

Lakeview-Reeder Fuels Reduction Project

How will we develop the Lakeview-Reeder project?

The wildland urban interface (WUI) around Nordman was identified by the Bonner County Fire Mitigation Plan as a priority for fuel reduction treatment in 2004. As a result, the district interdisciplinary (ID) team spent a great deal of time determining not only areas where hazardous forest fuels accumulations were high, but also identifying potential issues and/or concerns with fuel reduction treatments in those areas.



Regardless of the quantity or intensity of any fuel treatments we undertake in this area, our project will not eliminate the potential for wildfires to start. Lightning and human-caused wildfires have occurred in the past within the project area, and they will continue to occur in the future. The question is “how will fires behave once they start, and can they be suppressed successfully without undesirable consequences?”. This is keenly important to those with fire suppression responsibility.

Research and practical experience has demonstrated that when implemented successfully, treating forest fuels will alter the potential fire behavior. Reducing the quantity of forest fuels, as well as modifying fuel arrangement and patterns across a landscape, increases the effectiveness of suppression efforts and decreases the potential harm a wildfire could cause to people, private property, public infrastructure, and natural resource values.

Decisions regarding management of NFS lands usually involve balancing social, environmental and economic tradeoffs. At this point in the Lakeview-Reeder project, we need your input to determine the appropriate balance. How much wildfire risk is acceptable to most people? To what degree, and by what means, should we treat hazardous forest fuel accumulations? While members of the district ID team will likely be able to answer the latter part of this question, we need to determine how much risk the public feels is acceptable. We are pursuing this project because we are not comfortable with the existing condition of the forest fuels in the WUI around Nordman and Reeder Bay, and we do not want to ignore the situation. However, the decision maker will likely have a fair amount of latitude in deciding the amount and methods of hazardous fuel treatment we will use.

Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)—Bonner County Fire Mitigation Plan defines WUI as a zone around human habitation and/or the infrastructure that serves these points of habitation. Usually that zone lies within two miles of human habitation or infrastructure, but can be expanded to natural geographic breaks.

Because those of you who utilize, recreate, value, and/or live adjacent to the National Forest around the Nordman area will have to live with the consequences of any management decisions made for this area, you should be a participant in developing the proposal.

Summary of comments

In order to better understand the comments we received during the first scoping effort, we organized the first Lakeview-Reeder scoping comments into categories based on similar topics. In general they were taken verbatim from the letters, emails, and phone call records we received. The comments were entered into a data table, identified by topic and respondents' name. Because the substantive scoping comments consume 14 pages within that table, we have not included them here. Rather, we have summarized and compared some of the comments below. If you would like to review the full scoping comment table, it is available on the IPNF website, located at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/ipnf/eco/manage/nepa> (listed under Lakeview-Reeder, "scoping comments"). Please browse through the comments on that web site to see how others responded. In doing so, you will likely gain an appreciation for the diversity of comments and opinions we received. If you do not have internet access and would like a copy of all the comments mailed to you, please request a copy on the attached response form.

To whom did we send letters? The majority of the nearly 800 scoping letters were mailed to landowners in or near the project area. However, we also mailed letters to individuals, tribes, special interest groups, as well as state and local agencies that have previously requested information about these types of planning projects. We also sent press releases to local papers and announced the comment period on a local radio station.

Who submitted comments? We heard back from approximately 65 individuals who own homes and/or land in the project area. In addition, five environmental organizations responded- the Kootenai Environmental Alliance, Idaho Conservation League, Selkirk Conservation Alliance, The Ecology Center, and the Idaho Native Plant Society. We also received responses from Idaho State Department of Parks and Recreation and Washington Department of Fish and Game. In addition, a few other interested community members gave us comments that do not fit into the respondent categories listed above.

What were the comments, and how did we use them? Within the nearly 90 responses that were received, my staff identified over 300 "substantive" comments. The comment letters ranged from one sentence statements that someone wanted to remain on the mailing list but did not have any comments at this time, to a 45-page letter from an environmental organization.

Of those respondents who commented on whether or not they supported a fuel reduction project in the area, 95% expressed support. Many of those in support indicated that they agreed that there was an undesirable wildfire risk in the area and that the Forest Service should help lessen that risk. A few respondents requested that we enlarge the area being evaluated to include the Priest Lake islands (specifically, Kalispell and Bartoo Islands), as well as the area north of Granite Creek and along the lakeshore. Examples of comments in support include: "*I commend you on the undertaking of this project and wish you great success*", and "*I would like to add one suggestion however, Kalispell Island. I would ask that Kalispell Island be added to your current or future projects as soon as possible*".

Although general fire science research has been studied extensively, a number of issues surrounding managing wildfire risk within the WUI are difficult to quantify. For example, some of the comments we received indicate that people have different comfort levels of living with wildfire risk, as well as differences regarding what they consider values. We are not surprised by these diverse

views. In reading the comments, some respondents feel the potential negative environmental and social effects of treating any fuels to lower wildfire risk is not worth the benefits.

A few respondents suggested that the risk of an intense wildfire in the project area was not high. Other respondents indicated that fuel treatments would either not be effective in reducing wildfire risk or that treatment should only be considered in the immediate vicinity of homes. Examples of these types of comments include: *“We are concerned that the project may not be an efficient and effective approach to addressing the stated purpose”*, and *“We question the extent of these changes, and whether the current fire risk is significantly elevated over past conditions. We also question whether intensive fuel reduction through thinning and logging will reduce the potential for a large-scale fire. We question the appropriateness of a large-scale fuel reduction project in the area, especially in the moister mixed conifer forests.”* Some comments suggested that within the WUI, wildfire risk should be accepted by the land and homeowners in the area, and that fuel reductions on private property would be sufficient to protect homes.

We also received comments that suggested that fuel treatments in the WUI would harm the recovery of federally listed wildlife species. An example is *“There is a clear conflict between ‘fuels management’ in the WUI, effects to wintering ungulates that require thermal cover and snow interception, predator prey dynamics and caribou recovery.”* Many respondents expressed a desire for us to consider different types of fish and wildlife species as well as their habitats in our analysis. Comments ranged from concerns about the project’s impacts on federally-listed species such as caribou, lynx and grizzly bear to Management Indicator Species (MIS), such as pileated woodpeckers.

Many individuals commented about the scenic values of the area and recreational opportunities. For example, *“I would be opposed to any closing of trails...”*, and *“scenery is a big issue with people who come to visit our lake...”*. In addition, some concerns were raised regarding *“outlaw trail building”* and thinning near roads creating *“...an open invitation for ATV to enter areas where they can do harm.”*

Roads and access issues were mentioned several times. Comments ranged from *“Without access roads... to this area..., the only hope would be relying on air attack if a fire were to occur”* to *“the project should decommission and obliterate all high-risk and redundant roads, as determined by a complete Roads Analysis.”*

Water quality concerns were also raised. Comments included concerns about potential impacts to local wells and concerns about the potential for sediment delivery/run-off to either area streams or the lake.

Additional comments expressed concerns about forest insects and diseases, noxious weeds, fuel treatment methodologies, old growth, and soil compaction/nutrition.

A number of responses involved concerns about the scope of the project, our planning process and reiterated that we should follow all federal laws, IPNF Forest Plan standards, and agency regulations during this project’s planning, environmental analysis, and implementation.

Although there were exceptions, most of the property owners and community members who commented seem to be genuinely concerned about the wildfire risk and were not comfortable with the current situation. On the other hand, the comments submitted on behalf of the environmental

organizations and a smaller number of individuals, seemed to suggest that if any fuel treatments are done, that they should be very limited in scope and only conducted after preparation of a very detailed, thorough environmental study of potential effects.

Many of the comments received will be used by resource specialists during analysis of a proposed action. Because of the sheer variety of comments we received, we decided to reevaluate this, our next step, in the planning process. To further clarify and refine a “vision” for this project, we felt it necessary to describe three potential levels of treatment and obtain a better understanding of what level of treatment you, the public, can support. From that we hope to develop a proposed action.

Moving forward to a proposed action...

Why did we develop three different potential levels of treatment? Given the diversity of the comments we received, my staff and I decided to formulate three different treatment options and ask for your thoughts about what to move forward with. Each of these options would lessen the wildfire risk— but to widely-varying degrees. As described in more detail below, Level 1 would treat the least amount of fuels, Level 3 the most, with Level 2 falling somewhere between the other two options. Hopefully this stratification will help in developing your response.

Because this is such a cursory stage in project planning, no resource analysis has taken place yet, so it is impossible to quantify potential impacts to different resources. Again, everything to consider is a question of balance. Generally, one can deduce that with greater levels of treatment comes the potential for greater degrees of impacts to certain resources, and what can be an adverse impact to one resource can be a positive impact to another resource. However, regardless of the level of treatment that is proposed or implemented, all activities will have associated mitigation measures to minimize negative effects to resources, and all activities will still comply with federal regulations, agency direction, and Forest Plan standards.

At this point in the project planning, I need to decide what level of treatment to move forward with so that we can develop a proposed action. As mentioned earlier, this project qualifies as an “Authorized Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project” under section 102 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. In order to make the environmental assessment process more efficient for fuel reduction projects, this act allows the USFS to limit the analysis of alternatives to just one proposal. Therefore, rather than spending excessive time and money studying multiple alternatives in an environmental assessment process, public collaboration during scoping will help me quickly narrow down the options to one that is fairly well supported. Then, that alternative is studied in detail during the development of an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS).

What are the potential levels of treatment? The following descriptions of levels of treatment are still preliminary and could be modified, depending upon the responses we receive from you. As you read the general description, benefits, and drawbacks of each option, keep in mind that the Lakeview-Reeder project area is very large—encompassing approximately 31,850 acres around Nordman and Reeder Bay. The project area has been primarily delineated based on the watersheds within which most of the potential treatment areas exist. Nearly all of the project area is within the Bonner County classified WUI, and *all* of the potential treatment areas illustrated in these options are within the wildland urban interface. Within this project area over 6000 acres are under private ownership, and there are over 42 miles of boundary “lines” between NFS land and private property.

Please refer to the attached maps, which have been created to help illustrate each level of treatment. Be aware that although the shaded areas on the maps appear contiguous, these are very preliminary illustrations. Be assured that we are not implying vast expanses of treatment across whole mountainsides. Rather, once we identify all potential issues we will be able to refine those “areas of potential treatment” to exclude some areas, such as certain sensitive sites or sites with lower fuel loadings which do not require treatment.

Level 1 Treatment The fuel treatments on NFS lands in this option would be limited to areas very close to private property or egress routes. The proposed fuel treatments would generally be within 500-750' of private land. Under this option, approximately 2,800 acres of mechanical fuel treatments would be proposed, which is approximately 11% of the NFS land in the project area.

Level 1 would: If implemented, this option would reduce risk from wildfires by accomplishing two primary objectives: 1) If a fire were to start in treated areas on NFS land, this option would reduce the probability that it would quickly develop into an intense, fast moving fire which could be difficult or impossible to stop. Similarly, it would also reduce the probability that a fire starting on private land and moving onto treated NFS land would develop into an intense, fast moving fire; and 2) This option would help reduce the likelihood of egress routes becoming blocked in the event of a wildfire. Fuels on NFS land adjacent to egress routes would be decreased, and hazard trees (which could potentially block an egress route during a wildfire event), such as snags and disease-weakened trees, along egress corridors would be felled and/or removed.

Level 1 would not: If a wildfire were to start outside of these treatment areas and develop into an intense fire, this option would do very little towards creating an effective fuel break between an already large fire and private property. In this option, the relatively small and narrow fuel treatments proposed adjacent to the private property would generally not provide a large enough fuel break to allow suppression forces to safely and effectively work within them. The intensity of heat, smoke, fire brands, and the concern over firefighters escape routes could all result in a fire manager not placing firefighters between an intense fire and the private property. In summary, this option would do very little to help to control an intense, fast-moving fire, moving across the landscape.

Level 2 Treatment Level 2 would treat the same areas proposed in Level 1, **plus** additional areas located further away from the private lands and egress routes, which not only have hazardous fuel accumulations, but also have other associated elements that increase wildfire risk (e.g. being upwind from private property, being located downhill from private land or other resources, being located where the risk of fire starts is higher, etc.) Under this option, approximately 5,400 acres of mechanical fuel treatments would be performed, which is approximately 21% of the NFS land in the project area.

Level 2 would: If implemented, this level of treatment would have the same beneficial effects in reducing fire risks near private property boundaries as would Level 1. However, in addition, this option would treat fuels which occur in strategic locations where the fuels, physical site factors (topography, proximity to private property, etc.), increased likelihood of fire starts, more difficult suppression access, and/or surrounding fuel conditions, etc. result in the area being a higher risk.

As in Level 1, if a fire were to start in the treatment areas near private property, Level 2 would reduce the risk of the fire growing and developing into an intense fire before it could be suppressed. Moreover, these treatments would break up the fuel continuity, potentially slow fire rate of spread,

and/or allow firefighters a better location from which to try to safely control the fire. Most of these Level 2 treatments occur within 1/4 or 1/3 mile of private property boundaries.

Level 2 would not: As compared to Level 1, this option would begin to create conditions near the private property that would potentially help firefighters control the approach of a large, intense fire away from private lands. However, in a relative sense, Level 2 only helps to mitigate this risk at a low to moderate effectiveness level. Other hazardous fuels within the project area would be left untreated. Given certain conditions, a fast-moving, intense fire might start elsewhere and burn in a path that could be unaffected by our fuel reduction treatments, or the treatments within the fire's path might not be significant enough to allow firefighters to take advantage of less intense fire behavior.

Level 3 Treatment Level 3 would treat the same areas as Level 2, **plus** it would treat additional areas with high fuels. Treatment areas added to this level are generally adjacent to areas proposed in Level 2, but also include additional, strategically located stands elsewhere within the project area. Level 3 would include approximately 7,500 acres of mechanical fuel treatments, which is approximately 29% of the NFS land in the project area.

Level 3 would: Level 3 would build on the treatments of Level 2 and would treat more areas near private property and infrastructure. If a wildfire were to start in these treated areas, or be moving from these areas towards private properties, these additional treatments would further increase the chance that fire suppression tactics might be successful in controlling or containing the fire. Moreover, if a large fire were moving across the landscape, Level 3 treatments would include strategic placement of canopy/fuel breaks, which based on local fire history and historical weather patterns, might be more effective at disrupting the fuel continuity and affecting landscape fire behavior. This would enable suppression/protection efforts to be more successful.

Level 3 would not: Level 3, like any other option, will not prevent fires from occurring. Fires, including large, landscape fires, are and will continue to be part of this area's ecosystem. Although compared with the other levels of treatment, Level 3 provides the most effectiveness (moderate to high effectiveness) in potentially reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and altering landscape fire behavior so as to protect values-at-risk, no options will completely eliminate the risk of wildfire.

Additional Treatment Methods

In conjunction with any level of mechanical fuel treatment selected for the Lakeview-Reeder project, we also plan to incorporate approximately 300 acres of hand thinning/hand piling and 1300 acres of prescribed burning in brush fields and/or dry-sites. The hand thinning/hand piling treatments would be located near some roads, developed sites, and campgrounds where simply thinning small diameter brush and trees would be sufficient to reduce the risk of wildfire. The prescribed burning areas are currently comprised of either decadent brush fields, with abundant woody debris accumulations, or consist of open, dry-site conifer stands that currently do not have abundant ladder fuel accumulations. Small diameter fuel accumulations on these sites contribute to fast moving ground fires which can quickly expand a flaming front. Prescribed burning could take place in these areas with very little pre-treatment (i.e. hand slashing of some fuels, development of fire containment lines, etc.). Moreover, prescribed burning now would rejuvenate brush fields (reducing the woody debris accumulations, while providing increased browse for deer, elk, and moose), and could restore dry-site conifer stands (so that future treatments would not necessarily require mechanical thinning). These areas are natural, fire-maintained habitats, and prescribed

burning will help us maintain them out on the landscape while still reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Without burning (either prescribed or wildfire), these areas would eventually transition into different cover types, and their effectiveness as fuel breaks would likely be lost.

What is next? How can you help?

In summary, after looking at the descriptions of the preceding potential treatment levels for the Lakeview-Reeder Fuel Reduction Project, we are requesting your feedback. Please provide us comments related to which level of treatment you would be able to support, providing both reasons for that support and concerns/issues you feel are relevant to the project. Specifically stating why you could support one treatment level and not another is important in helping us determine how you want us to balance the risks and values. Your opinions are very important in helping us refine this project, develop an effective proposed action, and analyze pertinent issues!

We also would like to know your level of interest in future involvement in this project. For your convenience, we are enclosing a response form that includes options for potential meetings, field trips, and future mailings about Lakeview-Reeder Fuel Reduction Project. Please check next to the items in which you are interested. Although there will be other opportunities to comment on this project, **please respond with your feedback no later than Monday, May 1, 2006** so that we can develop a proposed action. Submit comments to:

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Priest River, ID 83856

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Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments may not have standing to appeal or file objection to the subsequent decision.

Thank you for your time and consideration! We look forward to your continued interest and involvement in the management of your National Forest!