

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Avery Fuels Reduction Project

Forest
Service

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Decision Notice



Under Authority of the
Healthy Forests Restoration Act



St. Joe Ranger District
Idaho Panhandle National Forests

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DECISION NOTICE

AVERY FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service
Idaho Panhandle National Forests
St. Joe Ranger District
Shoshone County, Idaho

DECISION

After careful review of the environmental assessment (EA) for the Avery Fuels Reduction Project, the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), comments from the public, and the project file, I decided to authorize three types of activities within the Shoshone County Wildland-Urban Interface on a total of 3,387 acres: shrubfield burning, off-site ponderosa pine treatment, and commercial thinning (see Avery Fuels Reduction Decision Notice Map). This selected alternative is Alternative C as described in the Avery Fuels Reduction EA. No new road construction or reconstruction will occur.

Shrubfields

This includes broadcast burning 3,022 acres of shrubfields north of the St. Joe River using aerial ignition.

Off-Site Ponderosa Pine

Treatments in the off-site ponderosa pine areas near the community of Avery include broadcast burning 83 acres of shrubs with pockets of regenerating off-site ponderosa pine, 105 acres of slashing off-site ponderosa pine followed by jackpot burning, and 65 acres of slashing off-site ponderosa pine with no further treatment. Portions of the 253 acres will be planted with more sustainable, resilient, western larch and rust-resistant western white pine from local seed sources.

Commercial Thin

This includes commercial thinning on approximately 112 acres near Roundhouse Gulch southwest of Avery. This will increase the percent of western larch and western white pine by removing other species (listed by priority): grand fir, lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, western hemlock, and western redcedar. Between 40% and 60% of the existing stand canopy will be removed. This will primarily be a thinning from below, where the smaller diameter class trees (8" to 15" d.b.h.) are the priority for removal. The larger diameter trees along with enough of the smaller diameter class trees will be retained to meet the desired residual basal area for each stand. Logs will be yarded with helicopters. Tops of the commercial timber will be yarded to landings on Road 3465 then be piled and burned. The helicopter yarding could occur at any time of the year or season.

Table 1 – Selected Alternative Treatment Summary

Treatment	Treatment Acres
Shrubfield Burning	3,022
Off-Site Ponderosa Pine Treatments	253
Roundhouse Gulch Commercial Thin	112
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Total Acres	3,387

Design Features

1. Air Quality

- a. All prescribed burning activities will be designed and conducted following the Memorandum of Understanding established between the states of Idaho and Montana to comply with state and federal air quality standards.
- b. 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.

2. Heritage Resources

- a. Project activities will avoid the drainage bottom of Roundhouse Gulch and the upper end of the bottom of Storm Creek Drainage.
- b. Project activities will avoid the ridge top running through Section 34, T46N, R5E.
- c. The heritage site at Dunn Peak Lookout will be protected, taking into account the flammability of the old structure.
- d. If additional heritage sites are discovered, the sites would be inventoried and then protected if found to be of historic significance. The decision to avoid, protect or mitigate impacts to these sites will be in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act. Timber sale contract provision, *Protection of Cultural Resources*, will be included in the timber sale contract to ensure protection of heritage sites located during project implementation.

3. Water, Soils and Fish – Aquatic Environment

- a. Off-site ponderosa pine treatment within RHCAs will be directed by a fisheries specialist. All off-site ponderosa pine felled within the RHCAs will be left on the ground and used to enhance the riparian area as directed by a fisheries specialist.
- b. Some of the proposed tree planting will occur in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas where off-site ponderosa pine trees are felled.
- c. All Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFS) standards and guidelines that apply to activities in the Avery Fuels Reduction Project will be utilized. This project will utilize the standard widths described for the Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) described in Table 2 except the RHCA buffer on main Roundhouse Gulch will be expanded from the INFS recommended 150 feet to 300 feet either side of channel.

Table 2 - Standard Riparian Habitat Conservation Area (RHCA) Widths

INFS Category	Description	RHCA Width
1	Fish-bearing streams	300 feet from either side of channel
2	Permanent, flowing, non-fish bearing stream	150 feet from either side of channel
4	Seasonally flowing or intermittent streams Wetlands <1 acres Landslide prone areas	50 feet on either side of channel (priority watersheds)

- d. *Blank - Not included in the decision because no shrubfields with mapped high mass failure potential will be prescribed burned.*
- e. No ignition of prescribed fire will occur in RHCAs, timbered areas, or rocky areas with low or minimal vegetation (upper portions of stands 20903017 and 20904010).
- f. Prescribed fire will be ignited only when soil moisture content is greater than or equal to 15%. Soil monitoring will occur after the first 500 acres (but not more than 800 acres) have burned to evaluate the results of burning at the prescribed soil moisture conditions on the soil resource. If soil monitoring results are acceptable burning would continue. If soil monitoring indicates unacceptable effects from

burning at 15% soil moisture content, the minimum soil moisture content would be increased and burning would continue.

- g. Best management practices (BMPs) will be implemented. *Soil and Water Conservation Practices for the Avery Fuels Reduction Project (SW-29)* discusses the BMPs to be used for the selected alternative.
- h. An emergency spill clean-up kit will be on site for the unlikely event of a fuel spill outside the containment system.

4. Wildlife

- a. Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) Species: Management activities would be altered, if necessary, to protect TES species located during project implementation. Any TES species found during implementation would be reported to the Sale Administrator and the District Wildlife Biologist. Timber sale contract provisions *Protection of Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Species* and *Limited Operating Period* or their equivalents will be used in timber sale contracts for Roundhouse Gulch commercial thinning.
- b. Goshawk:
 - i. Nests: Nests found during project implementation will be protected with a 30-acre, no-activity buffer.
 - ii. Post Fledging Areas (PFA): Proposed project activities will be suspended in the PFA of active goshawk nests between March 15 and August 15. Restrictions may be removed if the nest is determined by the district biologist to be inactive or unsuccessful after June 30.
- c. Canada Lynx: All harvest activities will follow standards and guidelines established in the Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy and the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction Record of Decision (March 2007).
- d. Wildlife Travel and Movement Corridors: A timbered ridgeline travel corridor will be maintained by maintaining 40% canopy cover along the ridge on the west edge of Roundhouse Gulch Unit 1 (boundary between stands 24901131 and 24807001).
- e. Small Mammal Habitat: Slash piling is not proposed, but this is included in case some piles are created with activities. One pile would be left unburned per five acres to supply potential fisher rest sites, provide cover for small animals (prey habitat), and serve as potential lynx den sites in harvest units where slash piles are created. Piles left should be those closest to standing timber, such as the unit edge or a large cluster of leave trees.
- f. Cavity Nesting Species: Specific details on snag and leave tree selection from the Reserve Tree Guide (IPNF, 1995) and the Snag and Woody Debris Guidelines (IPNF Forest Plan, Appendix X) will be followed in commercial thin units to reach objectives of the Northern Region Snag Management Protocol and worker safety. See snag numbers and sizes required in Table 3 below. Snags not presenting a safety hazard will be left standing in the units. Snags cut for safety reasons will be left in the unit where they fall unless they interfere with the operations or management of the National Forest.

Table 3 - Snag Guidelines for Commercial Thin Units

Forest Type	Snags / Acre
Cool, wet, & dry spruce, grand fir, hemlock, & subalpine fir	6-12 total, with 2 >20" d.b.h.

- g. If an active wolf den were discovered in the project area during implementation, appropriate management authorities would be notified and project activities would be modified as needed to avoid adverse effects.
- h. Spring burns (those planned for implementation before June 1st) will not be ignited after green up to reduce potential impacts on nesting birds.

5. Roadless, Recreation, and Trails

- a. Trail tread will be protected and the trail way will be cleared on Roundhouse Trail 520 if needed once other activities are completed. Dunn Peak Trail 58 will be cleared, if needed, after burning.
- b. Slash piles will be burned as soon as possible or within two years where piles are within view of the trails.
- c. The public will be notified with news releases and signs regarding the operations, dates, and access to the area.

6. Visual and Scenic Quality

- a. Commercial Thin (CT): Unit boundaries will be blended with surrounding vegetation patterns and topographic features such as natural openings (use similar shapes and avoid straight line boundaries).
- b. Prescribed Burning: Shapes of units will be blended with existing topography, natural openings, and surrounding vegetation texture. Straight firelines, if needed for fire suppression, will be revegetated.

7. Noxious Weeds

A number of preventative measures will be taken to reduce the risk of noxious weed introduction and spread in accordance with the St. Joe Weed Control EIS (ROD, 10/12/99). Measures include:

- a. All off-road heavy equipment will be cleaned prior to entering the project area to remove soil, plant parts, and material that may carry weed seeds. A provision will be included in the sale contract.
- b. Mulching agents, such as hay or straw, will be certified weed-free.
- c. Any seed used for re-vegetation and erosion control purposes will be certified noxious weed-free.
- d. Appropriate action will be taken if new populations of noxious weeds were discovered within the project area.
- e. Opportunities for integrated weed control will be examined and implemented according to the St. Joe Noxious Weed Project EIS (ROD 10/12/99).

8. Rare Plants

- a. Plant surveys have been conducted, however newly documented occurrences would be evaluated, and specific protection measures would be implemented to protect population viability.
- b. In the event that any Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive plant populations are found prior to or during project implementation, an agency botanist would implement mitigation measures to protect population viability.

9. Roads and Access Management

- a. Warning signs will be posted and flaggers or temporary closures of roads will be used to provide safety when logging activity and prescribed burning activities occur adjacent to Dunn Peak Road 1934 and on other roads when and where needed.
- b. National Forest System roads will be left in a stable condition after their use for project implementation.
- c. Existing access will be maintained. The amount or type of access currently provided in the project area will not change.
- d. Access on Road 3465 will be returned to pre-treatment conditions immediately after completion of treatment activities. The existing gate will be closed and locked after passage of every vehicle. During periods of inactivity roads will be returned to pre-treatment condition.
- e. Existing travel management will not change (ie. roads currently not available or open for motorized vehicle use will continue to become more overgrown and inaccessible).

10. Prescribed Burning

- a. Prescribed burning will be conducted as established in Forest Service Manual 5140 – Prescribed Fire Management. A site-specific burn plan will be prepared for each area to be burned to meet specific objectives.
- b. Burning will only occur when weather, fuel conditions, and available resources are at levels specified in the prescribed burn plan.
- c. Prescribed fires will not be ignited within aspen stands.
- d. The following prioritization scheme will be utilized to determine which areas to treat first with prescribed fire:
 1. Treatment areas that lay within 1.5 miles of the Avery community, private property, or electronic sites.
 2. Treatment areas that will provide firefighter tactical defensible space (i.e. ridge tops, areas adjacent to roads, etc.)
 3. Treatment areas within identified big game winter/transitional range or areas having preferred browse species.
 4. Treatment areas identified with a higher potential for weed spread.
 5. Treatment areas that have been previously burned and/or sprayed with herbicide.

Mitigation

The Proposed Action includes design features to avoid the need for mitigation. No mitigation actions are required to implement the proposed action because analysis of effects did not indicate a need for any mitigation.

Monitoring

The following monitoring will be included as part of the proposed action:

- Soil monitoring will occur after the first 500 acres (but not more than 800 acres) are burned to evaluate the results of burning at the prescribed soil moisture conditions on the soil resource. If soil monitoring results are acceptable burning will continue. If soil monitoring indicates unacceptable effects from burning at 15% soil moisture content, burning would only continue at a higher soil moisture content.
- Representative monitoring of best management practices (BMPs) will be conducted by the sale administrator and reviewed by resource specialists (SW-29).
- Representative monitoring of noxious weeds by district personnel to help identify any areas needing treatment and follow-up treatments.

II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The project area is located near Avery, Idaho approximately 47 miles east of St. Maries, Idaho (see Avery Fuels Reduction DN Map). The entire 12,740-acre project area falls within the wildland-urban interface designated in the Shoshone County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan. Avery is identified as an at-risk community within the wildland-urban interface (PD-1). The project was developed in collaboration with Shoshone County and adjacent land owners and land managers. The proposed activities are for National Forest System lands, but during the project development process possible fuels reduction activities were identified for other land in the project area. Some of those activities have already been accomplished, and others are still in the development phase.

III. SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A. OUTREACH & COLLABORATION

The Avery Fuels Reduction Project was developed through a collaborative effort with Shoshone County to identify and mitigate wildfire risk on federal and private lands. Public scoping for the Avery proposal began in January 5, 2005 when District Ranger, Chuck Mark, sent a letter to the adjacent landowners and to people on the St. Joe Ranger District NEPA mailing list describing a proposal in the Avery Fuels Reduction Project Area. This letter explained the need to concentrate planning efforts adjacent to the community of Avery, Idaho. The letter was also posted on the IPNF's website. The Avery Fuels Reduction Project was listed on the IPNF's January 2005 Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions.

The project was discussed with representatives of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe during meetings in March 2005 and March 2006 (PI-22, PI-25). A flyer announcing the February 12, 2005 public meeting was mailed to the Coeur d'Alene Tribe on January 18, 2005 (PI-5). A letter with updates about the project was mailed to the Coeur d'Alene Tribe on November 20, 2006 (PI-29).

On January 11, 2005 the Forest Service; Idaho Department of Lands; Forest Capital, Incorporated; and Avista Corporation met with Shoshone County representatives to share information and discuss fuels reduction issues around Avery, Idaho.

On February 12, 2005 the St. Joe Ranger District hosted a public meeting with representatives from the U.S. Forest Service and the Shoshone County Fire Mitigation Program to discuss the Avery Fuels Reduction Project and fuels treatment options available to private landowners.

On June 5, 2006 the District Ranger sent a letter to the people on the Avery Fuels Reduction Project mailing list notifying them of changes in the proposed actions for the project. On November 20, 2006 the District Ranger sent another letter to the people on the Avery Fuels Reduction Project mailing list with a general update for the project.

As a result of this scoping effort the St. Joe District received comments from 12 individuals and organizations, and collaboration with adjacent land owners resulted in possible fuels reduction projects for their lands. Most people who commented are supportive of the project. Two letters from groups requested specific analysis, but did not indicate disagreement with the project (PI-18, PI-19). One of these letters encouraged us to require washing of all equipment brought on to the site. Design Feature 7.a. requires all off-road heavy equipment to be cleaned prior to entering the project area. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game requested that we use standard INFS riparian habitat conservation area (RHCA) widths for stream buffers. Design Feature 3.c. specifies that this project will utilize the standard widths describe for RHCAs except that for Roundhouse Gulch the buffer width will be expanded from the INFS standard 150-foot width to 300 feet.

B. ISSUES

Design features were developed upfront to anticipate and reduce the effects from the proposed action on the environment and address and resolve the main issues. The proposed action was designed to address issues with unit locations, riparian buffers, logging methods, silvicultural prescriptions, design features, and timber sale contract provisions for protection of resources. The following preliminary issues were identified during scoping for the Avery Fuels Reduction Project over the last two years. They are discussed in more detail in the *Rationale for the Decision* beginning on page 8.

- Will shrubfield burning be adequate to reduce the potential effects of wildfire, change potential fire behavior, and increase the margin of safety for firefighters in case of a wildfire?
- Prescribed burning has the potential to spread existing noxious weeds.
- What would be the effects of prescribed burning on areas with high mass failure potential?
- What would be the effects of prescribed burning with lower soil moisture?

C. ALTERNATIVES NOT CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Fuelbreak - Avery Community Protection:

The originally proposed clearcut would not meet visual quality objectives. The project was modified to

meet VQOs; but the area is under an electrical transmission line, and yarding is not possible there. Coeur d'Alene salamanders were found which would require buffers to protect their habitat.

Avery Work Center:

Fuel reduction work completed by Shoshone County included fuels around and adjacent to the structures in the town of Avery and the Avery Work Center (Forest Service administrative site), so there was no need to include that work in this proposal. These activities were conducted in 2005 and 2006.

Shrubfields:

Fireline construction for shrubfield burning: The use of natural breaks, wet areas, and shaded timbered areas will be adequate for controlling prescribed burns without the added cost and soil disturbance of fireline construction. Also the shrubfields that will be burned in spring will serve as fuel breaks for areas burned in the fall. Constructing fireline along private property boundary was considered, but the straight line would not meet VQOs. The adjacent landowner does not require a fireline, and no fire will be ignited on the private property.

Fuelbreak to protect aspen: The possibility of fire moving through and burning the shrub layer may promote aspen regeneration without being hot enough to take out all the larger aspen trees.

Burning in shrubfields with tree regeneration: Originally more shrubfield areas were proposed for burning; but the areas with small trees were eliminated from the proposal, so they could progress toward timbered stands.

No shrubfield burning during the fall: One of the objectives for burning is to regenerate redstem ceanothus. Soil temperatures between 85 and 100 degrees Celsius (185 to 212 degrees F) one cm below the surface are required to activate the ground-stored seed for redstem ceanothus (PD-23). These temperatures are more likely to occur in the fall.

Grapple piling in off-site ponderosa pine treatment areas: There would probably not be enough continuous fuels to warrant opening the road to get machinery to the area, and we didn't want to unnecessarily risk scorching soils when burning concentrated fuels.

D. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

No-Action Alternative

This alternative continues standard protection and maintenance activities such as fire suppression, access management, and road maintenance. Ecosystem processes such as insects and diseases in trees, and vegetation succession with fire exclusion would continue their current trends. No commercial timber harvest or road construction would occur. Some incidental tree removal along open roads would occur through firewood cutting. This alternative does not propose activities included in the proposed action. It 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, maintenance activities, and public use.

Alternative B

Alternative B proposes three types of activities on a total of 3,862 acres: 3,497 acres of shrubfield burning using aerial ignition, 253 acres of off-site ponderosa pine treatment, and 112 acres of commercial thinning. No new road construction or reconstruction would occur.

Alternative C

Alternative C proposes treatment on a total of 3,387 acres. It is similar to the proposed action, but it proposes fewer acres of shrubfield burning: 3,022 acres in Alternative C instead of 3,497 acres in Alternative B. Alternative C does not include shrubfield burning in areas that are mapped as having high mass failure potential.

IV. 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 project file documents;
- 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.

A. PURPOSE AND NEED

The need for the proposed action in the Avery Fuels Reduction Project Area is based on the Forest Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF) and the differences between the existing condition and the desired condition in the project area. The selected alternative will move the treated areas towards the desired conditions. The three different parts of the project (prescribed burning in shrubfields, off-site ponderosa pine treatments, and commercial thinning) are proposed by the Forest Service for the following reasons:

Prescribed Burning in Shrubfields (3,022 acres)

- Reduce fuels to:
 - reduce the potential effects of wildfire to adjacent land owners, the communities of Avery and Hoyt Flat, the Dunn Peak electronic site, and the Bonneville Power Administration electrical transmission line
 - change potential fire behavior by reducing rate of fire spread, fire intensity, firebrand production (spotting), and resistance to control
 - increase the margin of safety for firefighters in case of a wildfire
- Improve browse for wildlife
- Meet forest plan objectives for Management Areas 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9.

Off-site Ponderosa Pine Treatments (253 acres)

- Reduce fuels to:
 - reduce the potential effects of wildfire to adjacent land owners and the community of Avery
 - change potential fire behavior by reducing the rate of fire spread, fire intensity, firebrand production (spotting), resistance to control, and probability of crown fire
 - increase the margin of safety for firefighters in case of a wildfire
- Increase forest resiliency by:
 - reducing the number of live off-site ponderosa pine trees in the project area
 - reducing off-site ponderosa pine regeneration because of its poor genetic adaptability to northern Idaho's environmental conditions
 - replanting with western larch and western white pine from local seed sources
- Meet forest plan objectives for Management Areas 4, 5, and 9.

Commercial Thinning (112 acres)

- Reduce stand density to:
 - Reduce potential for active crown fire
 - Reduce the potential effects of wildfire
 - Increase the margin of safety for firefighters in case of a wildfire
- Reduce the vertical continuity of fuels to reduce the chances of crown fire initiation
- Meet forest plan objectives for Management Areas 1, 4, and 5.

Prescribed burning the shrubfields, treating the off-site ponderosa pine, and thinning the area south of Avery will enhance the vegetation mosaic and will create fuel interruptions that will reduce the potential for fast-spreading, high-intensity fires. Fuel mosaics can delay fire spread or delay fire build-up which will reduce the risk of escaped fires. The spatial arrangement of treatments will likely disrupt the growth of a fire burning towards Avery and modify fire behavior so that fire suppression might be more effective (EA p. 30). Forage conditions for elk will improve because the amount and availability of browse will increase where shrubfields and off-site pine areas are burned (EA p. 136). The thinning of stands in the Roundhouse Gulch area is expected to allow an increase in underbrush while maintaining overhead cover. This has the potential to provide slightly better habitat for elk on 112 acres (EA p. 136). The increased quality and availability of the browse resulting from treating shrubfields is expected to noticeably enhance forage conditions for big game (EA p. 126). Reducing the number of live off-site ponderosa pine trees and planting western larch and western white pine will increase the area's health and vigor by having a higher percentage of trees from local seed sources that are better able to withstand natural disturbances (EA p. 96).

B. IPNF FOREST PLAN

The selected alternative will meet forest plan goals for Management Areas 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9. The commercial thin and off-site ponderosa pine treatments are designed to reduce fuels and improve timber stand health and vigor (EA p. 97). Soil productivity will be protected in all treatment areas (EA p. 86). All proposed activities are consistent with the Idaho State Water Quality Standards and the Clean Water Act (EA p. 113). The project will maintain and improve wildlife habitat (EA p. 136). Shrubfield burning will improve forage conditions (EA pp. 135-136). Opportunities for dispersed recreation will continue to be provided (EA p. 71). All activities will meet visual quality objectives (EA p. 101).

As required by the Forest Plan, the effects of all activities will not detrimentally disturb $\geq 20\%$ of the activity area. Furthermore, in compliance with Region 1 standards, the detrimental disturbance will not exceed the recommended 15% in any individual activity area. The Forest Plan Standard to maintain sufficient microorganism populations for site productivity will be met by following the coarse woody debris recommendations of Graham and others (1994). Fine organic matter layer thickness will be retained as appropriate for local conditions. Where yarding tops is proposed, project design features will ensure compliance with the Forest Plan Standard to maintain sufficient nutrient capital. Management area direction to implement best management practices are included in the proposed activities. See EA page 86.

All proposed activities will maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the streams in the project area. The proposed action will comply with the Idaho Water Quality Standards for Special Resource Waters and will adhere to the Antidegradation Policy to provide water quality protective of existing uses. Models were used in conjunction with field data, research, and professional judgment to refine estimated effects of proposed activities and to make recommendations for management alternatives, design criteria, and mitigation measures. These recommendations include sufficient soil moisture levels, feasible retention of duff, timing of ignition, and parameters for low- to moderate-burn severity, which will all contribute to the prevention of increased sediment delivery to streams from proposed activities. Therefore, watershed conditions will remain the same as current conditions. Additionally, RHCA buffers will be implemented and will limit ground disturbance near all tributaries. Water yield is not expected to have a detectable increase from the proposed activities so the current channel system will remain in the same physical condition, meeting the objectives of the Clean Water Act and Idaho Anti-degradation Policy. Sediment load reductions are not required in the Avery Fuels Reduction Project Area. Indirect, short-term sediment that could possibly be generated by project activities will not reduce water quality or impair beneficial uses. In compliance with TMDL requirements (IDEQ 2005 pp. 94-96), thermal modifications in the middle portion of the St. Joe River sub-basin will not be exacerbated. RHCA buffers on units will allow riparian canopies along streams to recover to levels established for the St. Joe River and its tributaries. No nutrient load reductions are required in Avery Fuels Reduction Project Area. Nutrient levels in the St. Joe River and its tributaries within the project area will not be affected by project activities. Aquatic habitat conditions will not change with the implementation of the project. See EA page 113.

The project is consistent with applicable goals, direction, standards, and guidelines from the Forest Plan for the management of wildlife habitat and species populations (EA p. 136). This project will have no effect on, is not likely to adversely affect, or is not likely to contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to management indicator species (FONSI pp. 1-2, 4, 7-8; EA pp. 117-119, 124-136). 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 viability. Put another way, with no impact on suitable habitat (or no suitable habitat to impact) there is no

impact on populations. The project will improve conditions for big game species and the gray wolf (EA pp. 126-127, 135-136). The amount of secure habitat in the project area will not change from existing conditions (EA p. 135).

Proposed activities will not affect the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum setting and the predominating dispersed use will remain the same. Forest Plan standards will be met for recreation and trails resources (EA p. 71).

No activities will occur in allocated old growth stands or in stands that meet minimum criteria for old growth (FONSI p. 2; EA p. 64). The proposed activities are consistent with Forest Plan standards for old growth (EA pp. 62-63).

C. CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES

Design features were developed up front to anticipate and reduce the effects from the proposed action on the environment and address and resolve the main issues (see below). The proposed action was designed to address issues with unit locations, riparian buffers, logging methods, silvicultural prescriptions, design features, and timber sale contract provisions for protection of resources. The following preliminary issues were identified during scoping for the Avery Fuels Reduction Project over the last two years.

Will shrubfield burning be adequate to reduce the potential effects of wildfire, change potential fire behavior, and increase the margin of safety for firefighters in case of a wildfire?

Shrubfield burning will reduce fuels and fuel continuity, and thereby change potential fire behavior. It will reduce surface fuel loads by about 18 tons per acre which will result in conditions that will potentially support a low to moderate surface fire severity which is less severe than the existing potential surface fire severity of moderate to high. Prescribed burning will effectively decrease fuel loadings and associated fire behavior so new ignitions and fires burning into them could be more readily controlled. See EA page 28.

Prescribed burning has the potential to spread existing noxious weeds.

It is true that activities associated with this project may contribute to a net increase in weed populations within the project area; however, I am choosing to implement Alternative C that will result in less ground disturbance and therefore less chance of weed expansion than Alternatives B and C. Design Feature 7 will limit the spread of weed seed and establishment of new populations, but it cannot fully prevent weed expansion. Design feature 10. d. will encourage treatment of units with prescribed fire that have the least potential of weed spread and establishment. Weed control, as outlined in the St. Joe Noxious Weed Control EIS, may potentially occur; and it could reduce the extent of existing weed populations along roads and trails. See EA page 59.

What will be the effects of prescribed burning on areas with high mass failure potential?

The effects of burning on areas of high mass failure potential were considered for Alternative B (EA pp. 28, 41, 53-55, 77, 82-83, 85-86, 96, 108, 110, 112-113), and Alternative C was developed specifically to address this issue by not including shrubfield burning in areas that are mapped as having high mass failure potential. The selected alternative also does not include shrubfield burning on areas of high mass failure potential; however, three acres of off-site ponderosa pine on areas with high mass failure potential remain in Alternative C because they will not have any noticeable detrimental effect on the watershed (EA p.54). The area burned in wildfires in 1910 and 1934. Since there is no evidence of mass failure resulting from those hot, high-intensity fires it is not likely that a prescribed burn with higher soil moistures will result in mass failure.

What will be the effects of prescribed burning with lower soil moisture?

To encourage regeneration of redstem ceanothus which is the preferred wildlife browse species some of the shrubfields may be burned under conditions with soils moistures of 15%. The First Order Fire Effects Model (FOFEM) was used to determine potential soil heating effects under moderate burning conditions (EA pp. 28-29). FOFEM predicts that shrubfields burned with soil moistures of 15 percent will result in surface soil temperatures less than 100 degrees Celcius. As long as moisture is present throughout the burn, the temperature of the duff and soil will remain below 100°C, reducing the potential for detrimental impacts to the soil. As temperatures rise above 150°C, chemical and physical changes occur in the organic matter and soil nutrients (Hartford and Frandsen 1992), increasing the risk of detrimentally impacted soils.

Prescribed fire will be ignited only when soil moisture content is greater than or equal to 15%. Soil monitoring will occur after the first 500 acres (but not more than 800 acres) have burned to evaluate the results of burning at the prescribed soil moisture conditions on the soil resource. If soil monitoring results are acceptable burning will continue. If soil monitoring indicates unacceptable effects from burning at 15% soil moisture content, the minimum soil moisture content will be increased and burning will continue. See Design Feature 3.f. and the *Monitoring* section of this document.

Recent (June 2006) monitoring conducted in prescribed-burned shrubfields along the North Fork St. Joe River (near the project area) with slopes and landtypes similar to those in the Avery Fuels Reduction Project Area revealed very minimal detrimental impact to the soils and ~95% of the duff layer appeared to have remained intact. Shrubfields were burned with moderate to high intensity immediately following snowmelt in May. Vegetation was re-emerging within a few weeks following the burn. See EA p. 81.

V. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

After considering the environmental effects described in the Avery Fuels Reduction Environmental Assessment and the associated documents, I have determined that the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment based on context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. The Finding of No Significant Impact is included as an appendix with this decision notice.

VI. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

To the best of my knowledge, this decision is in compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies. See discussions below.

HEALTHY FORESTS RESTORATION ACT (HFRA)

The selected alternative is consistent with the HFRA. It meets the objectives of HFRA by reducing hazardous fuels around Avery, Idaho which is a community determined to be at risk (PD-1), and it is authorized under the HFRA because it falls entirely within the wildland-urban interface as designated in the Shoshone County Wildland Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan (PD-3).

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (NFMA)

The selected alternative is consistent with the NFMA (FONSI p. 9) 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. The only proposed timber harvest is commercial thinning on lands classified as suitable for timber production (EA p. 98).

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 (EA pp. 86, 113).
- (ii) Openings will not be created with the commercial thinning which is the only timber harvest proposed. Openings created in the off-site ponderosa treatment units will be restocked within five years (EA pp. 97-98).
- (iii) The proposed harvests will not seriously or adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat (EA pp. 55, 113).
- (iv) The proposed harvesting system is not selected primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output of timber (Purpose and Need for Action, EA pp. 2-3). The only timber harvest proposed is a commercial that will remove the smaller, less valuable trees (EA p. 7).

16 USC 1604(g)(3)(F) National Forest System Land and Resource Management Plans

- (i) Regeneration harvests are not proposed (EA p. 7-8).
- (ii) An interdisciplinary team reviewed and assessed the project. Their findings are reported in detail in the Avery Fuels Reduction Environmental Assessment.
- (iii) Harvest units will be shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain (EA, Design

Feature 6).

(iv) Small openings in the off-site ponderosa pine treatment areas are expected to be created, ranging in size from 0.2 acres to 2 acres in size. Treating some of the area with prescribed fire following the felling of the off-site pine may cause a slight increase in opening size. These opening will be artificially regenerated with long-lived seral species.

(v) The proposed harvests will be carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and esthetic resources, and the regeneration of the timber resource (EA pp.49-137).

(vi) The proposed timber harvest is a commercial thin that will generally remove the smaller trees (EA p. 7) to improve stand health and vigor and maintain or enhance species composition and stand structure. The intent of the off-site pine treatments is to eliminate as much of the off-site ponderosa pine as possible whether or not it has reached the culmination of mean annual increment of growth (EA pp. 97-98).

IDAHO WATER QUALITY STANDARDS AND THE CLEAN WATER ACT

All proposed activities are consistent with the Idaho State Water Quality Standards and the 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 p. 9; EA p. 113).

CLEAN AIR ACT

Proposed prescribed burning will be monitored and controlled to avoid individual or cumulative violations of air quality standards (Design Feature 1; EA p. 21).

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 (EA pp. 55, 69, 136).

This project meets the objectives of the National Fire Plan by reducing hazardous fuels, and it falls under the counterpart regulations to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that provide alternative procedures to comply with the federal agency consultation responsibilities described in Section 7 of the ESA regulations. The procedures allow the Forest Service to make “not likely to adversely affect” determinations without consulting with or obtaining written concurrence from the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and/or the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for any proposed actions that support the National Fire Plan (NFP).

NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT

The selected alternative complies with the National Historic Preservation Act (FONSI p. 9; EA p. 56). Systematic inventory and reports are complete for this project area, and Native American groups were given the opportunity to comment. District Ranger, Chuck Mark, discussed the project with representatives of the Coeur d’Alene Tribe during a meeting on March 21, 2005. The Nez Perce Tribe was contacted, and their representative said the Tribe had no concerns about the proposal (FONSI, page 8; EA, p. 6; PI-22, PI-23, PI-25).

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 wetlands are relatively scarce in the project area (EA p. 132) and will not be damaged (EA p. 55).

ROADLESS AREA FINAL RULE (1/12/2001)

The activities that will occur within the inventoried roadless area are consistent with the Roadless Area Final Rule because no roads will be constructed and no timber will be harvested. Only shrubfield burning will occur within the Storm Creek Inventoried Roadless Area (EA p. 57).

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE EXECUTIVE ORDER 12898

No disproportionate impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or during any other portion of public involvement over the course of this analysis. District Ranger, Chuck Mark, discussed the project with representatives of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe during a meeting on March 21, 2005 (EA p. 6). The Nez Perce Tribe was contacted, and their representative said the Tribe had no concerns about the proposal (FONSI p. 8; PI-23). Based on this, the selected alternative complies with Executive Order 12898.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 12962 (June 7, 1995)

The selected alternative will maintain aquatic habitat and thus will not affect the fishery potential, which in turn will not reduce the potential for recreational fishing opportunities (FONSI p. 2, EA p. 55).

EXECUTIVE ORDER 13112 (February 1999)

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...". Design features combined with past weed treatment and future weed control according to the St. Joe Noxious Weed Project EIS will work towards preventing the introduction of invasive species, providing for their control, and minimizing the economic, ecological, and human health impacts that invasive species cause. (Design Feature 7; FONSI p. 9; EA p. 61).

STATE OF IDAHO NOXIOUS WEED ACT

The State of Idaho also requires landowners to control weeds on their property under the Noxious Weed Act, Title 22, Chapter 24 Idaho Code. Weeds have been treated within the project area (B-4), and future weed control will be examined and implemented according to the St. Joe Noxious Weed Project EIS (Design Feature 7). See EA page 61.

VII. PRE-DECISIONAL ADMINSTRATIVE REVIEW

On August 9, 2007 a legal notice announcing the beginning of the pre-decisional administrative review process, referred to as the "objection" process, was published in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' newspaper of record, *The Coeur d'Alene Press* (PI-37). Objections needed to be filed within 30 of the publication of the legal notice. To provide reasonable assurance that objections are received before a decision is made 36 CFR 218.11(b) states that a decision can be made on a proposed authorized hazardous fuels reduction project on the fifth business day following the close of the filing period when no timely objections are received. The objection filing period ended September 10, 2007, and no objections were filed.

VIII. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision is issued under the authorities as defined by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003. It 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.

Charles A. Mark

CHARLES A. MARK

District Ranger
St. Joe Ranger District
Idaho Panhandle National Forests
(208)245-2531

9/17/07

Date

Avery Ruel Reduction Project Area Selected Alternative

Legend

- Helicopter Landings
- Towns
- Boundary
- IPNF Offices
- Roads
- Streams
- Powerline
- Contours - 200'
- Shrubfield Treatment Units
- Offsite PP Treatment
- Thinning Units

