyline	*Whole tree/Grapple pile – 2 acre
6a	4	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 2 acres
6b	2	Larch thin	Skyline	*Whole tree
7a	2	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 1 acre
7b	1	Larch thin	Cable	*Whole tree
8	5	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 3 acres
9	1	LP selection thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 1 acre
10a	9	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 6 acres
10b	1	Larch thin	Cable	*Whole tree
11a	15	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 11 acres
11b	6	Larch thin	Skyline	*Whole tree
12a	6	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 3 acres
12b	4	Larch thin	Skyline	*Whole tree
13	12	Larch thin/LP selection thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 6 acres
14	5	Larch thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 5 acres
15	5	LP selection thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 3 acres
16	8	Larch thin/LP selection thin	Cable	Whole tree
17a	5	Larch thin/LP selection thin	Forwarder	Grapple pile – 3 acres
17b	1	Larch thin	Cable	Whole tree
18	2	Larch thin	Cable	Whole tree
19a	2	Larch thin	Cable	Whole tree
19b	1	Larch thin	Tractor	Whole tree
20	2	Larch thin	Cable	Whole tree

LP selection thin = selection thinning to reduce fading lodgepole component.

\* If processor is used for felling in skyline units, then corridors trails (30 feet) would be grapple piled, resulting in 50% of the unit acres being piled.

# ROLLING HILLS LARCH PROPOSED ACTION

## Legend

- Project Boundary
- Wildland Urban Interface Boundary
- Roads Open to All Motorized Use
- Roads
- Trail 575
- Proposed System Roads
- Proposed Temp Road
- Proposed Decommission Roads
- Rehabed Roads
- Existing Gate Closure

## Past Harvest

- Thin
- CC
- Liberation
- Seed Tree

## Units Prescription

- Larch Thin (197 acres)
- Lodgepole Selection Thin (19 acres)
- Grapple Pile - Fuelbreak (50 acres)
- Prescribed Fire (55 acres)

1:12,000

Miles  
0 0.25 0.5

