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Forest  
Service

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# Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

## South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

*Under Authority of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act*

Sandpoint Ranger District, Idaho Panhandle National Forests  
Bonner County, ID



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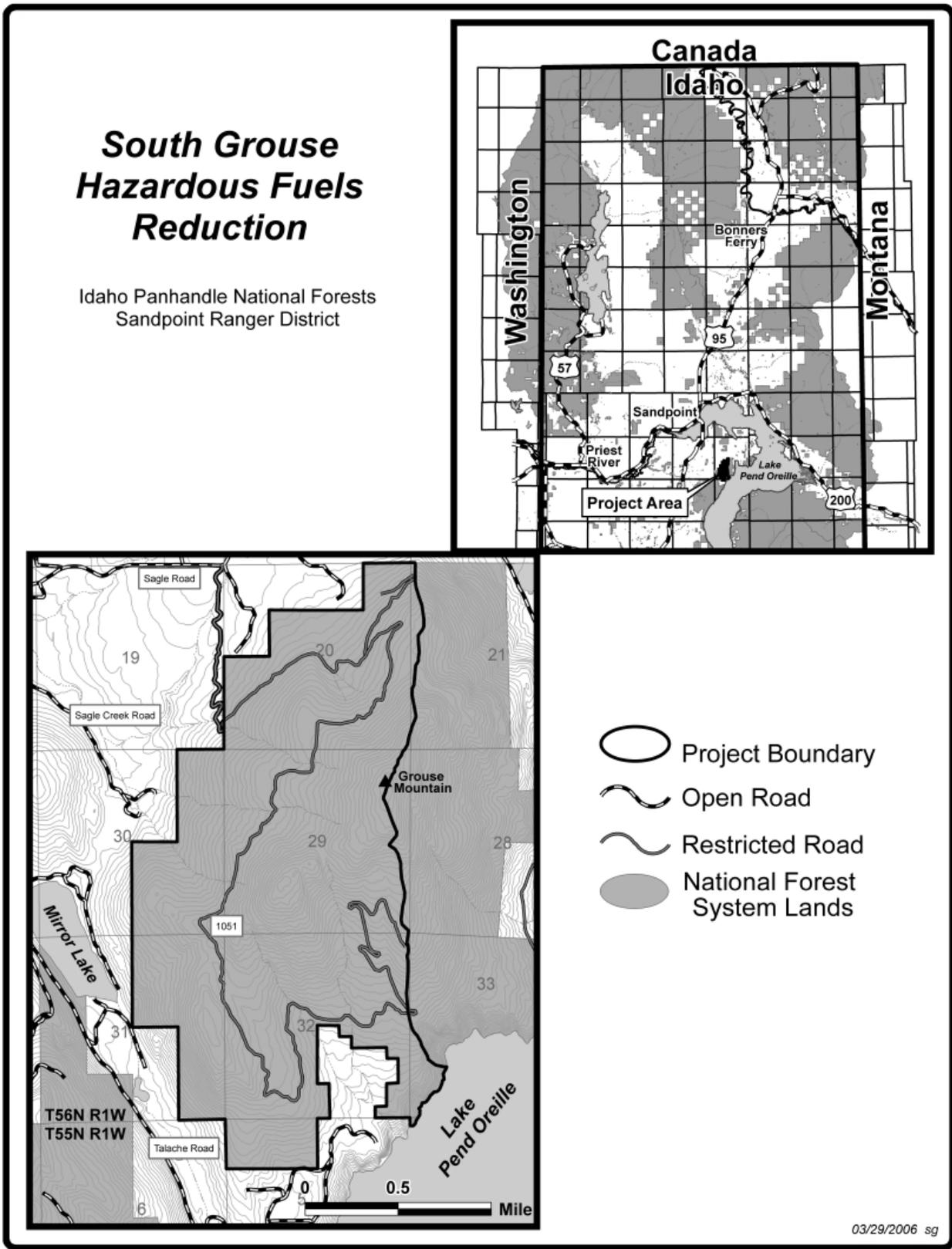


Figure 1 - Vicinity map

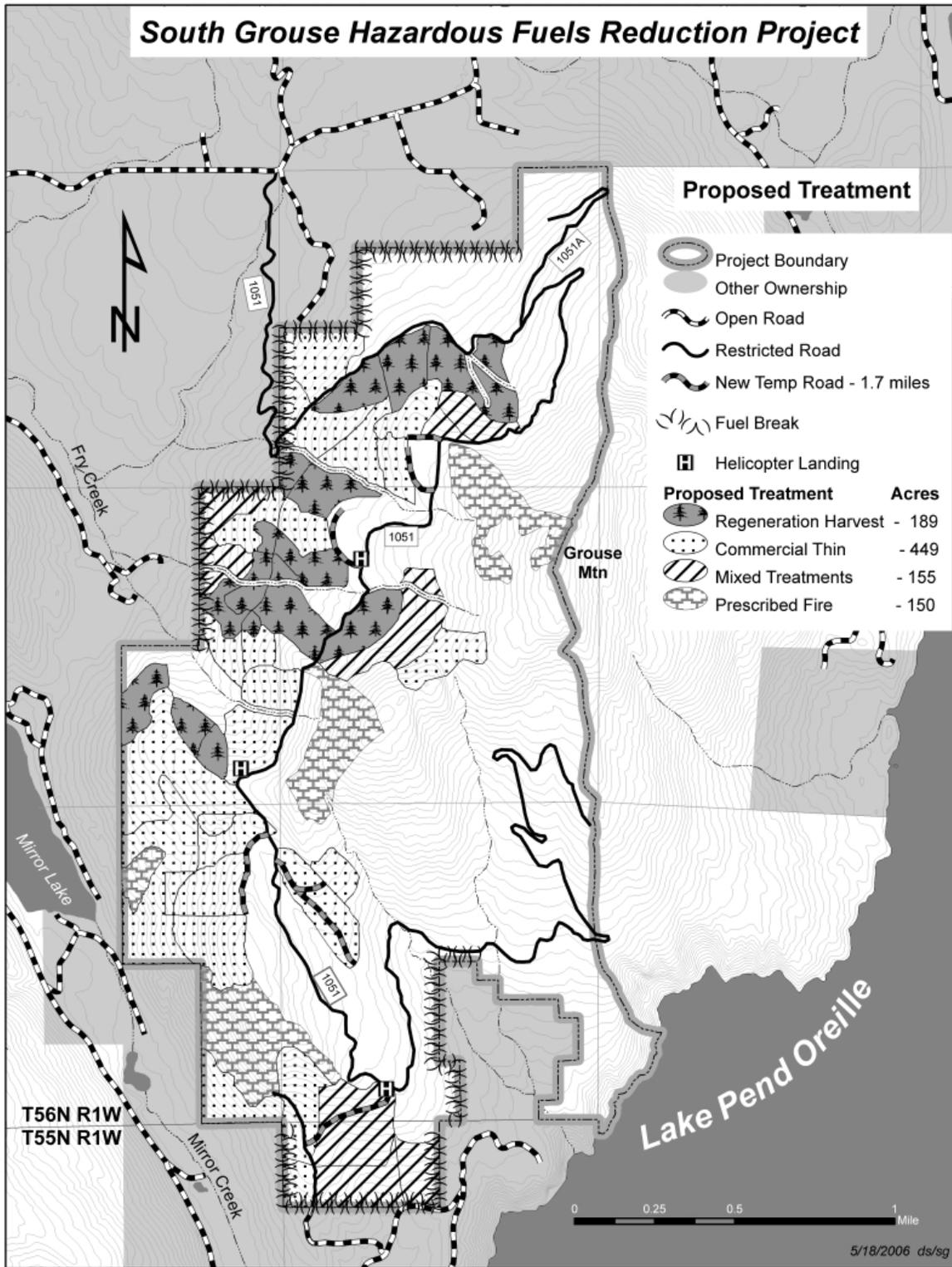


Figure 2 - Vegetation Treatment Map

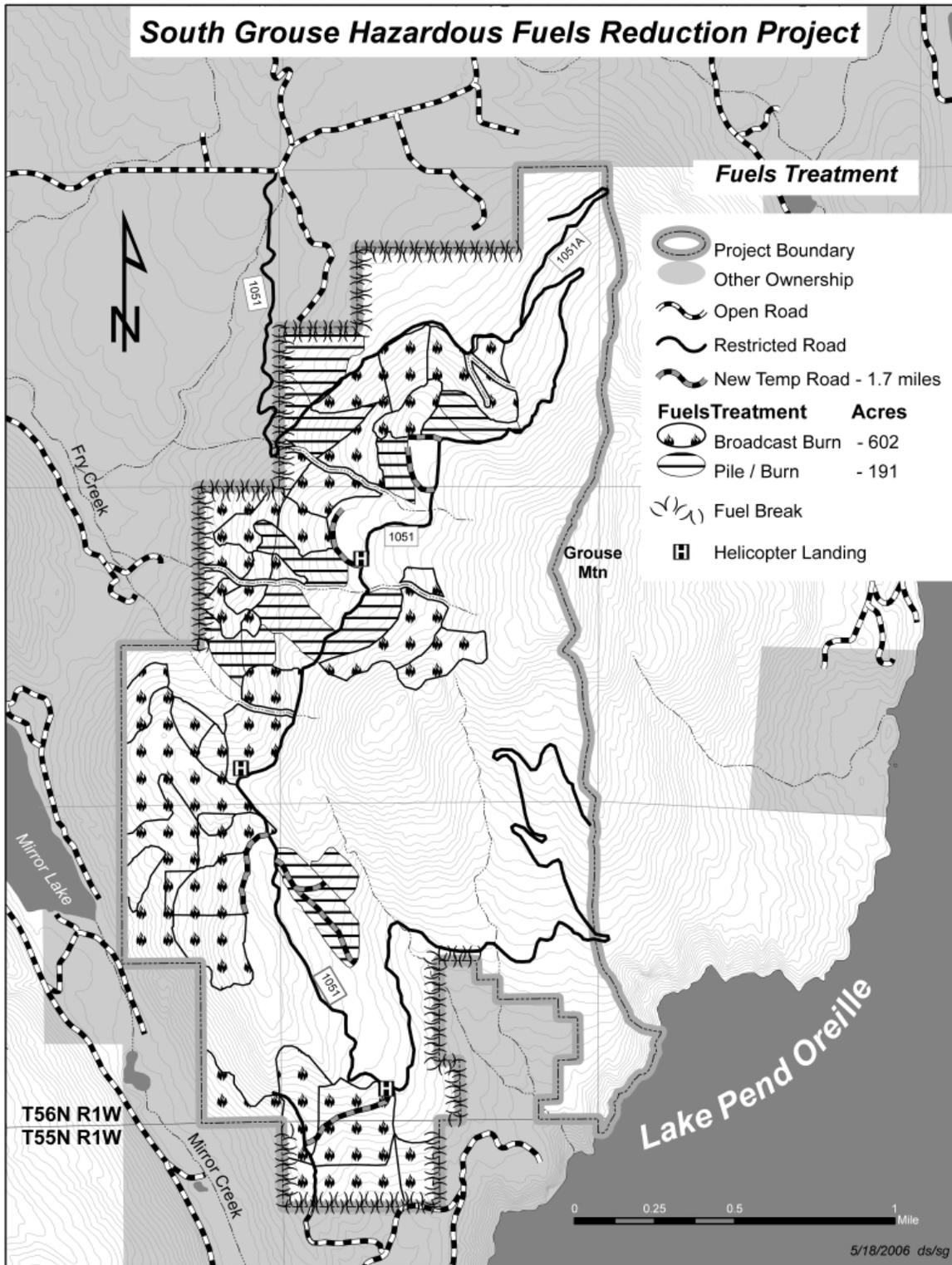


Figure 3 - Fuel Treatment Map

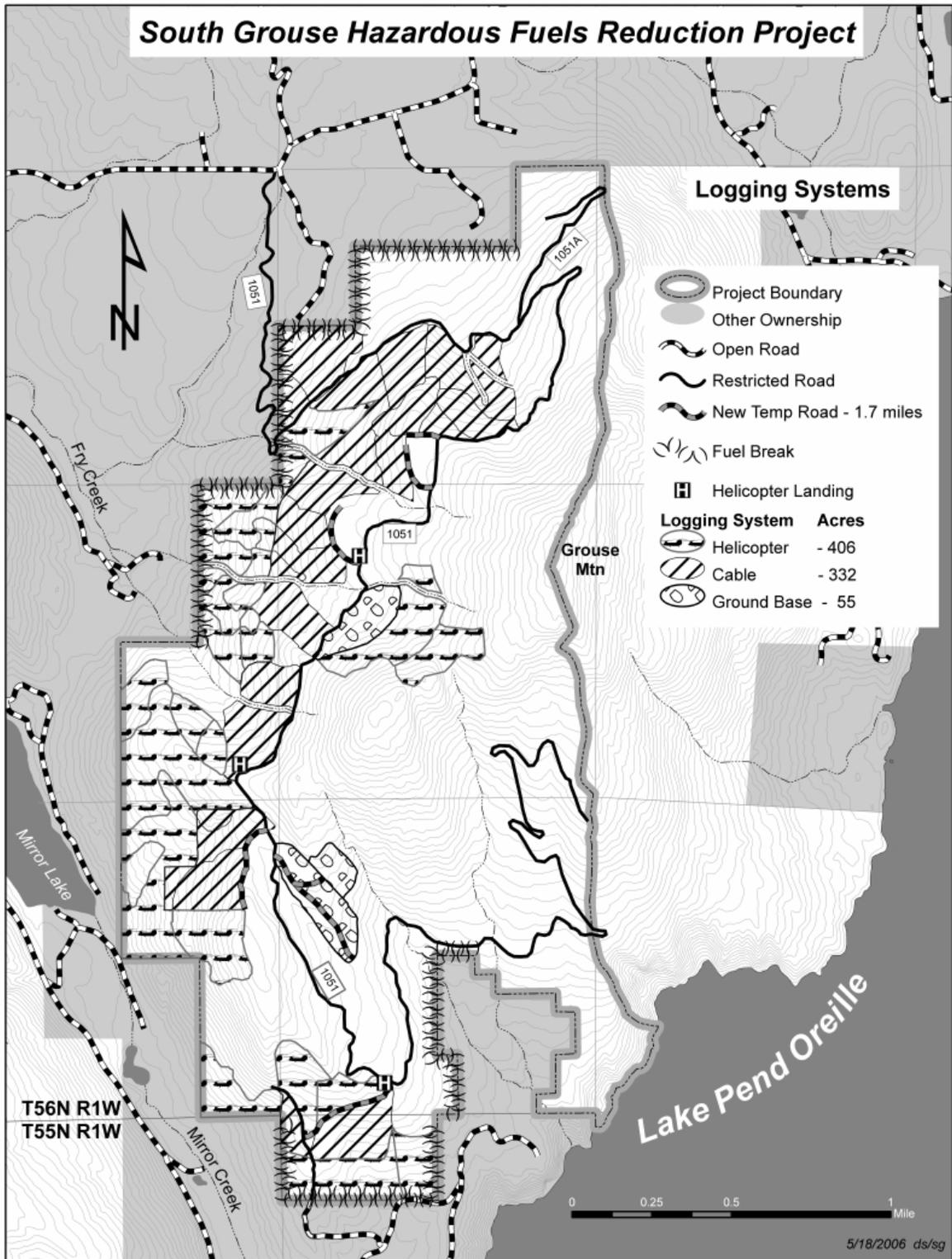


Figure 4 – Logging Systems Map

**DECISION NOTICE**  
**SOUTH GROUSE HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT**  
USDA FOREST SERVICE  
IDAHO PANHANDLE NATIONAL FORESTS  
SANDPOINT RANGER DISTRICT

## I. DECISION

### A. Introduction

After careful review of the environmental assessment (EA) for the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), comments from the public, resource reports, and the project file, I have decided to authorize vegetation and fuel reduction treatments on approximately 965 acres of National Forest System Lands (Alternative 2). The project is located on the west side of Grouse Mountain in Sagle, Idaho (Figure 1). Table 1 lists the treatments that will occur and Figures 2 and 3 depict the location of these treatments.

The purpose and need for the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was derived from field reviews and surveys of the resources in the Grouse Mountain area and responds to goals and objectives of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF) Forest Plan, the National Fire Plan, the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and the Bonner County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan. The purpose and need is also responsive to recommendations made under the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project and the Pend Oreille Geographic Assessment. Based on this information the goals of this project are to:

- **Reduce hazardous fuels within the project area to lessen wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure, private and National Forest System lands, and resource values.**

The project area has a high risk of wildfire due to increased surface fuel loading, fuel ladders, and crown densities. In addition, hazardous fuels continue to accumulate as forest insects, diseases and other disturbances (such as snow and wind storms) kill more trees. These hazardous fuel conditions, in conjunction with the steep terrain and topography-influenced winds, have the potential to produce severe fire behavior (EA page 6 and pages 49-61).

- **Restore, enhance, and protect forest ecosystem components to improve forest health, reduce threats from catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease infestations, and increase biological diversity.**

The project area's current forest composition and structure is less resilient to natural disturbances than the forest composition and structure that occurred historically (EA pages 1-2). Historically, low- and mixed-intensity fire regimes resulted in stands that had fewer trees per acre (especially in the understory), and much larger trees than the stands that dominate the landscape today (EA pages 4-5). These more open, mature structures have been replaced by dense stands of smaller trees (EA pages 1-2 and 40-42).

## B. Selected Alternative

I believe Alternative 2 meets the purpose and need for the project, best responds to public comments and concerns and is consistent with applicable laws, plans and policies. Sections III-VII of this decision document contain further rationale for my decision.

Table 1. Vegetation and fuels treatments

Description	Alternative 2 Acres*
Commercial Thinning	449
Regeneration Cutting	189
Mixed Treatments	155
<b>Subtotal harvest treatments</b>	<b>793</b>
Prescribed burning (following harvest treatment)	602
Natural Fuels Treatment (prescribed fire with no harvesting)	150
Machine Piling and burning	191
Fuelbreaks (fuelbreak treatment only)	23**
<b>Subtotal fuel treatments</b>	<b>965</b>
Reforestation (all regeneration harvest acres reforested and mixed treatment acres as appropriate)	About 280 acres

\*All acres shown above are approximations based on aerial photography interpretation, field visits and GIS/GPS data.

\*\*23 acres will receive fuelbreak treatment only. Another 37 acres of fuelbreak treatment is already counted in the prescribed burning or machine piling and burning treatments acreages, for a total of 60 acres of fuelbreak treatments.

The following logging systems will be used to meet vegetation management and fuel reduction objectives throughout the project area:

- Cable Yarding on 332 acres;
- Ground-Based Yarding on 55 acres; and
- Helicopter Logging on 406 acres.

Figure 4 depicts the locations where these logging systems will be used.

1.7 miles of temporary roads will be constructed to facilitate vegetation and fuels management activities. Construction of temporary roads will reduce the cost of fuel treatments and provide more access and control points for prescribed burning and fuels treatment. Temporary roads will be decommissioned after use. Decommissioning may entail full or partial recontouring of the road prism, the removal of any culverts, stabilizing fill slopes and restoring stream crossings back to natural grade, the introduction of woody debris, and revegetation as needed.

Road maintenance activities will occur on 6 miles of existing permanent road to meet standards suitable for use by large trucks and equipment. Maintenance activities will include clearing brush, shaping or grading the road prism, and maintaining drainage structures. Maintenance will facilitate vegetation restoration activities while helping to reduce potential and existing sediment risks to the watershed.

Three helicopter landings will be developed in flat areas at or near existing or proposed road junctions to minimize the amount of required excavation and disturbance. These helicopter landings will be rehabilitated after completion of project activities.

## C. Design Features

### *Vegetation Treatments*

**Retention of Large Old Trees in Stands Not Designated as Old Growth** – Within treatment units where there are individual and groups of large old trees that are not defined as old growth, marking guidelines will specify that these trees be retained.

**Post-cutting Treatments** - In regeneration units, site preparation, fuels treatment, and planting activities will occur within five years following timber cutting or the start of rehabilitation. Site preparation and/or fuels treatment may include a combination of prescribed burning, underburning, grapple piling, and hand piling, depending on post-cutting conditions.

**Retention of Untreated Vegetation in Treatment Areas** - Pockets, stringers and islands of untreated vegetation will be left in stands where harvest is proposed. These areas will contribute to both structural and compositional diversity.

### *Road Construction*

**Road Design** – Temporary roads generally greater than 300 feet in length<sup>1</sup> will be designed by a Forest Service Engineer to avoid potential resource damage from roads that may remain on the landscape until post-sale activities are completed. An engineering representative will monitor new temporary road construction to ensure design specifications were met. At the end of all project activities, all temporary roads will be decommissioned and removed from the forest transportation system.

**Temporary Road Decommissioning** - All temporary road construction segments will be decommissioned with appropriate techniques. This may include full or partial recontouring; removing all culverts; stabilizing fill slopes and restoring stream channel crossings back to natural grade. Seeding, fertilizing, and placement of woody debris will follow to prevent erosion, establish desired vegetation and prevent noxious weed spread. Unless circumstances change during implementation that will extend the duration of time a road is needed, roads will be decommissioned within the following timeframes:

- Temporary roads or existing road segments proposed for decommissioning that are not needed for post-harvest activities (e.g. fuel treatment or planting) will be decommissioned the same season following harvest activities or no later than the following season.
- Other road segments proposed for decommissioning that are needed for post-cutting activities, such as prescribed burning or planting, will be decommissioned within two to five years of harvest activities.

### *Fuels Treatment*

**Prescribed Fire Management** - A site-specific burn plan will be prepared for each area to be burned. Burning will only occur when weather, fuel conditions, and available resources are at the levels specified in the prescribed burn plan. Site conditions may dictate the use of other fuel treatment methods prior to prescribed burning so burns can be conducted safely and the objectives of the silvicultural prescription are met.

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<sup>1</sup> This distance could be increased if ground conditions are such that resource damage would be minimal.

**Slash and Pile Burning** – Landing slash and excavator piles will be burned in late fall after heavy rains and during cooler temperatures when the risk of escape into adjoining stands and potential damage to residual timber is lessened.

**Fuelbreaks** – If natural fuelbreaks are not present, firelines and fuelbreaks will be constructed around the perimeters of all burn units. Along private land boundaries a variable width fuelbreak will be created, dead vegetation will be removed, and trees left will be pruned. The width of fuelbreaks will depend upon slope, private resources threatened (homes and other improvements), and the type of stand treatment.

**Use of Water and Engines** – Fire hose will be installed along critical sections of fuelbreaks using water supplied from fire engines. An emergency spill clean up kit will be on site in the unlikely event of a spill outside the containment system.

### *Air Quality*

**Smoke Management** – All prescribed burning activities will be designed and conducted following the Memorandum of Agreement established between the states of Idaho and Montana to comply with state and federal air quality standards. Burning will only occur when weather and air conditions are favorable for smoke dispersal. No burning will be initiated during times when air quality restrictions are in place.

### *Wildlife Habitat and Security*

**Management of Gated Roads During Project Activities** - During logging activities, existing gated roads in the project area will remain closed to all motorized vehicles not associated with the logging operation or Forest Service administrative use to help maintain wildlife security. While using these roads, the purchaser will not be allowed to use motorized vehicles to gather firewood, hunt or transport big game animals from behind the gates.

**Road Design** - To retain habitat for snag-dependent species and species dependent on large-diameter trees, the location of the proposed new roads will ensure, whenever practical, that veteran and relic survivor trees and snags will not be removed during construction.

**Skid Trail and Cable Corridor Location** - To maintain habitat for snag-dependent species, the timber sale administrator will ensure, whenever practical, that the design of skid trails and cable corridors will avoid veteran and relic fire survivor trees and snags.

**Road Management** - All temporary roads, including the proposed spur roads, will be decommissioned following use. Existing roads, which are currently restricted and utilized for this project, will be returned to their pre-project road status.

**Wildlife Tree and Down Log Management** - Snags and live tree replacements will be retained where opportunities exist in treatment units at levels recommended or exceeding recent studies and scientific literature. Where possible, this project will strive to exceed the minimum Regional Snag Management Protocol for snag and live tree replacements within treatment units. Where they exist, the following minimum amounts of snags and live tree replacements will be retained within cutting areas:

- Dry forest habitats: 4-6 snags/acre and 8 live tree replacements/acre from the largest representative trees.
- Moist forest habitats: 6-12 snags/acre and 12 live tree replacements/acre from the largest representative trees.

Selection of snags will emphasize practices that assure a diversity of snag structural classes and the highest probability for long-term retention. High-hazard snags and snags in the advanced stages of decay will not be used to meet retention objectives. Trees killed by root disease will be avoided, where possible, to meet retention objectives because of their rapid deteriorate/fall-down rate. Snag retention practices will give emphasis to larger diameter or veteran/relic ponderosa pine, western larch, western red cedar, and western white pine available within each treatment unit. When these snags are not available, Douglas fir and grand fir will be used. The minimum retention snag will be 10" DBH. To maintain habitat for snag-dependent species, the tree marking guide will assure a diversity of snag structural classes and the highest probability for long-term retention. Where necessary, an unharvested perimeter will be left around large, relic, fire-burned trees and/or snags to protect them from harvest operations. Large diameter snags that are felled for safety reasons will remain on site to provide for large woody debris recruitment and long-term site productivity. The exception would be where these snags would exceed Forest Plan standards for down wood tonnage in the fuelbreak zones. Silvicultural prescriptions will be designed to retain large-diameter, live trees, which may be managed for future snag recruitment and retention. Large-diameter live trees (except those posing safety concerns and infected or at-risk), will be retained whenever possible. In grapple-pile treatment units, the large-diameter logs will be left in place.

**Maintaining Pockets of Late/Old Forest Structure** - Areas within treatment units that contain pockets of late and old structure will be thinned from below or not treated. These unique areas will be managed on a case-by-case basis. Vegetation type, moisture regime, logging system, wildlife species suitability and surrounding treatments will all be considered.

**Protection of Cedar Swales** - Swales containing large western red cedar will be not be treated, unless they are within the fuelbreak area adjacent to private property.

**Retention of Veteran and Relic Trees** - To maintain habitat for snag-dependent species and to protect veteran and relic trees and snags, where practical, individuals implementing prescribed burns will attempt to retain these trees by pulling slash back from the snag or live tree base and by adjusting ignition patterns. Grapple-piling will be considered to treat fuels on moderate slopes where residual snags will be at risk from broadcast burning.

**Retention of Hardwood Trees** - To maintain forest species diversity and wildlife habitat, aspen and birch trees will not be harvested for pulp. If trees of these species need to be cut for safety reasons, they will remain on site for coarse woody debris and long-term site productivity. Conifers in and around aspen and birch patches, including burn only treatment units, will be slashed to reduce competition for water, sunlight, nutrients as well as to help provide fuel for underburning. Where appropriate, individual trees may be cut or pushed over to encourage sprouting. Whenever possible, these areas will be underburned to stimulate sprouting. This strategy will provide vegetative diversity, which benefits various wildlife species.

**Grapple Piling** - Leave an average of one to three slash piles per acre unburned for small forest mammals and land birds, except within the fuelbreak zone adjacent to private property.

**Goshawk Nest Site Protection** – If a goshawk nest were discovered, mitigation measures would be implemented to help ensure that nest sites and post-fledgling areas are receiving minimal disturbance. A no-activity buffer (>150 foot radius) would be placed around each known active nest tree. In addition, a 30-acre buffer would be placed around each nest area to provide long-term nesting habitat (Reynolds et al. 1992). Treatments within the 30-acre buffer would be limited to activities that would enhance suitability of nesting habitat (e.g. thinning understory congestion while retaining overstory

protective cover). Purchasers operations and related Forest Service activities would be suspended within ½-mile distance of active nest areas from March 15 to August 15 1) to promote nesting success and 2) provide foraging opportunities for adults and fledgling goshawks during fledgling-dependency period. Activity restrictions would be removed after June 30 if the Forest Service determines the nest site is inactive or unsuccessful.

**Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Wildlife Species Protection** - If any threatened, endangered, or sensitive species are located during project layout or implementation, management activities will be altered to include proper protection measures. Timber sale contract provision B6.24 (Protection of Plants, Animals, Cultural Resources, etc.) will be in the timber sale contract.

**Regeneration Units** – Regeneration treatment units larger than 5 acres in sizes will leave patches of variable size and shape of untreated trees to retain security areas and structural diversity for wildlife. The regeneration units will leave a scattered overstory with variable spacing and density in order to achieve reforestation objectives and future snag recruitment objectives.

**General Wildlife Habitat** - No treatment activities will take place within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) and/or riparian buffers except for allowing prescribed burns to back into the RHCAs.

#### *Watershed Protection*

Seasonally flowing or intermittently streams, wetlands less than one acre, landslides and landslide prone areas (INFISH)--at a minimum the RHCAs must include:

- the extent of landslides and landslide prone areas;
- the intermittent stream channel and the area to the top of the inner gorge;
- the intermittent stream channel or wetland and the area to the outer edges of the riparian vegetation.
- the area from the stream channel, wetland, landslide, landslide prone area to a distance equal to one half site potential tree or 50 feet slope distance, whichever is greater.

No mechanical entry into RHCAs will occur. Handwork (thinning, slashing, hand piling, etc.) will be allowed. No active lighting of prescribed fire will occur within RHCAs. Fire may be allowed to back down into RHCAs. Harvest operations and roadwork will be limited to time periods outside of the spring runoff when the potential for mass failures and surface erosion is highest. Slash filter windrow and mulch will be applied to bare soil areas on new road construction for 100 ft. on either side of stream crossings.

#### *Soils Protection*

**Ground-based Yarding** – Skid trails for ground-based yarding will be designated, and located at 100-foot or greater spacing. Yarding will occur over slash and/or snow when possible. Erosion control measures for skid trails could include either covering trails with slash and randomly placed logs (on contour) to increase the microtopography needed to reduce runoff, stabilizing skid trail slopes with waterbars, or a combination thereof. Excavated skid trails will be recontoured and seeded after logging is completed.

**Skyline Yarding** - The leading end of logs will be suspended during yarding. Yarding across any designated RHCA will require full suspension.

**Road Construction** - Temporary road and landing construction will utilize existing skid trails and landings to limit the cumulative impacts of the proposed activities.

**Nutrient Protection** - The latest soil nutrient management recommendations from the Intermountain Forest and Tree Nutrient Cooperative (IFTNC) and Rocky Mountain Research Station will be applied to each activity area where organic material is removed. Conventional removal (lop and scatter) rather than whole-tree removal will be practiced where appropriate. Where practical, slash will remain on site over-winter so that mobile nutrients such as potassium can leach from fine materials back to the soil. Broadcast burn or underburns will be “light” in nature to foster release of potassium and other nutrients. Tree species suitable to the site will be planted.

**Retention of Coarse Woody Debris** - Management of coarse woody debris and organic matter in regeneration units will follow the USFS Region 1 guidelines described in Table 2. In units where existing coarse material is not sufficient, project activities will provide enough dispersed dead and downed coarse material to meet the guidelines.

**Table 2. Coarse woody debris requirements**

Douglas-fir/ninebark	260	PSME/PHMA	5-10 tons/acre
Grand fir/bear grass	510	ABGR/XETE	7-14 tons/acre
Western hemlock/queencup beadlily	570	TSHE/CLUN	17-33 tons/acre

<sup>1</sup> The minimum amounts listed should be retained after intermediate harvest, whereas the higher levels are recommended after final harvest and slash treatments.

**Protection During Grapple Piling, Excavator Piling or Mechanical Harvest Activities** –Grapple piling, excavator piling and ground-based yarding or harvesters will operate on a slash mat on slopes under 35%.

**Protection During Logging Activities** - If an area is winter logged one or more of the following requirements apply:

- Require a 24-inch snow layer or 18 inches of settled snow
- Require a combination where mineral soil is frozen at least 2 inches and a minimum of 6 inches of snow is maintained beneath the tread or wheels of operating equipment and logs dragged behind skidders
- Require frozen ground to a depth of 4 inches with equipment operation restricted to skid trails or where adequate slash matting exists.

**Protection of Soils in Landings** - Landings will be rehabilitated by recontouring, scarifying, ripping, subsoiling (as appropriate), seeding, planting and by covering them with slash and coarse woody debris for nutrient retention and erosion control. In stands 655-01-074 and 655-01-007 where detrimental impacts may exceed 15%, these measures will reduce detrimental impacts to below their pre-project levels.

**Protection During Prescribed Burning Activities** - Prescribed underburning and pile burning will take place only when the upper surface inch of mineral soil has a soil moisture content of 25 percent by weight or 100 percent duff moisture.

### *Noxious Weeds*

Noxious weed treatment will be conducted according to guidelines and priorities established in the Sandpoint Noxious Weed Control Project FEIS (USDA 1998). Methods of control may include biological, chemical, mechanical and cultural. Follow-up treatments and monitoring will be conducted as needed. Gravel or borrow pits on federal lands to be used during road construction or reconstruction will be free of new weed invader species (as defined by the IPNF Weed Specialist). A list of weed species considered potential new invaders is included in the project file.

Any priority weed species (as defined by the IPNF Weed Specialist) identified during road maintenance will be reported to the District Weed Specialist. Weed treatment of all haul routes, service landings and helicopter landings will occur prior to ground disturbing activities where feasible. If the timing of ground disturbing activities does not allow weed treatment to occur when it would be most effective, it will occur in the next treatment season following the disturbance. All timber sale contracts will require cleaning of off-road equipment prior to entry onto National Forest lands. If operations occur in areas infested with new invaders (as defined by the IPNF Weed Specialist), all equipment will be cleaned prior to leaving the site. All newly constructed roads, skid trails, landings or other areas of disturbance (including maintenance on existing roads) will be seeded with a weed-free native and desired non-native seed mix and fertilized as necessary. Areas that are underburned will be evaluated after the burn and seeded and fertilized as necessary. All straw or hay used for mulching or watershed restoration activities will be certified weed-free. Road segments identified for weed treatment and proposed for obliteration will be treated prior to obliteration.

### *TES Plants*

All documented sensitive plant occurrences will be buffered from project activities. The buffers will be established by a qualified botanist. Any changes to the selected alternative that may occur during layout will be reviewed, and rare plant surveys conducted as necessary prior to project implementation. Newly documented occurrences will be evaluated, with specific protection measures implemented to protect population viability. Such measures could include the following;

- Dropping units from harvest activity
- Modifying unit boundaries to provide adequate buffers around documented occurrences, as determined by the project botanist and based on topography, extent of contiguous suitable habitat for documented occurrences and the type of treatment proposed
- Modifying harvest methods, fuels treatment or logging systems to protect TES plants and their habitat
- Implementing, if necessary, Timber Sale Contract provisions B6.24, Protection Measures Needed for Plants, Animals, Cultural Resources, and Cave Resources; C6.24#- Site Specific Special Protection Measures; and B8.33, Contract Suspension and Modification.
- Final unit layout will be reviewed to determine if further surveys for the sensitive plants are needed.

### *Scenery and Visual Quality*

In foreground and mid-ground areas visible from Lake Pend Oreille, unit shape and design will imitate natural openings and landform configurations, including leaving islands of untouched vegetation, openings, clumps of trees and open stands of trees with irregular spacing. This technique borrows color and texture from the existing landscape. In thinning units, the spacing of leave trees will vary and some clumps of denser canopy will be retained to create a natural appearance. Roads and landings will be located and constructed to minimize cuts and fills. Hardwoods will be maintained for diversity of color and texture. In the background view areas, openings will be shaped to a size and form that appear as natural. Vegetation will be blended from treated to untreated areas.

### *Heritage Resources*

The South Grouse project area has been surveyed for heritage resources and only one site has been noted for protection within the project area. This site is not within any proposed activity area, and no other sites are known to occur within any activity areas. In the event that heritage resources are encountered during program activities, the Idaho Panhandle National Forests has the authority to modify or stop timber sale activities. The standard heritage resources timber sale contract provision (B6.24 Protection of Cultural Resources) will be included in the timber sale contract. The provision specifically requires the contractor to notify Idaho Panhandle National Forests regarding such discoveries. Mitigation of impacts for timber sales can include but are not limited to:

- Establishing buffer zones
- Directional falling
- Altering cutting unit boundaries
- Changing road locations
- Designating skid trails away from historic properties
- Limiting the cutting methods in certain areas
- Allowing only seasonal activities
- Limiting slash disposal and tree planting activities

## **II. COLLABORATION AND SCOPING**

### **A. Public Meetings**

In November 2004, the Bonner County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Committee (BONFIRE) sent a letter to all landowners within a mile of National Forest System lands on Grouse Mountain (398 invitations mailed out). This letter invited these landowners to attend a meeting to discuss fuel reduction opportunities on their lands and to introduce a potential Forest Service fuel reduction project on Grouse Mountain. At this meeting, BONFIRE representatives discussed Stevens Grant Assistance available to private landowners in the South Grouse Area, which can be used to perform hazardous fuels reduction work in the immediate vicinity of homes. Representatives from the Forest Service outlined the current hazardous fuels situation on National Forest System Lands on Grouse Mountain and discussed a project that would be designed to address this situation. Attendees were asked to note their interest in receiving a site visit from a BONFIRE representative and/or collaborating with the Forest Service in the development of a hazardous fuel reduction project on Grouse Mountain.

In December 2004, BONFIRE sent a letter to those attendees who were interested in collaborating with the Forest Service, to invite them to a meeting in January to develop a treatment proposal for Grouse Mountain. At this meeting, nine members of the public and Forest Service personnel discussed the needs of the area and the purpose of the project. Attendees stressed the need to treat problems before a catastrophic fire took place. Forest Service representatives conducted a stand by stand review of the area discussing hazardous fuel conditions, insect and disease-caused mortality, and potential treatment options. Details were discussed among the group and a refined treatment proposal was developed. The project goals of improving forest health and reducing hazardous fuels were defined. Wildlife habitat improvement opportunities and fire use were discussed. Issues such as smoke, noise, increased traffic, dust abatement, wildlife, aquatics, and past logging were identified as well. Members of the public were especially concerned about preserving the visual integrity of the area, controlling noxious weeds, and balancing short-term risks with long term benefits. Attendees agreed that management of the road system should continue as it has for the past several years, with the gates opened only for a couple of weeks in the late summer for firewood cutting and during hunting season to provide opportunities for disabled hunters. The need for increased recreational access was also talked about.

## **B. Scoping**

After developing a treatment proposal, the scoping process for this project was initiated with the *Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions* (SOPA) for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests beginning in January 2005, and continuing through the current issue. On February 16, 2005, a scoping notice that included a "Request for Comments" letter was mailed to 32 members of the public, including those who had indicated an interest in the project, adjacent landowners, potentially affected organizations, and other public agencies. The letter provided a description of public involvement and analysis processes to be used. During scoping, letters were received from Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Idaho Conservation League, Selkirk Conservation Alliance, Kinnikinnick Chapter of The Idaho Native Plant Society, Northwest Access Alliance, and several adjacent landowners. The comment period ended March 18, 2005 with a total of sixteen respondents

## **C. Field Trips**

A field trip through the project area was conducted on April 14, 2005. Ten individuals and organization representatives attended including members of the Idaho Conservation League, Selkirk Conservation Alliance, The Lands Council, and Kinnikinnick Chapter of The Idaho Native Plant Society. Stops on the tour were made to show a variety of current forest conditions, illustrate the need for hazardous fuels reduction and forest restoration work, and discuss concerns about project components and treatments. Two main issues were identified during this field trip -- permanent road construction and vegetative restoration using prescribed fire.

## **D. Objection process**

Projects developed under the HFRA authority include a pre-decisional administrative review process referred to as an "objection process" designed to encourage early public participation in project planning. A single objection was received following distribution of the EA. A conference call was held with the objecting party in an attempt to resolve the objection. No resolution was reached during the call, but it was agreed that the decision would clarify and further consider information relating to several of the objection points. The objection was then reviewed by the regional office who decided that the project and analysis were in compliance with existing laws, regulation and policy. To summarize my responses to the objection points:

- I understand that logging slash will increase fire hazard in the short-term (up to five years). Our team has mitigated this risk through the prudent use of piling and the construction of defensible fuel breaks (EA, pages 25-27). Based on the Fire and Fuels, and Forest Vegetation analysis in the EA, (pages 38-61), I am confident that the long-term fuel reduction and forest health benefits resulting from this project outweigh the increased fire risk in the short-term..
- A hard look was taken at the existing condition of the soil resource and at the effects of the proposed activities. Modeling based on monitoring was used to estimate the effects of proposed activities (including underburning and the burning of piles) on the soil resource (EA, pages 109-118). All road construction will be temporary, and will be decommissioned either under the timber sale contract, or using KV funds (EA, page 27). With regards to the efficacy of the restoration planned for these activity areas, I have reviewed monitoring of recent skid trail and road decommissioning on the IPNF's (Project File –Soils Section). This monitoring shows that temporary road obliteration has been successful, and that subsoiling, ripping, and the introduction of coarse woody debris can be used to aid the recovery process in heavily impacted areas like skid trails and landings.

- The South Grouse project meets the intent of the HFRA. It is located in a community identified as “at-risk from wildfire” in the Federal Register on August 17, 2001. It was developed through a collaborative process with the Bonner County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Committee (BONFIRE) and interested members of the public. The proposed action is largely a product of the collaborative process discussed above, and on public input received in comment letters, meetings, and on the ground reviews.
- Regarding the potential for cumulative effects stemming from BONFIRE’s fuel reduction efforts on private lands; “These activities would complement the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project by progressing towards a landscape approach of reducing fire intensities in the wildland urban interface” (EA, page 60). Specific information concerning BONFIRE’s fuel reduction activities on private lands is contained in the project file.

### III. ISSUES

Issues were identified by the interdisciplinary team using current knowledge of conditions and concerns and through collaboration and scoping described above. These issues reflect both agency and public concerns. After consideration, these issues were sorted into three categories: key issues, analysis issues, and issues eliminated from detailed analysis. The issues are described below.

#### A. Key Issues

Key issues are those within the scope of the project and of sufficient concern to drive the development of alternatives and/or refine the proposed action. Key issues are used to develop the specific activities of the action alternatives, sharply identify effects of the proposed action, and help define the scope of the environmental analyses and documentation. The key issues are specific to this geographic area and proposal, and provide a good comparison between alternatives during analysis.

A concern related to the effects of permanent road construction and its associated resource impact was the only key issue that could be used to develop an alternative to the proposed action. These concerns were repeated during the collaborative process and an alternative addressing this issue was proposed by Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. All other key issues that were identified through other resource concerns did not warrant the development of separate alternatives. Instead, these were used to develop and refine activities associated with the proposed action. These key issues are described below. The Selkirk Conservation Alliance proposed one additional alternative related to vegetation treatment. The alternatives proposed by Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation and the Selkirk Conservation Alliance are discussed in the alternatives section.

- **Effects on Vegetative Communities** - Changes in stand/forest composition, structure, and landscape pattern can affect forest health and other resource elements, such as fish and wildlife habitat. This project is designed to improve forest health and protect water quality and fish and wildlife habitat.
- **Effects on Fuel Characteristics and Fire Behavior** - Activities associated with wildfire suppression, timber harvest, and the introduction of white pine blister rust, have caused a substantial change in stand conditions and related fire behavior. Changes in surface, ladder, and crown fuels have resulted in the potential for an increase in fire intensity and severity when fires do start. These intense fires threaten human life and property, are difficult to suppress, and can result in the loss of key ecosystem components. This project is designed to decrease fuel loading

and breakup fuel continuity across the landscape. These changes in hazardous fuel conditions have the potential to lower fire intensity and decrease the potential for a crown fire, thereby increasing fire suppression effectiveness.

- **Effects of Road Construction** - Road construction and potential use patterns have the potential to affect soil productivity, water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and vegetative communities. Design features and mitigation measures have been identified to reduce the risk of adversely affecting soil, fish, wildlife, and vegetative resources from road construction.
- **Effects on Noxious Weed Populations** - There are some noxious weeds in the project area and along roads leading to the project area. Managers and the public are concerned about the risk of project activities on the spread of existing weed infestations and introduction of new weed invaders. Design features have been identified to reduce the risk of noxious weed spread and new infestation.

## **B. Analysis Issues**

Analysis issues are concerns about effects of proposed activities on the environment that are remedied by refining the design of a project or by applying mitigation measures. Analysis issues are not used to develop alternatives, but are carried forward in the analysis in order to provide a comparison of the alternatives and their effects. Most comments were related to the effects of the proposed action on various resources. Contents of the comments are sorted and summarized below.

- **Effects on Water Quality** - Road building and harvesting have the potential to deliver sediment to live streams and increase water yield, which can affect water quality both within the project area and downstream. Existing springs and domestic water sources can also be affected.
- **Effects on Wildlife Habitat** - Potential changes in forest conditions and increased access from road building may affect certain wildlife species. Of particular concern are big game, and threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.
- **Effects on Fish Habitat** - Water quality and changes in channel characteristics can affect fish populations and/or habitat within the project area or downstream.
- **Effects on Soil Productivity** - Soil productivity can be reduced by removal of organics and associated nutrients or by detrimental impacts such as compaction, displacement, rutting, surface erosion, puddling, or severe burning. Road building can impact soil productivity.
- **Effects on Visual Quality** - Proposed activities could adversely affect the visual quality of the area as viewed from the valley and lake.
- **Effects on Air Quality** - Smoke from underburning and pile burning and dust generated from logging operations and truck traffic have the potential to affect local and regional air quality.
- **Effects of Project Activities on Sensitive and Rare Plants** - Relative amount of canopy opening and/or ground disturbance can affect rare plant populations or suitable habitat.

### C. Issues Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

Issues that were 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence were eliminated from detailed analysis. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..." A list of these issues and reasons for their elimination from detailed analysis are summarized below.

- **Effects on Access** - Several comments were received regarding road management in the South Grouse area. Road 1051, currently provides access to the South Grouse project area. The road is currently restricted by two gates and is kept closed throughout the year except for occasional periods of firewood cutting during the summer months. The only other regularly scheduled use of the road is disabled hunting by permit behind the closed gates during hunting season. Some comments were to leave the road open to the public throughout the year while others wanted the road to be kept closed during and after project activities. A few comments suggested opening the road for non-motorized access only. This issue was considered but not analyzed in detail because changing current access restrictions does not address the purpose and need and does not facilitate the implementation of the proposed action. Therefore, changing access was considered outside the scope of the proposed action.
- **Effects on Old Growth** - No allocated or recruitment old growth stands will be treated with any alternative. Additionally, small pockets of large, old trees, which do not meet the minimum criteria for old growth allocation, will be retained. Therefore, the effects of project activities on old growth were not analyzed in detail.
- **Loss of Control During Prescribed Burning** - Prescribed burning is conducted only when weather and moisture conditions are favorable for control, and when adequate resources of personnel and equipment are available. Implementing design features described in Appendix A to address this issue will be highly effective at keeping a prescribed fire under control. For these reasons, this issue was eliminated from further analysis.

### IV. ALTERNATIVES

Generally, for authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects, HFRA states that the Forest Service "shall study, develop, and describe—(A) the proposed agency action; (B) the alternative of no action; and (C) an additional action alternative, if the additional alternative—(i) is proposed during scoping or the collaborative process...and (ii) meets the purpose and need of the project, in accordance with regulations promulgated by the Council on Environmental Quality" (HFRA 2003 sec. 104(c)). Additionally, for projects that occur within the WUI and are located no further than 1 ½ miles from the boundary of an at-risk community, HFRA does not require the development of any alternative to the proposed agency action (HFRA 2003 sec. 104(d)(2)). Grouse Mountain is located in Sagle, Idaho, a community identified as "at risk from wildfire" in the Federal Register on August 17, 2001, so the South Grouse project meets this requirement. Additionally, the risk analysis in the Bonner County Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan identified the area around Grouse Mountain as among those with the greatest risk and highest values in the county. Nonetheless, the Forest Service considered four alternatives: no action, the proposed action, a temporary roads alternative, and a reference condition alternative. The temporary roads alternative and the reference condition alternative were considered but eliminated from detailed study as described below.

### **A. Alternatives Considered But Eliminated**

Federal agencies are required by NEPA to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate a range of reasonable alternatives, and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not considered in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Two alternatives were proposed during scoping and are discussed below.

- **Temporary Roads Alternative** - The Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation proposed an alternative differing from the proposed action by suggesting all new roads be temporary. This means that roads constructed would be decommissioned upon project completion. The issue behind this alternative is concern about a lack of money and resources to adequately maintain the existing roads and any new ones. This issue was discussed again on the April 14 field trip when several individuals voiced concern over lack of maintenance on existing roads and resource damage from road construction in general. At this point, district staff revisited the areas where permanent road construction was proposed to determine if vegetation management and fuel reduction activities could be accomplished without the construction of these roads. Originally, two permanent roads and several short temporary road spurs were proposed. Based on additional field reconnaissance and analyzing the need for long-term access, the permanent road segment planned across stand 655-01-003 was changed to a temporary road. The permanent road segment on the northwest side of the project area was looked at to determine if it was needed to 1) enhance long-term fire protection access for National Forest and nearby private lands, 2) provide access for post harvest activities (grapple piling, tree planting, and prescribed burning), and 3) facilitate timber harvest activities. After additional field reviews and analysis, district staff determined that these activities could be completed without constructing this road. Instead, a short, temporary spur would be constructed and decommissioned upon project completion. Therefore, because the suggested temporary road construction only alternative has been built into the proposed action, this alternative was eliminated from further consideration.
- **Reference Condition Alternative** - The Selkirk Conservation Alliance (SCA) offered a concept of an alternative. In part, the concept stated: "If pre-settlement conditions are used for a reference condition, please disclose the site specific approximation of the historic conditions and use that as a "reference condition" alternative. This would enable the public to compare the degree to which the action alternatives meet the reference condition." This reference condition alternative would propose to restore the project area to pre-settlement conditions. The end result of this alternative would be similar to that of the proposed action. While the proposed action proposes to reduce the fuel hazard, the method of doing that would begin to restore the project area to historic vegetative conditions. The Forest Service recognizes that to precisely mimic historic conditions is not feasible or practical; however, the proposed action strives to achieve conditions similar to how the site was maintained naturally. Those conditions were characterized by open stands of large, fire-resistant trees. Frequent, low-intensity ground fires tended to maintain this condition by keeping ground fuels low and minimized dense regeneration of shade-tolerant trees. The result of the proposed action and the SCA alternative concept would be similar; therefore, there is no need to consider both in detail. For these reasons, the SCA alternative was dropped from further consideration.

### **B. Alternatives Considered in Detail**

#### **Alternative 1: No Action**

This alternative provides a baseline for comparison of environmental consequences of the proposed action to the existing condition and is a management option that could be selected by the Responsible Official. The results of taking no action would be the current condition as it changes over time due to natural forces and present and reasonably foreseeable future activities. Under the No Action alternative, current

management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No commercial harvest, noncommercial thinning, road building or fuel treatments would be authorized through this project to accomplish project goals. Existing road maintenance, weed treatment, and recreation activities would continue.

### **Alternative 2: The Selected Alternative**

Activities are designed to 1) reduce wildfire threat to human lives, private property, and other values within the wildland urban interface (WUI), 2) restore ecosystems which evolved under a more frequent fire regime, and 3) to move the resource area towards desired future conditions. See Section I above for details about the selected alternative.

## **V. RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION**

I have made my decision to implement the proposed action based on:

- Limited environmental consequences as documented in the Finding of No Significant Impact, EA, and the associated resource reports;
- How well the management action addresses the project's purpose and need;
- Consideration of the Forest Plan standards and guidance for the project area as amended;
- Consideration of issues that were raised during the scoping and comment periods.
- Consistency with applicable laws, regulations, plans and policies

### **A Purpose and Need**

The purpose and need for the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was derived from field reviews and surveys of the resources in the Grouse Mountain area and responds to goals and objectives of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF) Forest Plan, the National Fire Plan, the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and the Bonner County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan. The purpose and need is also responsive to recommendations made under the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project and the Pend Oreille Geographic Assessment. The purposes of this project are to:

- **Reduce hazardous fuels within the project area to lessen wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure, private and National Forest System lands, and resource values.**

The project area has a high risk of wildfire due to increased surface fuel loading, fuel ladders, and crown densities. In addition, hazardous fuels continue to accumulate as forest insects, diseases and other disturbances (such as snow and wind storms) kill more trees. These hazardous fuel conditions, in conjunction with the steep terrain and topography-influenced winds, have the potential to produce severe fire behavior (EA page 6 and pages 49-61).

The elevated wildfire risk and potential for extreme fire behavior pose a direct threat to the natural resources and developments both within and surrounding the project area. These natural resources and developments are of considerable value both locally and regionally and include clean air, clean water, visual aesthetics, wildlife habitat, healthy forests, private land, homes, cabins, and other public infrastructure. Because of the risk of losing these values, it would be socially unacceptable for wildfire to assume its historic role. For that reason, fire suppression will continue. However, in the event of a wildfire in this area, severe fire behavior could result in flame lengths, spread rates and fire intensities higher than firefighters could safely and effectively suppress (EA pages 49-61). Additionally, a fire could easily move into the crowns of the trees,

further impeding fire suppression efforts. There is a clear need to reduce fuels within the project area in order to alter fire behavior.

Our analysis shows that the selected alternative would effectively reduce flame lengths, lower existing fuel concentrations, decrease ladder fuels, and increase the chance of successfully suppressing wildfires should they occur. Any fire starting in the project area or entering the project area would be confined to the ground, affording a high probability of control using engines, hand crews, and air resources. A wildfire would be substantially less severe, of lower intensity, less expensive and safer to suppress than under current conditions. This would reduce wildfire risk to the surrounding private lands and resource values. (EA pages 49-61). In comparison, the No Action alternative would not reduce hazardous fuels or wildfire risk, both of which would continue to increase over time (EA, page 56).

- **Restore, enhance, and protect forest ecosystem components to improve forest health, reduce threats from catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease infestations, and increase biological diversity.**

The project area's current forest composition and structure is less resilient to natural disturbances than the forest composition and structure that occurred historically (EA pages 1-2). Historically, low- and mixed-intensity fire regimes resulted in stands that had fewer trees per acre (especially in the understory), and much larger trees than the stands that dominate the landscape today (EA pages 4-5). These more open, mature structures have been replaced by dense stands of smaller trees (EA pages 1-2 and 40-42).

Restoration, enhancement, and protection of forest ecosystem components cannot be separated from fuel reduction activities. Restoring forest cover, structure, pattern, and species composition to those which occurred under low- and mixed-intensity fire regimes will reduce the threat catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease infestations, increase habitat diversity and will create conditions where low fire intensities can be maintained for the long term. Alternative 2 is designed to do these things (EA pages 21-28). A combination of thinning, regeneration harvest, reforestation, and mixed treatments in will increase the area dominated by long-lived, disease-resistant seral tree species (EA pages 44-45). Harvest and prescribed fire will result in more open forest structures, encourage individual tree growth, and reduce the understory and associated ladder fuels (EA pages 42-45).

Our analysis shows that these changes in structure and species diversity will move the project area's forest cover towards historic conditions, improve forest health, reduce threats from both catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease infestations, while increasing habitat diversity and future management options relative to current conditions (EA pages 4-5 and 42-48). In comparison, the No Action alternative would not effect positive changes in structural composition or species diversity. Forest Health would continue to decline over time (EA, page 43).

## **B. IPNF Forest Plan 1987**

All resource plans are to be consistent with the Forest Plan [16 U.S.C. 1604(i)]. The Forest Plan guides all natural resource management activities [36 CFR 219.1(b)]. All administrative activities affecting the National Forest must be based on the Forest Plan [36 CFR 219.10(e)]. Chapter II of the Forest Plan describes in detail Forest-wide management direction, goals, objectives, research needs, desired future condition and standards applicable to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF). The land allocation decisions made in the Forest Plan allocated lands within the project analysis areas to Management Areas

1, 4 and 9. Chapter III of the Forest Plan describes the management area direction for each land allocation for the IPNF.

I have evaluated features of the selected alternative against Forest Plan goals, as well as the standards for consistency with the Forest Plan. These Forest Plan goals and standards are discussed in Chapter I of the EA (pages 10-11), with disclosures of Forest Plan consistency for each resource in Chapter III (EA, pages 35-131). In addition, a discussion of compliance with the IPNF Forest Plan standards for potentially affected resources is included below. I believe that all management activities included in the selected alternative are in full compliance with Forest Plan goals, objectives and standards, including the Inland Native Fish Strategy amendment to the Forest Plan.

### **Soils**

Proposed activities will meet IPNF Forest Plan Standards for soils and Regional Soil Quality Standards (FONSI, page A-4; EA, pages 117-118) and Table A-1 in Soils Report (Helgenberg and Rone 2005). Due to the presence of pre-existing impacts, the temporary road construction proposed in stands 655-01-007 and 655-01-074 may result in the Regional 15% detrimental soil disturbance guideline being temporarily exceeded (EA, pages 114-115). These temporary roads will be decommissioned following their use with recontouring, coarse woody debris placement and planting occurring. Similar treatments will be used to rehabilitate the skid trails contributing to the pre-existing detrimental soil impacts. The expected result will be a net improvement in long-term soil quality and a return of detrimental disturbance level in the area to below 15%.

The Regional Soil Quality Standards allow the 15% standard to be exceeded temporarily; “In areas where less than 15 percent detrimental soil conditions exist from prior activities, the cumulative detrimental effect of the current activity following project implementation and restoration must not exceed 15 percent. In areas where more than 15 percent detrimental soil conditions exist from prior activities, the cumulative detrimental effects from project implementation and restoration should not exceed the conditions prior to the planned activity and should move toward a net improvement in soil quality” (Regional Soil Quality Standards R-1 SUPPLEMENT 2500-99-1 CHAPTER 2550 - SOIL MANAGEMENT).

With regards to the efficacy of the restoration planned for these activity areas, I have reviewed monitoring of recent skid trail and road decommissioning on the IPNF’s (Project File –Soils Section). This monitoring shows that temporary road obliteration has been successful, and that subsoiling, ripping, and the introduction of coarse woody debris can be used to aid the recovery process in heavily impacted areas like skid trails and landings.

### **Wildlife**

The analysis for potential effects on wildlife species is, in part, based on the premise that by maintaining or not impacting sufficient suitable habitat for species there is no effect on populations at the project level, and by extension on population viability. Put another way, with no impact on suitable habitat (or no suitable habitat to impact) there is no impact on populations. This project is associated with several blocks of public land that are surrounded by water and highly developed rural properties, which are disconnected from the larger, contiguous span of National Forest lands. Therefore, it is not large enough, and too isolated for population dependence or to be source habitat for any of the species considered (EA, pages 64 and 84). None of the project area is critical or what is considered primary habitat for any threatened, endangered, or sensitive wildlife species, or MIS (EA, pages 64 and 84) . Consequently, species viability and extent of their distribution is not dependent on the integrity of these isolated parcels (FONSI, pages A-2 and A-3; EA, pages 64 and 84).

The selected alternative will comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Forest Plan direction to manage the habitat of threatened or endangered species to prevent declines in populations across the Forest. This project will have no effect on threatened or endangered species (FONSI, pages A-2, A-3, A-6 and A-10; EA, pages 65-67 and 84). The selected alternative will comply with the Forest Plan direction to manage the habitat of species listed in the Regional Sensitive Species Lists to prevent further declines in populations across the Forest. This project will not impact old growth stands and activities will meet snag management objectives. For sensitive species, the selected alternative may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species (FONSI, pages A-2 and A-3; EA, pages 65-67, 68-72 and 84-85).

The IPNF Forest Plan requires that habitat must be maintained to protect and maintain viable populations for management indicator species. This project will not impact old growth stands, activities will meet snag management objectives, and winter range will be maintained. The selected alternative may impact individuals and habitat, but will not likely indicate a local or regional change in habitat quality or population status to management indicator species (FONSI, page A-3,; EA, pages 65-66, 72-81 and 85). While the Forest Plan does not address specific standards or guidelines for managing forest land birds, it does provide guidance for managing snag habitat and old growth. This project will meet Forest Plan standards for snag management and will not adversely impact old growth. For forest land birds, the selected alternative may impact individuals and habitat, but will not indicate a local or regional change in habitat quality or population status (FONSI, page A-10; EA, pages 82-85).

### **Old Growth Habitat**

No activities will occur in old growth stands, therefore no allocated or recruitment old growth stands will be treated or affected (FONSI, pages A-2, A-8; EA, pages 20, 23, 48 and 163 – 165). Forest Plan standards for old growth will be met (EA, page 163 – 165). As documented in Appendix B of the EA (pages 163 – 165), the South Grouse Project Area (2,211 acres) is located within a portion of Old Growth Management Unit 27 (OGMU 27). This OGMU contains 10,072 acres of National Forest System land and 3,313 acres of private land (13,385 total acres). OGMU 27 contains 195 acres of field-allocated old growth. This represents 1.5% of the total acres in the OGMU and 2.8% of the National Forest System land in the OGMU. An additional 85 acres of recruitment old growth has been identified in OGMU 27, but does not occur within the South Grouse Project Area. Stand 655-01-044 (17.34 acres) is the only allocated old growth located in the South Grouse project area. No treatments will occur this stand. Old growth standard 10c requires selection and maintenance of at least five percent of the forested portion of those old growth units that have five percent or more of existing old growth. Less than 3% of OGMU 27 is old growth; therefore, because there is less than 5% presently, the project is not required to bring OGMU 27 up to the 5% old growth. No reduction in old growth within OGMU 27 will occur as a result of the selected alternative. No harvest is proposed in field-allocated old growth or in field-allocated recruitment old growth. Areas proposed for thinning in the project area, as well as untreated stands throughout the OGMU will likely increase the proportion of the OGMU occupied by old growth over the next 50 years (EA, page 23).

Additionally, based on Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) data for old growth on the IPNF, the estimated percent of old growth on the forested lands of the IPNF is 11.8%. The 90% confidence intervals of this estimate are 9.5% to 14.0%. Based on these values, the IPNF is meeting Forest Plan Standard 10b that calls for maintaining ten percent of the forested portion of the IPNF as old growth.

### **Threatened, Endangered and Rare Plants**

The selected alternative will meet Forest Plan direction and provide for the viability of populations for threatened, endangered, and rare (sensitive) plants. There are no federally listed threatened or endangered

plant species suspected to occur in Bonner County, Idaho (USDI 2006). Therefore, the project is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (1973) as amended (FONSI, page A-2; EA pages 95-96).

### **Noxious Weeds**

In regards to noxious weeds, Forest Plan direction is to "provide moderate control actions to prevent new weed species from becoming established" (USDA Forest Service 1987). The selected alternative meets Forest Plan direction by providing moderate control actions through project design, as required by the Forest Plan, to prevent new weed species from becoming established (FONSI, pages A-4 and A-10; EA pages 107-108).

### **Aquatic Resources**

The Forest Plan goals, objectives and standards to protect watershed and aquatic resources will be met (FONSI, pages A-2 and A-9; EA page 126). Riparian Areas will be managed to feature dependant resources (fish, water quality, maintenance of natural channels, certain vegetation and wildlife communities) while producing other resource outputs at levels compatible for the objective for dependent resources. Management activities will not significantly impair the long term productivity of the water resource and state water quality standards will be met or exceeded (EA, pages 122-26). All streams within the project area are non-fisheries drainages and include first and second order streams. Activities will maintain existing biota by maintaining the physical integrity of these streams (EA, pages 122-26). Best Management Practices and riparian guidelines found in the Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFS 1995) will be used to accomplish this objective (EA, pages 122-126 and 157). Water features that occur in the project area will be protected with Riparian Habitat Conservation Area (RHCA) measures as identified in the INFS (EA, page 157). The project will have no effect on endangered or threatened fish species and will have no impact on sensitive fish species (EA pages 119-126 and Project File).

On June 2, 2005, the Forest Supervisor signed a Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact that amended the Forest Plan to modify or remove objectives, standards, and monitoring requirements pertaining to fry emergence success (USDA Forest Service 2005a). The amendment was implemented because the fry emergence objectives, standards and monitoring requirements in the Forest Plan did not contribute as well as Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFS) objectives, standards, guidelines, and monitoring direction towards meeting the goals of providing sufficient habitat in support of maintaining diverse and viable populations of fish species across the forest. In addition, because of the limited application of the fry emergence models and their unreliability, and the inability to determine fry emergence success in the field due to high variability affected by multiple natural and human-caused factors, the Forest Service was not able to state with any degree of certainty whether measures of fry emergence success were accurate or precise. Therefore, the aquatics analysis for this project did not consider the effects of proposed activities on fry emergence success.

### **Fire and Fuels**

The EA documents the effects of implementing activities under the proposed action that would reduce surface, ladder, and crown fuels in areas of treatment (EA pages 48-61). In the event of a wildfire, this would result in reduced flame lengths and rate of fire spread, giving fire crews more time to control the fire. Activities associated with the proposed action will also make progress toward reducing the potential for severe fire behavior that could threaten human life and property in the resource area (EA, pages 57-61). This is consistent with Forest Plan standards to protect human life and property from fire.

## **Forest Vegetation**

Proposed regeneration cutting followed by planting of seral tree species less susceptible to insect and disease damage including rust-resistant western white pine, is consistent with Forest Plan direction that "reforestation will normally feature seral tree species." All stands proposed for regeneration cutting are on lands suitable for timber production that can be adequately restocked within five years of the final cut. As directed by the Forest Plan, stands would be regenerated with trees from seed that is well adapted to the specific site condition, and would be regenerated with a variety of species (EA, pages 21-29 and 48).

Site-specific silvicultural prescriptions are compatible with management area goals, and preferred species management has considered both biological and economic criteria. Silvicultural practices including cutting, site preparation and planting with seral species are designed to reduce the perpetuation of pest problems. Management of competing understory vegetation would be accomplished, where necessary, as a consequence of fuels reduction/site preparation treatments (EA, pages 48 and 150). For additional discussion of consistency with the Forest Plan, also refer to the discussion under "National Forest Management Act," in this Record of Decision.

## **Visual Quality**

For this project, the visual resource was evaluated based on visual sensitivity levels assigned to travel routes, use areas, and water bodies in and adjacent to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. Visual quality objectives (VQOs) identified within the project area as defined in the Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 1987) are primarily partial retention with some modification and retention. Activities in partial retention areas may be evident, but must blend in with the surrounding landscape. Activities in retention must not be evident. In areas that allow modification, activities may dominate the surrounding landscape but must utilize naturally established form, line, color, and texture to maintain a high level of visual quality or should appear as a natural occurrence when viewed in background or middleground. The vegetation removal within the project area will be designed to repeat the form, line, color, and texture of the natural occurrences common to the surrounding areas by creating small openings that are irregular in shape and similar in size to the natural openings on the landscape. A high visual quality will be maintained throughout the project area and established Forest Plan VQOs will be met (FONSI, pages A-4 and A-5; EA pages 127-129).

## **VI. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

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 have reviewed the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the project activities as documented in this Decision Notice, the Environmental Assessment, and the Project File.

I have determined that the selected alternative will not have significant beneficial or adverse impacts on the physical, biological, or social portions of the human environment based on context and intensity of the impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. The Finding of No Significant Impact is included with this decision notice as Appendix A.

## VII. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

### HEALTHY FORESTS RESTORATION ACT (HFRA)

The selected alternative is consistent with the HFRA. The implementation of this hazardous fuel reduction project will reduce wildfire risk to communities and other at-risk Federal land, enhance efforts to protect watersheds, address threats to forest health, including catastrophic wildfire across the landscape, and protect, restore, and enhance forest ecosystem components to improve biological diversity and enhance productivity. The project meets criteria to be authorized under this act.

- **SEC. 102(a)(1). AUTHORIZED HAZARDOUS FUEL REDUCTION PROJECTS**  
This project occurs within the wildland-urban interface (WUI) identified in the Bonner County WUI Fire Mitigation Plan of May 2004. Project activities will occur in an area of the WUI among those identified as having the greatest risk and highest value in the county in the Bonner County WUI Fire Mitigation Plan of May 2004.
- **SEC. 102(a)(2 and 3)**  
The Fire Regime Condition Class Analysis for the South Grouse Project area showed that the landscape as a whole is in Condition Class 2, and is in need of restoration of fire effects, vegetation composition and structure, and fuel characteristics. Fire exclusion, white pine blister rust, and historic timber harvest not mimicking the natural fire regime are primary factors pushing the Condition Class rating into Condition Class 3 in localized moist habitats (FONSI, page A-7; EA pages 53-54).
- **SEC. 102(e)(2)**  
Implementation of the selected alternative will not affect any old growth stands. Over time, stands re-established with the implementation of this project may contribute toward the development of the structure and composition of old growth stands according to the pre-fire suppression old growth conditions characteristic of the dry and moist forest types occurring within the project area (FONSI, page A-7; EA pages 163-165).
- **SEC. 102(f)(1)(A)**  
The project focuses largely on small-diameter trees, thinning, strategic fuel breaks and prescribed burns to modify fire behavior, as measured by the projected reduction of wildfire effects. This project's mechanical treatment will mainly commercially thin stands, typically harvesting smaller, weaker or diseased trees (FONSI, page A-7; EA pages 23-27 and 44-45). Some 23 acres of strategic fuel breaks along the national forest boundary adjacent to private land are planned (EA pages 22 and 25). Finally, all treatment acres will receive some form of prescribed burning and 150 acres are planned for prescribed burning only (EA pages 22 and 25-27). These activities will reduce wildfire flame-length and rate of spread and associated effects (EA pages 54-55).
- **SEC. 102(f)(1)(B)**  
The project maximizes the retention of large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote fire-resilient stands. Large, fire-resistant trees such as ponderosa pine, western white pine and western larch dominated the pre-settlement forests of this area. The proposed project will retain those large trees remaining on the landscape and promote restoration of historic forest conditions by planting those species in some harvest units (FONSI, page A-8; EA pages 23-27 and 44-45).

- **SEC 102(g)(8)**

For authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects, HFRA stresses “monitoring the need for maintenance of treated areas, over time, in order to preserve the forest health benefits achieved”. For this project and the Grouse Mountain area in general, this will be achieved by monitoring the effectiveness of fuel treatments and levels of insect and disease activity throughout time to determine when the next treatment and what type of treatment will occur (EA pages 32-34).
- **SEC. 104(f). ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS**

HFRA requires hazardous fuel reduction projects to be developed in a manner consistent with “A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan”. One of the action items in this implementation plan addresses local level collaboration and recommends coordinating with Federal and State agencies, local governments, landowners and other stakeholders, and community-based groups. The National Fire Plan also directs local level collaboration, involving participants with direct responsibility for management decisions affecting public and/or private land and resources, fire protection responsibilities, or good working knowledge and interest in local resources. The South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction proposal was developed using a collaborative, community-based approach to hazardous fuel reduction and forest health issues. The Grouse Mountain area was identified as a priority for hazardous fuel reduction treatments in the Bonner County Fire Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan (2004). This plan was developed in collaboration with Bonner County, the Forest Service, other federal and state agencies, rural fire districts, and private landowners. Additionally, the ID Team used information gathered using several methods in the collaborative process including public meetings, scoping, and on site field trips, to develop this project (EA pages 16-19).
- **SEC 104(c) and (d)(2)**

Generally, for authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects, HFRA states that the Forest Service “shall study, develop, and describe—(A) the proposed agency action; (B) the alternative of no action; and (C) an additional action alternative, if the additional alternative—(i) is proposed during scoping or the collaborative process...and (ii) meets the purpose and need of the project, in accordance with regulations promulgated by the Council on Environmental Quality”. Additionally, for projects that occur within the WUI and are located less than 1 ½ miles from the boundary of an at-risk community, HFRA does not require the development of any alternative to the proposed agency action. Being located in Sagle, Idaho, a community identified as “at risk from wildfire” in the Federal Register on August 17, 2001, the South Grouse project meets this requirement. Nonetheless, the Forest Service considered four alternatives: no action, the proposed action, a temporary roads alternative, and a reference condition alternative. The temporary roads alternative and the reference condition alternative were considered but eliminated from detailed study because the proposed action was modified to include only temporary road construction, and because the reference condition alternative would have had results similar to the proposed action (EA pages 20-21).

## **NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (NFMA)**

The selected alternative is consistent with the NFMA (FONSI, page 7) and the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Forest Plan. This proposal does not require any Forest Plan amendments. According to 36 CFR 219.12 (Federal Register, Vol. 70, No. 3, January 5, 2005, page 1059) a final determination of suitability for timber production is made through project decisions. For this project a determination was made that two stands formerly classified as unsuitable for timber production are forested well above the 16% stocking requirement, are producing well above the required 20 ft<sup>3</sup>/ac/yr and technology is available to reforest these stands (Project File – Vegetation Section).

- **16 USC 1604(g)(3)(E)**
  - (i) Timber harvest is not expected to result in irreversible damage to soil, slope, or watershed conditions (EA pages 110-126).
  - (ii) Openings will be restocked within five years after harvest (EA, page 150)
  - (iii) The proposed harvests will not seriously or adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat (EA pages 119-126).
  - (iv) The proposed harvesting system is not selected primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output of timber. Harvest systems were selected on feasibility of logging with minimal road construction and soil disturbance (EA, pages 108-118).
  
- **16 USC 1604(g)(3)(F)**
  - (i) In some areas the selected harvest methods will result in areas of even-aged stands of timber in order to appropriately meet the objectives and requirements of the IPNF Forest Plan (EA, pages 22-25).
  - (ii) An interdisciplinary team reviewed and assessed the project. Their findings are reported in detail in each resource report and are summarized in the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment.
  - (iii) Harvest units will be shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain (EA, pages 128-129 and 161).
  - (iv) Opening size limitations do not apply in this case because the juxtaposition of leave areas between and throughout harvest units will not create a contiguous opening exceeding 40 acres (EA page 24).
  - (v) The proposed harvests will be carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic resources, and the regeneration of the timber resource (EA, pages 35-132).

## **NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT**

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires analysis of projects to ensure the anticipated effects upon all resources within the project area are considered prior to project implementation (40 CFR 1502.16). The analysis for the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project followed the guidelines of NEPA as provided by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). Alternatives were developed based on existing conditions, Forest Plan goals and objectives, and public concerns and recommendations. Two alternatives were considered in detail, including a no action alternative as required by NEPA (EA, pages 21-29). Two additional alternatives were briefly considered but eliminated from further study as described in Chapter II of the EA (pages 20-21). The range of alternatives is appropriate given the scope of the proposal, the public issues expressed, and the purpose and need for action as stated in Chapter I of the EA (pages 1-8).

## **CLEAN WATER ACT**

The selected alternative will maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the streams in the project area, in adherence with 33 U.S.C. §1251 (FONSI, page A-9; EA, page 118-126). State water quality standards will be met or exceeded (FONSI, page A-9; EA, page 126).

## **CLEAN AIR ACT**

Clean Air Act requires each State to develop a State Implementation Plan (SIP) to identify how the State will attain and maintain national air quality standards. The EPA has established National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for smoke and other particulate matter. Idaho Department of Environmental

Quality (DEQ) ensures compliance with the NAAQS through regulations and air quality permits which are contained in the Idaho State Implementation Plan (SIP). Conditions of the air quality permits ensure that emissions from permitted industrial sources would not cause or contribute to a violation of the NAAQS. Burning that will occur with the selected alternative will be performed in accordance with smoke management practices, which are designed to prevent the smoke from causing a violation of the NAAQS. As a result, there is little risk that a violation of any ambient air quality standard will occur (EA, pages 61-63).

#### **ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT**

Section 7 of the ESA directs federal agencies to ensure that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by them are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any Threatened or Endangered species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of their critical habitat. The selected alternative is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (Wildlife, Fisheries, and Rare Plants Reports). The selected alternative will have any significant effects on threatened or endangered species (FONSI, pages A-2, A-3, A-6, A-7 and A-10; EA, pages 63-68, 85-96, 67-85 and 118-126 wildlife, plants, and aquatics).

#### **NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT**

The selected alternative complies with the National Historic Preservation Act (FONSI, pages A-5, A-6 and A-10 ). Systematic inventory and reports are complete for this project area, and Native American groups were given the opportunity to comment and no concerns were identified (FONSI, page A-6)

#### **FLOODPLAIN AND WETLAND PROTECTION EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11988 AND 11990**

Project activities will not adversely affect floodplains or wetlands. No activities will occur on floodplains. Streams that could have floodplains will be buffered from activities. There are no mapped wetlands in the project area. Unmapped, smaller wetlands will have appropriate buffers marked during unit layout (FONSI, page A-5; EA, pages 119-120).

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE EXECUTIVE ORDER 12898**

No disproportionate impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or during any other portion of collaboration over the course of this analysis. Tribes holding treaty rights for hunting and fishing on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests were included on the project mailing list and have the opportunity to provide comments on this project. No concerns about the proposal were identified (FONSI, page A-10; EA, pages 131-132).

#### **MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT EXECUTIVE ORDER 13186**

Executive Order 13186 directs federal agencies to avoid or minimize adverse impacts on migratory bird habitat when conducting agency actions. Activities implemented by the selected alternative will not contribute to a local or regional change in habitat quality or population status (FONSI, page A-10; EA, pages 84-85).

#### **AQUATIC SYSTEMS AND RECREATIONAL FISHERIES EXECUTIVE ORDER 12962**

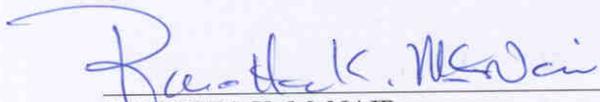
The selected alternative will maintain aquatic habitat and there are no perennial fish-bearing or non-fish-bearing streams within the project area. Additionally, project activities will not affect any fish-bearing streams outside of the project area (FONSI, pages A-2 and A-10; EA, page 126) Therefore the selected alternative will not affect the fishery potential, which in turn will not reduce the potential for recreational fishing opportunities.

**INVASIVE SPECIES EXECUTIVE ORDER 13112**

Directs federal agencies to "...prevent the introduction of invasive species and provide for their control and to minimize the economic, ecological, and human health impacts that invasive species cause..." The selected alternative will meet the intent stated in Executive Order #13112 for moderate control, through the implementation of design features. Weed populations in the project area are low in density monitoring for noxious weeds will help identify areas needing treatment and follow-up treatments, and all weed treatments will be done in accordance with the Sandpoint Ranger District Noxious Weed Project FEIS (FONSI, pages A-4 and A-10; EA, pages 107-108).

**VIII. APPEAL RIGHTS AND IMPLEMENTATION**

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 218.10(b)(2). The implementation of this project may begin immediately after the signature date on this Decision Notice. For more information regarding this project, contact the team leader A.J. Helgenberg at the Sandpoint Ranger District office, (208) 263-5111.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
RANOTTA K. McNAIR  
Forest Supervisor,  
Idaho Panhandle National Forests

12/6/07  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**  
**SOUTH GROUSE HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT**  
 USDA FOREST SERVICE  
 IDAHO PANHANDLE NATIONAL FOREST  
 SANDPOINT RANGER DISTRICT

The South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment considered two alternatives 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, Chapter 3). 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, Chapter 3).

After considering the environmental effects described in the 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).**

I find this project to be a site specific action; therefore the context of this proposal is limited to the locale of the Grouse Mountain Area. Project activities are limited to the specific fuel and vegetation treatments proposed on lands managed by the USDA Forest Service in this area, although some analyses (such as wildlife) considered the extent of cumulative effects beyond the project boundaries. I believe that while improving hazardous fuels conditions and reducing potential wildfire intensities in the local area and watershed, this proposal will not pose any significant short- or long-term effects on other resources; design features included in this proposal will limit adverse effects to such an extent that any adverse impacts are almost undetectable and immeasurable, even at the local level (EA, pages 44-48, 57-61, 62-63, 65-85, 89-96, 100-108, 110-118, 122-124, 128-129, 130-132 and 162).

#### **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 criteria (1-10) 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.

I considered impacts associated with the Proposed Action Alternative as presented in the South Grouse EA (pages 35-132, all of chapter 3). These impacts are within the range of effects identified in the IPNF Forest Plan. I conclude that the specific direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the selected alternative are not significant, and this action does not rely on beneficial effects to balance adverse environmental effects.

## **NO EFFECT**

The proposed action will have no effect on the following resource concerns.

- **Wildlife (EA pages 63-85):** Either because there is no suitable habitat present and/or there is no occurrence in the project area, there will be no effect to Northern Gray Wolf, Grizzly Bear, Woodland Caribou, Canada Lynx, Boreal Toad, Fringed Myotis, Townsend's Big-eared Bat, Coeur d'Alene Salamander, Wolverine, Northern Bog Lemming, Peregrine Falcon, Common Loon, Harlequin Duck, Black Swift, and American Marten.
- **Threatened and Endangered Plants (EA pages 85-96):** No federally listed endangered plant species are suspected to occur in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USDI 2006) currently lists no Threatened plant species as suspected to occur in Bonner County, Idaho, in which the South Grouse project area occurs. Therefore, there will be no effect to those species as a result of project activities.
- **Aquatic Resources (EA pages 118-126):** There are no perennial fish-bearing or non-fish-bearing streams within the project area. There are no threatened, endangered, or sensitive fish or species of concern in the project area, and there is no habitat for these species. Therefore, there will be no effect to those species as a result of project activities. In addition, the direct and indirect effects analysis of the proposed action indicated that there no measurable or foreseeable impacts from the project activities on mass failure, large woody debris, sediment delivery, water yield, fish and fish habitat.

## **DIRECT, INDIRECT, AND CUMULATIVE EFFECTS**

For the following resources the proposed action may contribute to effects from past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions, but the cumulative effects will not be significant.

- **Forest Vegetation (EA, pages 38-48):** The EA documents the effects of implementing activities under the proposed action that will increase the composition of long-lived early seral species (ponderosa pine, western larch, and white pine). The increase in composition of these species will add to the vegetation diversity and will improve resistance to insect and disease pathogens, fire, and climatic variability. Vegetation will move toward the desired future condition, which is reflective of historic conditions. Changes in composition will also enhance wildlife habitat variety. Treatments will reduce fuel loading, lower canopy density, and reduce horizontal and vertical fuel continuity. These changes in fuel characteristics will result in less intense fire behavior and make a fire easier to control. Harvesting will remove trees competing with fire-

surviving relics and will increase protection of remnant trees and stands from fire. When the effects of these vegetation treatments are considered with the impacts to other resources and past, present, and reasonably foreseeable activities, there are no significant cumulative effects. For these reasons, there will be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects as a result of changes in forest vegetation conditions.

- **Fire and Fuels (EA pages 48-61):** The EA documents the effects of implementing activities under the proposed action that would reduce surface, ladder, and crown fuels in areas of treatment. In the event of a wildfire, this will result in reduced flame lengths and rate of fire spread, giving fire crews more time to control the fire. Activities associated with the proposed action will also make progress toward reducing the potential for severe fire behavior that could threaten human life and property in the resource area. When the effects of these fuel treatments are considered with the impacts to other resources and past, present, and reasonably foreseeable activities, there are no significant cumulative effects. For these reasons, there will be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects as a result of fuel reduction treatments.
- **Air Quality (EA pages 61-63):** The EPA has established National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for smoke and other particulate matter. Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) ensures compliance with the NAAQS through regulations and air quality permits which are contained in the Idaho State Implementation Plan (SIP). Conditions of the air quality permits ensure that emissions from permitted industrial sources would not cause or contribute to a violation of the NAAQS. Burning that will occur with the proposed action will be performed in accordance with smoke management practices, which are designed to prevent the smoke from causing a violation of the NAAQS. As a result, there is little risk that a violation of any ambient air quality standard will occur. The effects of the proposed action from smoke will not result in any significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects with other activities in the airshed given the oversight by the DEQ.
- **Wildlife (EA pages 63-85):** The proposed action will comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Forest Plan direction to manage the habitat of TES species to prevent declines in populations across the Forest. The proposed action will not result in any change in populations of bald eagles. The proposed action will comply with the Forest Plan direction to manage the habitat of species listed in the Regional Sensitive Species Lists to prevent further declines in populations across the Forest. Proposed activities will meet the Forest Plan and objectives for managing snag habitat and will not adversely impact inventoried old growth stands. The proposed action will not result in any perceptible change in populations of pygmy nuthatches, flammulated owls, northern goshawks, or black-backed woodpeckers. For management indicator species, the proposed activities will not impact viable populations of pileated woodpeckers and will ultimately improve the site for pileated woodpeckers. The proposed action will comply with the Forest Plan regarding big game management. Forage will be provided on winter range. White-tailed deer critical winter range will be maintained. While the Forest Plan does not address specific standards or guidelines for managing forest land birds, it does provide guidance for managing snag habitat and old growth. This project will exceed Forest Plan standards for snag management and will not adversely impact inventoried old growth stands. Therefore, these habitat parameters will be maintained and there will be no perceptible change in populations of forest land birds as a result of project activities. For these reasons, there will be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects as a result of the proposed action.
- **Sensitive or Rare Plants (EA pages 85-96):** The EA documents effects to sensitive or rare plant species as a result of implementing the proposed action. Plant species and habitats not found in

the project area were not analyzed in the EA. These include the aquatic, peatland, deciduous riparian, subalpine habitat and cold forest guilds. Cumulative impacts to **rare moonworts** and **green bug-on-a-stick moss** will be low (individuals, populations and/or habitat not likely affected) to moderate (individuals and/or habitat may be affected, but populations will not be affected, and habitat capability will not over the long term be reduced below a level which could support sensitive plant species). While cumulative impacts to populations of **clustered lady's slipper** and **least bladdery milkvetch** will not be expected to occur under either alternative since these species were not found in the project area, the proposed treatments are compatible with natural disturbance regimes in suitable habitat for these species. By reducing the risk of stand-replacing wildfires, implementation of this alternative may have long term benefits to habitat for these species. Cumulative impacts to suitable habitat for these species will be low (habitat not likely affected) to moderate (habitat may be affected, but populations will not be affected, and habitat capability will not over the long term be reduced below a level which could support sensitive plant species). The proposed treatments will also contribute no cumulative impacts to populations of **pine broomrape** that may have been affected by past timber harvest and road construction, since the two documented occurrences will be protected by site-specific buffers. The proposed treatments will reduce the risk of a severe wildfire in stands surrounding the populations. In addition, proposed treatments are compatible with maintenance of oceanspray, the host species for pine broomrape. Cumulative impacts to suitable habitat for this species will be low to moderate. For these reasons, there will be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects to TES Plants.

- **Noxious Weeds (EA pages 96-108):** Activities under the proposed action will minimize (but not eliminate) the risk of weed spread by application of design features. Weed control efforts in the area are ongoing and have shown some success. The cumulative effects to existing weed infestations under the proposed action are expected to be low for oxeye daisy, meadow hawkweed and Canada thistle, based on their current levels of infestation. The cumulative effects for spotted knapweed and goatweed will likely be moderate, given their current levels of infestation. Off-road infestations of spotted knapweed and common goatweed are expected to persist, since these species are considered to be naturalized in the project area. Treatment of off-road infestations with biological control agents may reduce the size of the infestations but will not eliminate them. For these reasons, there will be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects to noxious weeds.
- **Soils (EA pages 108-118):** The effects of past activities including timber harvest on the soil resource were considered in the establishment of the existing condition in proposed activity areas. The anticipated effects of proposed activities were added to this existing condition and evaluated against the Regional Soil Quality Standards. The combination of proposed activities and existing impacts is not expected to exceed soil disturbance guidelines in any activity area at project completion. During logging operations, the 15% detrimental impact guideline may be temporarily exceeded in stands 655-01-007 and 655-01-074; however, this effect will not be long lasting. Upon completion of logging, areas impacted during the Big Grouse Timber sale will be rehabilitated; and planting, seeding and Coarse Woody Debris reintroduction will occur as needed. The expected result is a net improvement in short- and long-term soil quality. Disturbed areas will begin the process of recovering their full productivity potential. Therefore, there will be no significant beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects to the soil resource.
- **Visual Quality (EA pages 127-131):** For this project, the visual resource was evaluated based on visual sensitivity levels assigned to travel routes, use areas, and water bodies in and adjacent to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. Visual quality objectives (VQOs) identified within the project area as defined in the Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 1987) are primarily partial

retention with some modification and retention. The vegetation removal within the project area will be designed to repeat the form, line, color, and texture of the natural occurrences common to the surrounding areas by creating small openings that are irregular in shape and similar in size to the natural openings on the landscape. When considered with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions, a high visual quality will be maintained throughout the project area and established Forest Plan VQOs will be met. Therefore, the beneficial, adverse or cumulative effects as a result of project activities will not be significant on visual quality.

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

The proposed action will reduce potential intensities of wildfire and trend stands away from potential fire behavior that could threaten human life and property. (EA, pages 57-61). In the event of a wildfire, fuel breaks and treated areas will reduce flame lengths and the rate of fire spread, and give fire crews more time to control the fire (EA, pages 57-61). Prescribed burning in brush fields will reduce the rate of spread and flame length, further increasing safety for both the public and fire suppression crews (EA, pages 25 and 57-61). The South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project has the endorsement of the Bonner County Fire Wildland Urban Interface Mitigation Program (Project File-Fire and Fuels Section).

The EPA has established National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for smoke and other particulate matter. Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) ensures compliance with the NAAQS through regulations and air quality permits which are contained in the Idaho State Implementation Plan (SIP). Conditions of the air quality permits ensure that emissions from permitted industrial sources would not cause or contribute to a violation of the NAAQS. Burning that will occur with the proposed action will be performed in accordance with smoke management practices, which are designed to prevent the smoke from causing a violation of the NAAQS. As a result, there is little risk that a violation of any ambient air quality standard will occur (EA, pages 61-61). For these reasons, there will 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 will be affected by any of the activities associated with the proposed action. The project area has been surveyed and analyzed for historic and cultural resources. Results of that work indicate that the proposed action will not have any effect on any historical or cultural resources (EA, page 162). With regard to wetlands, the proposed action will exclude all Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA's) from proposed treatment areas, consistent with Forest Plan guidelines (EA, page 157) as amended by the Inland Native Fish Strategy, and state and federal law. These design features will reduce riparian impacts to the extent that project activities will not pose any significant impacts to wetlands or riparian areas within or outside of the project 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. 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 (EA pages 16-21). 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. The originally proposed permanent road construction was dropped from the proposed action in response to

public input and concern. While some opposition to the proposed activities does exist due to the proposed harvest activities, most comments were supportive in nature (Project File – Public Involvement Section). Based on the findings of the analysis, the effects of the activities in the Grouse Mountain area on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial as defined by the Council on Environmental Quality.

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

The proposed action is similar to other projects involving fuel reduction and timber harvest activities that have been implemented without significant impacts on the Sandpoint 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 which are contained in the project file. The Proposed Action is consistent with management direction provided by the Forest Plan (EA, pages 21-29, 48, 60, 63, 63-64, 84-85, 95-96, 107-108, 117-118, 126, 129, 131 and 162). My conclusion is that design features will minimize the potential impacts and that 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 will not establish a precedent for any future action, nor will it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Management practices are consistent with the Forest Plan and with the capabilities of the land (EA, pages 21-29, 48, 60, 63, 63-64, 84-85, 95-96, 107-108, 117-118, 126, 129, 131 and 162).

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 (Project File –Heritage Section). Assessment of historic and cultural resources in the Grouse Mountain Area indicates implementation of this project will not affect any heritage resource eligible for listing in the National Register of historic places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of any significant cultural or historical resources (EA page 162). 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 (EA page 162).

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 analysis for potential effects on wildlife species is, in part, based on the premise that by maintaining or not impacting sufficient suitable habitat for species there is no effect on populations at the project level, and by extension on population viability. Put another way, with no impact on suitable habitat (or no suitable habitat to impact) there is no impact on populations. The project is associated with several blocks of public land that are surrounded by water and highly developed rural properties, which are disconnected from the larger, contiguous span of National Forest lands. Therefore, it is not large enough and too isolated for population dependence or to be source habitat for any of the species considered. None of the project area is critical or what is considered primary habitat for any threatened or endangered wildlife species. Consequently, species viability and extent of their distribution is not dependent on the integrity of

these isolated parcels (EA, pages 64 and 84). The proposed action will comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Forest Plan direction to manage the habitat of threatened or endangered species to prevent declines in populations across the Forest. This project will have no effect on threatened or endangered species (EA, pages 31, 64-67 and 84).

No federally listed endangered plant species are suspected to occur in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USDI 2006) currently lists no Threatened plant species as suspected to occur in Bonner County, Idaho, in which the South Grouse project area occurs. Therefore, the project is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (1973) as amended (EA page 85).

All streams within the project area are non-fisheries drainages and include first and second order streams (EA page 121). No federally listed endangered fish species occur in the project area. The proposed action will not adversely affect aquatic habitat (EA pages 122-126). Therefore, the project is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (1973) as amended (EA page 126).

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

### **HEALTHY FORESTS RESTORATION ACT (HFRA)**

The proposed action is consistent with the HFRA. The implementation of this hazardous fuel reduction project will reduce wildfire risk to communities and other at-risk Federal land, enhance efforts to protect watersheds, address threats to forest health, including catastrophic wildfire across the landscape, and protect, restore, and enhance forest ecosystem components to improve biological diversity and enhance productivity. The project meets criteria to be authorized under this act.

- **SEC. 102(a)(1). Authorized Hazardous Fuel Reduction Projects**

This project occurs within the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and is located within 1 ½ miles from the boundary of an at-risk community as identified in the Bonner County WUI Fire Mitigation Plan of May 2004.

- **SEC. 102(a)(2 and 3)**

The Fire Regime Condition Class Analysis for the South Grouse Project area showed that the landscape as a whole is in Condition Class 2, and is in need of restoration of fire effects, vegetation composition/structure and fuel characteristics. Fire exclusion, white pine blister rust, and timber harvest not mimicking the natural fire regime are primary factors pushing the Condition Class rating into Condition Class 3 in localized moist habitats (EA pages 53-54).

- **SEC. 102(e)(2)**

Implementation of the proposed action will not affect any old growth stands (EA pages 162-165). Over time, stands thinned or re-established with the implementation of this project may contribute toward the development of the structure and composition of old growth stands according to the pre-fire suppression old growth conditions characteristic of the dry and moist forest types occurring within the project area (EA page 164).

- **SEC. 102(f)(1)(A)**

The project focuses largely on small-diameter trees, thinning, strategic fuel breaks and prescribed burns to modify fire behavior, as measured by the projected reduction of wildfire effects (EA pages 23-27). Mechanical treatment will be used to commercially thin stands, typically

harvesting smaller, weaker or diseased trees (EA pages 23-24). Regeneration harvests proposed for stands affected by insects and disease will retain large old trees (EA page 150). Some 23 acres of strategic fuel breaks along the national forest boundary adjacent to private land are planned (EA pages 26 and 27). Finally, all treatment acres will receive some form of prescribed burning and 150 acres are planned for prescribed burning only (EA pages 25-27). These activities will reduce wildfire flame-length and rate of spread and associated effects (EA page 57-59).

- **SEC. 102(f)(1)(B)**

The project maximizes the retention of large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote fire-resilient stands. Large, fire-resistant trees such as ponderosa pine, western white pine and western larch dominated the pre-settlement forests of this area (EA page 40-43). The proposed project will retain those large trees remaining on the landscape and promote restoration of historic forest conditions by planting those species in some harvest units (EA pages 22-27 and page 150).

- **SEC 102(g)(8)**

For authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects, HFRA stresses “monitoring the need for maintenance of treated areas, over time, in order to preserve the forest health benefits achieved.” For this project and the Grouse Mountain area in general, this will be achieved by monitoring the effectiveness of fuel treatments and levels of insect and disease activity through time to determine when the next treatment and what type of treatment would occur (see fuels treatment and forest vegetation discussions below).

- **SEC. 104(f). Environmental Analysis**

HFRA requires hazardous fuel reduction projects to be developed in a manner consistent with “A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan.” One of the action items in this implementation plan addresses local level collaboration and recommends coordinating with Federal and State agencies, local governments, landowners and other stakeholders, and community-based groups. The National Fire Plan also directs local level collaboration, involving participants with direct responsibility for management decisions affecting public and/or private land and resources, fire protection responsibilities, or good working knowledge and interest in local resources. The South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction proposal was developed using a collaborative, community-based approach to hazardous fuel reduction and forest health issues. The Grouse Mountain area was originally identified as a priority for hazardous fuel reduction treatments in the Bonner County Fire Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan (2004). This plan was developed in collaboration with Bonner County, the Forest Service, other federal and state agencies, rural fire districts, and private landowners. Additionally, the ID Team used information gathered using several methods in the collaborative process including public meetings, scoping, and on site field trips, to develop this project (EA pages 16-17).

- **SEC 104(c) and (d)(2)**

Generally, for authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects, HFRA states that the Forest Service “shall study, develop, and describe—(A) the proposed agency action; (B) the alternative of no action; and (C) an additional action alternative, if the additional alternative—(i) is proposed during scoping or the collaborative process...and (ii) meets the purpose and need of the project, in accordance with regulations promulgated by the Council on Environmental Quality”. Additionally, for projects that occur within the WUI and are located no further than 1½ miles from the boundary of an at-risk community, HFRA does not require the development of an alternative to the proposed agency action. For this project, the Forest Service considered four

alternatives: no action, the proposed action, a temporary roads alternative, and a reference condition alternative. The temporary roads alternative and the reference condition alternative were considered but eliminated from detailed study (EA pages 20-21)

### **NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (NFMA)**

The selected alternative is consistent with the NFMA (FONSI, page 7) and the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Forest Plan. This proposal does not require any Forest Plan amendments. According to 36 CFR 219.12 (Federal Register, Vol. 70, No. 3, January 5, 2005, page 1059) a final determination of suitability for timber production is made through project decisions. For this project a determination was made that two stands formerly classified as unsuitable for timber production are forested well above the 16% stocking requirement, are producing well above the required 20 ft<sup>3</sup>/ac/yr and technology is available to reforest these stands (Project File – Vegetation Section).

- **16 USC 1604(g)(3)(E) National Forest System Land and Resource Management Plans**
  - (i) Timber harvest is not expected to result in irreversible damage to soil, slope, or watershed conditions.
  - (ii) Openings will be restocked within five years after harvest.
  - (iii) The proposed harvests will not seriously or adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat.
  - (iv) The proposed harvesting system is not selected primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output of timber. Harvest systems were selected on feasibility of logging with minimal road construction and soil disturbance (EA pages 108-118).
- **16 USC 1604(g)(3)(F)**
  - (i) In some areas harvest methods will result in areas of even-aged stands of timber in order to appropriately meet the objectives and requirements of the IPNF Forest Plan.
  - (ii) An interdisciplinary team reviewed and assessed the project. Their findings are reported in detail in each resource report and are summarized in the South Grouse Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment.
  - (iii) Harvest units will be shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain.
  - (iv) The juxtaposition of leave areas and thinned areas between and throughout harvest units will avoid the creation of a contiguous opening exceeding 40 acres.
  - (v) The proposed harvests will be carried out in a manner that protects soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and esthetic resources, and tree regeneration capability.

### **CLEAN WATER ACT**

The proposed action will maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the streams in the project area, in adherence with 33 U.S.C. §1251 (EA, pages 118-126). State water quality standards will be met or exceeded (EA, page 126).

### **CLEAN AIR ACT**

Clean Air Act requires each State to develop a State Implementation Plan (SIP) to identify how the State will attain and maintain national air quality standards. The EPA has established National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for smoke and other particulate matter. Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) ensures compliance with the NAAQS through regulations and air quality permits which are contained in the Idaho State Implementation Plan (SIP). Conditions of the air quality permits ensure that emissions from permitted industrial sources would not cause or contribute to a violation of the NAAQS. Burning that will occur with the proposed action will be performed in accordance with smoke management practices, which are designed to prevent the smoke from causing a violation of the NAAQS.

As a result, there is little risk that a violation of any ambient air quality standard will occur (EA, pages 61-63).

### **ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT**

Section 7 of the ESA directs federal agencies to ensure that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by them are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any Threatened or Endangered species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of their critical habitat. The proposed action is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (Wildlife, Fisheries, and Rare Plants Reports). The proposed action will not have any significant effects on threatened or endangered species (EA, pages 63-68, 85-96 and 118-126).

### **NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT**

The proposed action complies with the National Historic Preservation Act. Systematic inventory and reports are complete for this project area, and Native American groups were given the opportunity to comment and no concerns were identified.

### **FLOODPLAIN AND WETLAND PROTECTION EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11988 AND 11990**

Project activities will not adversely affect floodplains or wetlands. No activities will occur on floodplains. Streams that could have floodplains will be buffered from activities. There are no mapped wetlands in the project area. Unmapped, smaller wetlands will have appropriate buffers marked during unit layout (EA, page 119-120).

### **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE EXECUTIVE ORDER 12898**

No disproportionate impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or during any other portion of collaboration over the course of this analysis. Tribes holding treaty rights for hunting and fishing on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests were included on the project mailing list and have the opportunity to provide comments on this project. No concerns about the proposal were identified (EA, page 131-132 environmental justice).

### **MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT EXECUTIVE ORDER 13186**

Executive Order 13186 directs federal agencies to avoid or minimize adverse impacts on migratory bird habitat when conducting agency actions. Activities implemented by the proposed action will not contribute to a local or regional change in habitat quality or population status (EA, pages 84-85).

### **AQUATIC SYSTEMS AND RECREATIONAL FISHERIES EXECUTIVE ORDER 12962**

The proposed action will maintain aquatic habitat and there are no perennial fish-bearing or non-fish-bearing streams within the project area. Additionally, project activities will not affect any fish-bearing streams outside of the project area (EA, page 126). Therefore the proposed action will not affect the fishery potential, which in turn will not reduce the potential for recreational fishing opportunities.

### **INVASIVE SPECIES EXECUTIVE ORDER 13112**

Directs federal agencies to "...prevent the introduction of invasive species and provide for their control and to minimize the economic, ecological, and human health impacts that invasive species cause..." The

proposed action will meet the intent stated in Executive Order #13112 for moderate control, through the implementation of design features. Weed populations in the project area are low in density monitoring for noxious weeds will help identify areas needing treatment and follow-up treatments, and all weed treatments will be done in accordance with the Sandpoint Ranger District Noxious Weed Project FEIS (EA, pages 107-108).



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RANOTTA K. McNAIR  
Forest Supervisor  
Idaho Panhandle National Forest

12/7/06

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Date