

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Decision Notice

Forest
Service

September 26, 2005

Broadaxe



**St. Joe Ranger District
Idaho Panhandle National Forests
Shoshone County, Idaho**



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DECISION NOTICE

BROADAXE PROJECT

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

I. DECISION

A. Selected Alternative

After careful review of the environmental assessment (EA) for the Broadaxe Project, the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), comments from the public, resource reports, and the project file, I have decided to authorize the salvage harvest of live and dead lodgepole pine on approximately 509 acres affected by mountain pine beetles. The project area is located in the Broadaxe Creek Drainage approximately nine miles southwest of St. Regis, Montana and 23 miles east of Avery, Idaho (see Broadaxe DN Map).

Approximately 374 acres will be harvested using skyline logging systems, and approximately 135 acres will be harvested using ground-based systems. In the harvest units merchantable live and dead lodgepole pine greater than or equal to five inches d.b.h. will be harvested. Live and dead trees of other species will be left on site. In some units harvest will be followed with broadcast burning, jackpot burning, or underburning (see Table 1 on next page). Planting western larch and rust-resistant western white pine on approximately 252 acres will be combined with natural regeneration to achieve desired stocking levels and species mix (see Table 1 on next page and Broadaxe DN Map). The project would be implemented in the summer and fall months over a period of two to four years.

Approximately one mile of temporary road in Units 6 and 8 will be needed for product removal and will be completely recontoured to the natural slope after use. Timber will be hauled to Road 3719 then north to FH 50 (see Broadaxe DN Map).

An opening of approximately 160 acres would be created because:

- The ongoing mountain pine beetle epidemic has already resulted in large areas of dead and dying lodgepole pine.
- Silvicultural prescriptions will remove dead and live lodgepole pine that are at risk of mountain pine beetle infestation or are already infested.
- Harvest units will be located next to each other.

Activity fuels will be treated with one or a combination of the following methods:

- Jackpot burning: burn concentrations of slash without necessarily burning the entire harvested area.
- Broadcast burning: burn most of the slash in a unit where the slash is more evenly distributed across large areas.
- Underburning: burn most of the slash in a unit where it is desirable to maintain the remaining trees.
- Whole-tree yarding: remove tops during yarding operations, pile slash at landings, burn landings.

No firelines will be constructed for any of the proposed prescribed burns. Aspects and shaded boundaries will be used for fire breaks. It is possible that fire may creep out of some of the units, but such slop-overs will be controlled.

See Table 1 on next page for information about treatment units.

Table 1 – Selected Alternative Unit Summary

1	49	83	76	Skyline	Jackpot / Broadcast	0
2	40	70	89	Skyline	Jackpot / Broadcast	0
3	38	56	87	Skyline	Broadcast	38
4	19	49	42	Tractor	Whole-Tree Yard	0
5	24	53	35	Skyline	Whole-Tree Yard	0
5	13	53	35	Tractor	Whole-Tree Yard	0
6	41	68	96	Skyline	Broadcast	41
6	32	92	72-96	Tractor	Whole-Tree Yard	19
7	46	85	56	Tractor	Whole-Tree Yard	16
8	85	82	56-93	Skyline	Broadcast	68
8	25	86	67-93	Tractor	Broadcast	24
9	34	87	50	Skyline	Broadcast	24
10	36	93	51	Skyline	Broadcast	14
11	27	88	50	Skyline	Underburn	8
Total Acres	509					252

B. 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

If additional heritage sites are discovered, the sites will 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, #C6.24 *Protection of Cultural Resources*, will be included in the timber sale contract to ensure protection of heritage sites located during project implementation.

3. Water and Fish – Aquatic Environment

- a. Best management practices (BMPs) will be implemented. *Watershed Appendix Soil and Water Conservation Practices for the Broadaxe Project* discusses the BMPs that will be used for the selected alternative.
- b. All Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFS) standards and guidelines that apply to activities in the Broadaxe Project will be utilized. This project will utilize the standard widths described for the Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) described in Table 2.
- c. Protection of Fish When Using Streams For Prescribed Burning Control: To avoid adverse effects to fish and redds while using natural water sources, water removal may not exceed 90 gallons per minute and pumping sites will be located away from spawning gravels. The intake hose will be screened to prevent accidental intake of small fish. An emergency spill clean up kit will be on site in the unlikely event of a fuel spill outside the containment system.

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

1	Fish bearing streams	300' from either side of channel
2	Permanent, flowing, non-fish bearing stream	150' from either side of channel
4	Seasonally flowing or intermittent streams Wetlands <1 acres Landslide prone areas	100' (priority watersheds)

4. Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Wildlife Species Management

Management activities will be altered, if necessary, to protect Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) species located during project implementation. Any TES species found during implementation will be reported to the Sale Administrator and the District Wildlife Biologist. Timber sale contract provisions C6.25#, Protection of Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Species and C6.316#, Limited Operating Period or their equivalents will be used in timber sale contracts.

- a. 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. Vegetation treatments in the PFA are designed to meet guidelines for PFA.
- b. Canada Lynx: All project activities will follow standards and guidelines established in the Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy.

5. Wildlife Travel and Movement Corridors

Maintain connectivity and minimize fragmentation by maintaining an uncut 200-foot buffer in designated corridors. Designated corridors are the state line ridge and the ridge forming the northern boundary of the project area. This applies to proposed harvest Units 1-7 in designated travel corridors.

An exception to the no-cut ridgeline wildlife corridor may occur in Units 1 and 2 where it will be necessary to cut skyline corridors through the travel corridor buffer. This activity will not exceed guidelines for openings in travel corridors, i.e. limited to one side of the ridgetop, less than 300' wide, less than 25% of the corridor (IDFG 1995). The travel corridor will be protected by:

- Keeping the number of skyline corridors to a minimum,
- Keeping the width of the corridors to a minimum (less than 20 feet and closer to 10 feet in most cases),
- Locating skyline corridors in areas that are more sparsely timbered than the surrounding ridgeline stand,
- Spacing skyline corridors far enough apart to provide a buffer of uncut timber between them.

6. Small Mammal Habitat

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, leave one pile unburned per five acres. Piles left should be those closest to standing timber, such as the unit edge or a large cluster of leave trees. Slash piling is not proposed, but this is included in case some piles are created with activities.

7. Cavity Nesting Species

- a. Recommendations for snag numbers, size and species from the Northern Region Snag Management Protocol (January 2000) will be met where these or higher levels exist. The retention of snags and snag replacements will be applied at the stand scale. Sufficient numbers of replacement snags will be provided due to the nature of the proposed prescriptions and the layout of the treatment units. Replacement snag needs will be met because:
 - o The prescription for species designation of lodgepole means all other live trees of other species will be retained.
 - o All live trees will be retained in stream buffers.
 - o All live trees will be retained in the wildlife travel corridor except where skyline corridors are required (see #5 above).
 - o All live trees will be retained in portions of the stands that are not included in the timber sale units as well as in unloggable areas within the timber sale units.
- b. 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 to reach objectives of the Northern Region Snag Management Protocol and worker safety.
- c. Silvicultural and prescribed burning prescriptions will be prepared with the goal of protecting all trees other than lodgepole pine and retaining recommended levels and distribution of coarse woody debris during site preparation and fuels treatment.

Table 3 - Snag Guidelines

Cool, wet, & dry spruce, grand fir, hemlock, & subalpine fir (Unit 11)	6-12 total, with 2>20" dbh
High elevation spruce/fir/Lodgepole pine (Units 1-10)	5-10, >10" dbh

8. SOIL AND SITE PRODUCTIVITY

The following practices are designed to minimize the impacts of soil compaction, displacement, severe burning, and nutrient and organic matter depletion on long-term soil productivity. The use of these practices will ensure that the soil quality standards listed in the Forest Plan and Regional soil quality recommendations will be met.

- a. Tractor Yarding: The following tractor skid trail placement will be used:
 - I. Ground-based yarding will be limited to slopes less than 35 percent.
 - II. All skid trail locations will be approved before skidding begins.
 - III. Trails will be spaced at least 100 feet apart, except where converging at intersections.
 - IV. Skid trail spacing closer than that listed above may be planned when winter logging occurs on at least two feet of settled snow or frozen ground or where adequate slash matting exists.
 - V. No excavated skid trails will be constructed.
- b. Skyline Yarding:
 - I. The leading end of logs will be suspended during yarding.
 - II. Five acres in the lower end of Unit 9 will be logged with full suspension to protect soils in an area with moderate to high mass failure and sub-soil hazards.

- c. Fuels Treatment/Site Preparation Activities: Prescribed burning will take place only when the upper one-inch of soil has greater than or equal to 25 percent moisture content.
- d. Temporary Road:
 - I. Temporary road that remains on the landscape more than one dry season would be waterbarred according to specific interval direction and at specific angles to minimize erosion. It will then be mulched with a natural, weed-free material to prevent runoff and erosion during spring and/or winter runoff events.
 - II. Temporary road will be fully recontoured to the natural slope to meet or exceed the standards outlined in FSH 2509.22 Practice 15.25 after their use for the project (Watershed Report, Watershed Appendix) when yarding operations are complete.
- e. Nutrient Protection: The latest soil nutrient management recommendations from Intermountain Forest and Tree Nutrient Cooperative (IFTNC) and Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS) will be applied as appropriate to each salvage unit. Where trees to be harvested are already dead some of the recommendations would not apply. IFTNC management recommendations are a guideline for maintaining sufficient potassium on a site (Niehoff 2002):
 - I. Practice conventional removal (lop and scatter) rather than whole-tree removal. The “lop and scatter” technique should be practiced during intermediate as well as final harvest operations.
 - II. Practice density management. Thin stands in a timely manner in order to maintain high growth rates, and to encourage nutrient allocation to foliar biomass.
 - III. Let slash remain on site over winter for most mobile nutrients to leach from fine materials back to the soil.
 - IV. Light broadcast burn or under burn for N release, and release of other nutrients from larger materials. Leave large woody debris, based on recommendations taken from: Managing Coarse Woody Debris in Forests of the Rocky Mountains by R.T. Graham, et al., Sept. 1994, Intermountain Research Station, Moscow, Idaho.
 - V. Avoid mechanical site preparation on ground not protected by adequate snow or slash-mat.
 - VI. Plant species appropriate to site, using genetically suitable stock when possible.
 - VII. Consult the latest forest fertilization guidelines if fertilization is being considered.
- f. Retention of Organic Matter: Management of coarse woody debris (CWD, >3-inch diameter) and organic matter will meet USFS Region 1 recommendations (FSM-2500-99-1). Through marking plan specifications and contract administration enough trees or downed material will be left to provide for recruitment of 10-12 tons per acre of coarse woody debris. Reserve trees fallen for safety reasons will be left on site. They will be left where they land unless they interfere with operations or management of the National Forest (e.g. they fall in a skid trail or across a road).

9. Campsites

Dispersed camping spots will be protected and maintained along all open roads in the project area.

10. Visual and Scenic Quality

Pre-sale personnel will work closely with the District and Forest visual staff to determine that design features are adequate for each application. Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives (VQO) will be met through implementation of the following:

- a. **Foreground Retention Units (parts of Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 10, and 11):**
 - I. Openings in these areas will repeat natural openings frequently found in the characteristic landscape so completely they will not be evident.
 - II. Will not have evident lineal clearings for log removal. This will be accomplished by keeping cable clearing widths to minimums of 10-12 feet; corridor location will be angled away from view.
 - III. In Units 1 & 2 stumps will be cut flush with the ground to meet VQO of retention. Hand ignition will be used for prescribed burning to protect residual trees.
 - IV. The top of Unit 3 will have a visual buffer next to FH 50. Hand ignition will be used at the top of the unit to burn out the area below the visual buffer and protect it during the rest of the prescribed burn.

V. Unit 4 skid trail approaches will be angled away from Gold Pass.

b. Middleground Partial Retention Units:

I. In Units 5, 6, and 7 skidding corridors will be kept to widths of 10 to 12 feet.

II. In Units 5, 6, 7 and 9 skidding corridors will be angled up the drainage to help reduce visual impacts of skidding as seen from FH 50.

c. **All Units:** All unit boundaries will be feathered and irregular in shape.

11. 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 logging and construction 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. Appropriate action will be taken if new populations of noxious weeds were discovered within the project area.

12. Rare Plants

a. Additional plant surveys will be conducted after activities as needed prior to weed treatments (11.c. above). Any changes that may occur during implementation of an action alternative will be reviewed, and plant surveys will be conducted if needed prior to project implementation. Newly documented occurrences will be evaluated, with specific protection measures 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, the district botanist will implement mitigation measures to protect population viability.

13. Roads and Access Management

a. Warning signs will be posted and flaggers or temporary closures of roads will be used to provide safety when road construction, logging activity, and prescribed burning activities occur adjacent to FH 50 and other open/ATV roads.

b. Efforts will be made to maintain the primitive character of the Stateline Road 391 (i.e. not expanding road widths or clearing widths beyond that necessary for safety).

c. National Forest system roads will be left in a stable condition after their use for project implementation.

d. Existing access will be maintained. There will be no changes to amount or type of access currently provided in the project area.

e. Stateline Road 391 will be open to the public on weekends throughout sale activities. It will be open during the week from 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. daily. For weekend use it will remain open from 5:00 p.m. on Fridays until 5:00 a.m. on Mondays. At the end of harvest activity and at the end of use during any given year Road 391 will be open.

f. Road 3719 will be kept reasonably free of equipment and products to allow public access.

g. A temporary gate will be placed on Road 1405 as soon as it is brushed and bladed, and access for vehicles less than 50 inches wide will be provided. The gate will be replaced with a permanent restriction device with access provided for vehicles less than 50 inches wide (ATV access) at the end of sale activities.

14. Prescribed Burning

Prescribed burning will be conducted as established in Forest Service Manual 5142 – Prescribed Fire Management. A site-specific burn plan will be prepared for each area to be burned to meet specific objectives. Burning will only occur when weather, fuel conditions, and available resources are at levels specified in the prescribed burn plan. Landing slash will be burned in the late fall after rains and during cooler temperatures when the risk of escape into adjoining stands and damage to residual timber has lessened.

II. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Broadaxe Project began as a small portion of the Quartz Gold Project proposed earlier by the St. Joe Ranger District. The interdisciplinary team completed an ecosystem analysis at the watershed scale (EAWS) for the Quartz Gold Analysis Area using information specific to the Quartz Gold Area and the St. Joe Geographic Assessment (a landscape-level assessment of the St. Joe River Basin). An extensive roads analysis process (RAPS) examined the existing transportation system, identified management needs, and presented possible options for future projects. In a letter dated March 7, 2005, Chuck Mark, District Ranger of the St. Joe Ranger District proposed moving forward with silvicultural treatments in the Broadaxe Drainage to salvage merchantable forest products in dead, dying, and high risk lodgepole pine stands. Relevant information generated during the Quartz Gold analysis process was used in the development and effects analysis of the proposed action for the Broadaxe proposal.

III. SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A. OUTREACH

Public involvement began for this project as part of the Quartz Gold proposal in 2001. Public scoping for the Broadaxe proposal by itself began in September 2004 with a letter sent to the people on the Quartz Gold mailing list explaining the need to concentrate planning efforts in the Gold Creek drainage. On October 4, 2004 personnel from the St. Joe Ranger District led a field trip attended by 12 members of the public to look at conditions in the Gold Creek Drainage (lodgepole pine infested with mountain pine beetle, old growth, potential fuel accumulations, timber values, access, and wildlife habitat (project file, Vol. V, S-11).

On March 7, 2005 District Ranger, Chuck Mark, sent a letter with the Broadaxe Scoping Notice to people on the original Quartz Gold mailing list. The letter and the Scoping Notice were also posted on the IPNF's website. The Broadaxe Project was listed on the IPNF's April 2005 Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions. On April 21, 2005 the District Ranger sent a letter to the people on the original Quartz Gold mailing list notifying them that with the Broadaxe Project he was considering a proposal that would result in openings greater than 40 acres.

On May 16, 2005 the Broadaxe Environmental Assessment was mailed to people and groups who had asked to be on the mailing list or who had submitted comments on the proposal. On May 17, 2005 the Broadaxe EA was posted on the IPNF's website. On May 18, 2005 a legal notice was published in the IPNF's newspaper of record, *The Spokeman-Review*, to tell the public that the Broadaxe EA was completed and available for public review and comment. The legal notice stated that any decision to proceed with actions described in the EA will be subject to administrative appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215 by any party which submitted substantive comments during the 30-day comment period. The 30-day comment period began the day after the legal notice was published and ended June 17, 2005. The Response to Comments presents comments received during the 30-day comment period along with the Forest Service's responses to substantive comments. These are reflected in the revised EA.

B. ISSUES

The Forest Service found no significant issues or unresolved conflict concerning alternative uses of available resources that warrant consideration of additional alternatives (EA, pages 2-3). Issues are addressed below in my rationale for the decision; in the Response to Comments; in my review of comments from scoping (project file, Vol. V, S-38); and through harvest unit location, logging methods, silvicultural prescriptions, and design features of the project (Summary of Decision and Design Features above).

C. ALTERNATIVES NOT CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

The scope of the mountain pine beetle outbreak is much larger than the area proposed for management. One alternative to treat more acres was eliminated from detailed analysis because it would not be economically feasible. This alternative would have required new road construction and/or a helicopter logging system. The value of the dead and dying lodgepole pine would not justify the cost of new road construction or helicopter logging systems. Therefore, any stands that would require system road construction or a helicopter logging system were not considered for treatment.

D. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

No-Action Alternative

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.

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 would occur through firewood cutting. This alternative proposes no actions that are contained in the selected alternative described below.

Lodgepole pine would continue to die because mountain pine beetles are still active in the area (EA, page 18; Vegetation Report, page 10). Some stands will not lose more lodgepole to mountain pine beetle because most of the lodgepole pine trees are already dead. Seedling and sapling-size lodgepole pine would continue to grow. Shade-tolerant species would also continue to grow. Fuel loads and ladder fuels would increase. In twenty years, as the lodgepole continue to die and fall down, fuel loads would increase from the existing 5-10 tons per acre to approximately 23 to 71 tons per acre (EA, pages 12-13). Shade tolerant tree species will continue to grow creating ladder fuels. The foundation would be set to perpetuate the lodgepole pine / mountain pine beetle situation across the entire landscape.

Selected Alternative

The selected alternative is the proposed action presented in the Broadaxe Environmental Assessment. See Section I above for details about the selected alternative.

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 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.

A. PURPOSE AND NEED

The need for the proposed action in the Broadaxe 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 Forest Service is proposing this project in order to:

- **Meet forest plan standards for forest protection related to insects and diseases in Management Areas 1 and 6 (IPNF Forest Plan III-4 and III-30, respectively) by restoring fully stocked, diverse, vigorous stands that include species less susceptible to mountain pine beetle (western white pine and western larch); so the lodgepole pine / mountain pine beetle process is not perpetuated within the treatment areas** (EA, page 18; Vegetation Report, pages 13 and 15).

The selected alternative will put the treatment areas on a trajectory towards a desired condition that is less prone to future mountain pine beetle epidemics (EA, page 18). Approximately 252 acres will be planted with rust-resistant western white pine and western larch. In other areas natural regeneration of lodgepole and other species will fill in so the harvested areas will be stocked and have vigorous tree growth. The result will be a more diverse mix of species than currently exist on the sites, so during future mountain pine beetle infestations the treated areas will be less likely to sustain the nearly complete mortality that exists today (EA, page 18). The selected alternative will meet the Management Area Standard for Insects and Diseases in Management Areas 1 and 6 which says, "Silvicultural methods and cultural practices which reduce the development and/or perpetuation of pest problems will be given priority." The mountain pine beetle is on a downward trend in the Broadaxe Drainage. The beetle is killing any remaining green trees over eight inches d.b.h. and starting to infest smaller lodgepole pine, which is a sign of a decreasing food supply. The selected alternative will change future conditions such that the mountain pine beetle will not cause as much mortality through increased species diversity (planting) and breakup of the continuous lodgepole pine cover along both sides of the Bitterroot Divide.

- **Reduce long-term hazardous fuel accumulations within treatment areas** (FONSI, page 2; EA, page 13; Fire and Fuels Report, page 6).

Long-term hazardous fuel accumulations within treatment areas will be reduced (FONSI, page 2; EA, page 13; Fire and Fuels Report, page 6). Lodgepole pine dominance in the Broadaxe Drainage is a result of stand-replacement fires in 1889 and 1910 (Fire and Fuels Report pages 2-3). Once lodgepole pine reaches eight inches d.b.h. and 80 years old (Amman, et al. 1977), it becomes highly susceptible to mountain pine beetle infestation depending on stand density and other stress factors. The conditions conducive to an extensive mountain pine beetle infestation have obviously coalesced into an ongoing infestation. The No-Action Alternative would allow the dead, standing lodgepole pine to fall to the ground over the next 20 years fueling the potential for the next stand-replacement fire and perpetuation of the lodgepole pine/mountain pine beetle/stand-replacement fire cycle (EA, page 12; Fire and Fuels Report pages 3-6).

The selected alternative will directly result in the reduction of surface fuel loads by removing stems and portions of crowns of standing dead, dying, and at risk lodgepole pine trees. The reduction of surface fuel loads would result in the effective reduction of future surface fire severity within the treated area (FONSI, page 2; EA, page 13).

- **Contribute to local employment, income, and lifestyles (IPNF Forest Plan II-11) while the dead, dying, and high-risk lodgepole pine still has some economic value** (FONSI, page 2; EA, page 18; Vegetation Report, page 2).

The selected alternative will contribute to the local economy during the timber harvest and during subsequent fuels treatments and tree planting. The majority of the comments I received were in support of the proposal (project file, Vol. V, S-38 and Response to Comments). All of the people who commented and are in favor of the project currently live or have lived in the local area.

The selected alternative meets the intent of the Forest-wide Management Objective concerning community stability through management activities that will continue to contribute to local employment, income, and lifestyles (IPNF Forest Plan II-11). The treatment areas in the selected alternative are the most economical to harvest forest products from given current access, issues identified internally and by the public, and the amount of time since the trees have died (merchantability). The No-Action Alternative would continue standard protection and maintenance activities, such as fire suppression, access management, and road maintenance. Insects and diseases would run their course and vegetation succession with fire exclusion would continue. No commercial timber harvest or road construction would occur under the No-Action Alternative. The No-Action Alternative would not facilitate community stability, and contributions to local employment and income would be minimal. When the next large wildland fire occurs, certainly there would be needs to manage such an event, which would contribute to local employment and income.

B. IPNF FOREST PLAN (1987)

The selected alternative will meet the Management Area Standard for Insects and Diseases in Management Areas 1 and 6 which says, "Silvicultural methods and cultural practices which reduce the development and/or perpetuation of pest problems will be given priority." The mountain pine beetle is on a downward trend in the Broadaxe Drainage. The beetle is killing any remaining green trees over eight inches d.b.h. and starting to infest smaller lodgepole pine, which is a sign of a decreasing food supply. The selected alternative will change future conditions such that the mountain pine beetle will not cause as much mortality through increased species diversity (planting) and breakup of the continuous lodgepole pine cover along both sides of the Bitterroot Divide.

The selected alternative will meet the Management Area Goal for Management Area 9 that states, "Manage National Forest lands to maintain and protect existing improvements and resource productive potential and meet visual quality objectives" (Forest Plan, page III-39). Design features (EA, pages 5-10; Response to Comments 4:8) were intended to help the proposed action meet this management area goal. The MA 9 Timber Harvesting Standard that allows for salvage from existing access will also be met (Forest Plan, page III-40). Management area direction in Management Area 9 does not specify that salvage is only allowed if it can be done with minimal investment while protecting the productivity potential of the land (Response to Comments 4:8). A brief statement of the Management Area Goal for MA 9 on the Forest Plan Management Area Map says, "Manage to maintain and protect existing improvements and resource productive potential within minimum investments." The summary also refers to Chapter III of the Forest Plan for a full description

of the prescriptions. The proposed action was designed to be the most viable alternative given remaining product merchantability, while maintaining resource productivity through alternative design features (EA, pages 5-10) with minimal investment. The Alternative Eliminated from Detailed Study was not carried through further analysis because the investment could not be justified for vegetation treatments at a larger scale.

No activities will occur in old growth stands (FONSI, page 1; EA, page 15). The current old growth allocation within Old Growth Management Unit 28 is 2,195 acres or 14.4 percent of the OGMU (EA, page 15). Forest Plan standards for old growth would be met (EA, page 15). After the original Broadaxe EA was released, Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) data for old growth on the IPNF became available. Based on FIA data, the estimated percent of old growth on the forested lands of the IPNF is 12.85%. The 90% confidence intervals of this estimate are 10.55% to 15.27% (USDA Forest Service, 2005, Draft old growth chapter for the 2004 IPNF Forest Plan Monitoring Report). Based on these values, I conclude that the IPNF is meeting Forest Plan Standard 10b. that calls for maintaining ten percent of the forested portion of the IPNF as old growth.

Detrimental disturbance would not exceed 15 percent in any proposed activity area, so the proposed action would meet IPNF Forest Plan Standards for Soils (FONSI, page 3; EA, page 17). Retention of the majority of site nutrients is expected (EA, page 17). Using Regional guidance for coarse woody debris retention would adhere to the Forest Plan Standard to maintain sufficient microorganism populations to maintain site productivity. Coarse woody debris would be retained at recommended levels in all units (EA, page 17).

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, pages 1-4, 6-7; EA, pages 22-28). 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.

On June 2, 2005, the Forest Supervisor for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests 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 (IPNF, 2005). The amendment was implemented because the fry emergence objectives, standards and monitoring requirements that were in the IPNF 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.

C. CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES RAISED DURING SCOPING & 30-DAY COMMENT PERIOD

Gold Creek is listed under the 303(d) portion of the Clean Water Act for temperature, sediment, nutrients, and habitat alteration. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) has since recommended that Gold Creek be delisted for sediments and nutrients, so there are no sediment or nutrient load reduction requirements for Gold Creek. There are no other total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) developed for other streams within the project area (EA, page 19). Previous restoration activities within the Gold Creek watershed consisted of road storage and road obliteration within the last ten years. Culverts were removed, stream channels were restored, road prisms were partially and fully recontoured, and roadbeds were decompacted and/or revegetated. Riparian shrubs were planted in the late 1990s at many road-stream crossings that were removed (Watershed Report, page 6).

Design features (see above) are incorporated into the selected alternative to address other watershed concerns. These design features were developed to reduce impacts to the aquatic environment, maintain beneficial uses and protect long-term watershed productivity (EA, page 20). The proposed treatment units and temporary road are well above the sensitive rain-on-snow zone (EA, page 21). No harvest will occur within any riparian habitat conservation area (RCHA), no new point sources of discharge will be created, and the watershed condition will remain relatively unchanged (FONSI, pages 1-3, 5-6; EA, page 20). The mountain pine beetle has killed much of the lodgepole pine in the analysis area, and much of the tree canopy is already gone. The watershed effects of less tree canopy have already occurred, and the selected alternative would reduce future watershed effects from the next stand-replacing wildland fire in and around the Broadaxe Drainage (Watershed Report, page 12). The No-Action Alternative would exacerbate the

negative effects to the watershed resulting from the next stand-replacing fire through increased downed and dead fuel loadings (Watershed Report, page 12; Fire and Fuels Report, pages 5-6). Both the No-Action Alternative and the selected alternative would meet Forest Plan Standards and both are consistent with other laws and regulations (FONSI, page 7; EA, page 20; Watershed Report, pages 18-19).

My decision to implement the selected alternative will not degrade habitat for the bull trout or westslope cutthroat trout. As indicated in the FONSI (page 3, 5-6) and the EA (page 22) the selected alternative will not further degrade Broadaxe and Gold Creeks, but it will maintain current habitat conditions. There will be long-term improvement in riparian zone conditions because riparian areas will not be disturbed through harvest and road construction (FONSI, page 2; EA, page 22). In the No-Action Alternative riparian conditions would improve over time in both Broadaxe and Gold Creeks through vegetation recovery and growth. Habitat complexity would improve as conifers grow, die and fall into these streams creating new pool habitat and greater complexity (EA, page 21). Similar effects are predicted with the selected alternative. A slight potential for sediment and water yield increases exists as a result of temporary road construction (approximately one mile) in the Broadaxe watershed, but this temporary road would be fully recontoured after operations are completed in the selected alternative (FONSI, page 3). There is also the potential for sediment delivery in the No-Action Alternative due to the loss of forest canopy that has resulted from mountain pine beetle mortality (Fisheries Report, pages 22-24). The bottom line is that my decision will not change existing conditions in regards to road density and physical barriers to fish movement in Broadaxe and Gold Creeks; but long-term improvement is expected in both the selected alternative and the No-Action Alternative in riparian areas, stream temperatures, and habitat complexity.

The No-Action Alternative would allow the dead, standing lodgepole pine to fall to the ground over the next 20 years fueling the potential for the next stand-replacing fire and perpetuation of the lodgepole pine/mountain pine beetle/stand-replacement fire cycle (EA, page 12). The selected alternative addresses this eventuality and will reduce future dead and downed fuel loadings to an acceptable level in treated areas (FONSI, page 2; EA, page 13), while addressing the soil productivity issue (FONSI, page 3; EA page 17) through the design features (see above). Specifically, activity slash generated through timber sale harvest will be allowed to overwinter before prescribed burning to allow for nutrient leaching into the soil. Enough coarse woody debris would be left (greater than 3 inches diameter) to maintain site productivity and maintain sufficient microorganism populations (Design Feature 8.e. and 8.f.). Where whole-tree yarding is proposed design features, including nutrient management recommendations, would ensure compliance with the Forest Plan Standard to maintain sufficient nutrient capital (FONSI, page 3; EA, page 17). These design features help meet Forest-Wide Soils Standards 2 and 3 (Soils Report, page 8).

There is no road construction, timber harvest or other activities proposed within any old growth (FONSI, page 1). The current old growth allocation for Old Growth Management Unit (OGMU) 28 is 14.4 percent, which meets Forest Plan old growth standard 10c of five percent or more existing old growth within an OGMU. Planned timber harvest will only occur in dead and dying lodgepole pine forests, which do not qualify as old growth. Existing old growth patches would not be affected by the selected alternative (Old Growth Report, page 4). My decision is consistent with the other Forest Plan Old Growth Management Standards (FONSI, page 1; EA, page 15).

Opportunities for wildlife movement and travel would be maintained (FONSI, pages 2, 4; EA, pages 28-29). My decision is not changing forest structure (FONSI, page 5; EA, page 18) because the mountain pine beetle has, and still is, killing the lodgepole pine forest. Design Feature 5 would sustain existing corridors.

Ground-disturbing activities such as temporary road construction, skid trails, log landings, and timber harvest have potential to create suitable weed habitat. My decision increases this potential over the No-Action Alternative. Design Feature 11 (EA, page 9) includes cleaning equipment, mandating weed-free mulches, and monitoring and treating new weed infestations. Monitoring for noxious weeds will help identify areas needing treatment and follow-up treatments (FONSI, page 2; EA, pages 14-15). I believe these measures adequately address the weed potential associated with my decision.

Stateline Road 391 provides a primitive recreation experience for many members of the public. The selected alternative will utilize this road for timber harvest activities. Campsites will be maintained and not disturbed along the road corridor, and no sale activity would occur on weekends. These design components of my decision will maintain the primitive recreation experience the public seeks along the Stateline Road (FONSI, page 3; EA, pages 8-9).

Visual and scenic quality was a concern of mine, as well as the public. Concerns were expressed over the sea of dead trees and future possible effects from large-scale wildland fire (EA, page 3). Concerns were also expressed as to how timber harvest activity would look during and after operations. My decision deals with

longer-term visual quality issues through reducing fuel loadings and subsequent more severe fire effects. Planting a more diverse and resilient mix of species (western larch and western white pine) will also alleviate future effects of wildland fire on visual quality. Forest-wide standards for visual quality allow treatments that do not meet VQOs in large areas where the mortality of timber is very high (Forest Plan, II-25). It is unlikely that Units 1 and 2 will meet the VQO of Retention within the next three to five years. Near-term effects to visual quality are adequately addressed through Design Feature 10 pertaining to timber harvest operations and as regeneration becomes established full Retention will be attained (EA, page 19). Visual Quality Objectives from the Forest Plan will be met in the long term with these design features (FONSI, page 3).

Concern was expressed that additional alternatives were necessary to effectively consider the environmental effects of this project (FONSI, page 4; EA, pages 2-3). An alternative to treat additional areas affected by the mountain pine beetle was considered, but it was not studied in detail because of the costs associated with increased road construction/reconstruction and/or helicopter logging (Section III, c. above). Based on field exams and ground-truthing I determined that such costs would have compromised project viability. A commenter suggested that the project include watershed restoration activities. Watershed restoration activities would not meet the purpose and need for this project. During scoping for the Quartz Gold Project watershed improvement needs were identified, however, the proposed action was developed to address an immediate need to treat the mountain pine beetle infested lodgepole pine in Broadaxe Drainage. Other needs in the area will be addressed in the future under other project proposals (EA, page 3). Section 102 (2)(E) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that we study, develop, and describe appropriate alternatives to recommended courses of action in any proposal which involves unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources. We did this with the No-Action Alternative and the Proposed Action Alternative. Design Features 1-14 were developed upfront to anticipate and reduce the effects from the proposed action on the environment and address the main issues (FONSI, page 1). The proposed action was designed to address issues with harvest unit location, riparian buffers, logging methods, silvicultural prescriptions, design features, and timber sale contract provisions for protection of resources. Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) guidance recommends listing and only briefly describing the proposed action and any alternatives that meet the project purpose. There is discretion regarding the number of alternatives (CEQ, 12/2002). It is possible that an EA may include only the proposed action and a no-action alternative. The number of alternatives is left to the discretion of the responsible official and should be based on agency experience with the environmental issues involved. I resolved concerns and issues identified internally and externally and analyzed the No-Action Alternative and the proposed action sufficiently to disclose their effects and make an informed decision. I found no significant issues or unresolved conflict concerning alternative uses of available resources that warrant consideration of additional alternatives (FONSI, page 1).

V. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

After considering the environmental effects described in the Broadaxe 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 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 (FONSI, page 7; EA, pages 1, 2, 5-10,12-17, 19-22).

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. In this case, that determination is not required because lodgepole pine will be salvaged from insect-infested areas; and that may take place on areas that are either suitable or not suitable for timber production.

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 (Purpose and Need for proposed action). Only lodgepole pine in areas infested with mountain pine beetle will be harvested. Other species that may have more value for timber will be left on site.

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

- (i) In some areas the selected harvest methods will result in areas of even-aged stands of timber, but only lodgepole pine will be harvested. All other species will be left. The proposed lodgepole pine salvage is appropriate to 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 Broadaxe EA.
- (iii) Harvest units will be shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain (Design Feature 10).
- (iv) Opening size limitations do not apply in this case because natural insect and disease attacks have occurred, and the proposed timber harvest will only take place in those areas.
- (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.

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 1; EA, page 20). The selected alternative will not impact the 1998 303 (d) listing of Gold Creek for sediment, temperature, nutrients or habitat alteration (FONSI, pages 3-4; EA, page 20).

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 no effect on grizzly bear, woodland caribou, bald eagle (FONSI, pages 1 and 6; EA, page 22), bull trout (FONSI, pages 1 and 6; EA, page 22), water howellia, or Spalding's catchfly (FONSI, page, 6; EA, page 16); and it may affect but is not likely to adversely affect Canada lynx (FONSI, page 6; EA, page 23). Implementation of the selected alternative is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of gray wolf or result in destruction or adverse modification of proposed critical habitat for gray wolf (FONSI, page 6; EA, pages 23-24)

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, pages 4 and 6; EA, pages 13-14, 29). 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 6; EA, page 29).

FLOODPLAIN AND WETLAND PROTECTION EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11988 AND 11990

Project activities would 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 would have 100-foot buffers marked during unit layout (FONSI, page 4; EA, page 29).

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. The Nez Perce Tribe was contacted, and their representative said the Tribe had no concerns about the proposal (FONSI, page 6; EA, page 29). Based on this, the selected alternative complies with Executive Order 12898.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 12962 (June 7, 1995)

The selected alternative will maintain aquatic habitat (FONSI, page 1; EA, page 22) and thus will not affect the fishery potential, which in turn will not reduce the potential for recreational fishing opportunities.

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...". 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 St. Joe Ranger District Noxious Weed Project FEIS (Design Feature 13; FONSI, page 7; EA, page 14).

VII. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. The appeal filing period is the 45 days following the publication date of the legal notice of this decision in the paper of record, *The Spokesman Review*. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

VIII. REVIEW AND APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

The documents cited in this decision notice can be obtained from the St. Joe Ranger District office in St. Maries, Idaho or from the Idaho Panhandle National Forests website:

www.fs.fed.us/ipnf/eco/manage/nepa/index.

Project file documents are located at the St. Maries office of the St. Joe Ranger District.

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11. A written appeal must be submitted within 45 days following the publication date of the legal notice of this decision in the (*Spokesman Review*, Spokane, WA). It is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure their appeal is received in a timely manner. The publication date of the legal notice of the decision in the newspaper of record is the *exclusive* means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Appellants should not rely on date or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Paper appeals must be submitted to one of the following:

USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer
P.O. Box 7669
Missoula, MT 59807

USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer
200 East Broadway
Missoula, MT 59802

Office hours: Monday through Friday, except national holidays, 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Electronic appeals must be submitted to: appeals-northern-regional-office@fs.fed.us. In electronic appeals, the subject line should contain the name of the project being appealed. An automated response will confirm your electronic appeal has been received. Electronic appeals must be submitted in MS Word, Word Perfect, or Rich Text Format (RTF).

It is the appellant's responsibility to provide sufficient project- or activity-specific evidence and rationale, focusing on the decision, to show why my decision should be reversed. The appeal must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer in writing. At a minimum, the appeal must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14, and include the following information:

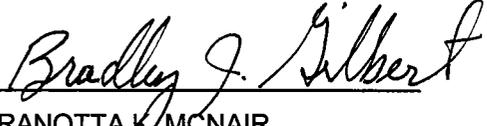
- The appellant's name and address, with a telephone number, if available;
- A signature, or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for electronic mail may be filed with the appeal);
- When multiple names are listed on an appeal, identification of the lead appellant and verification of the identity of the lead appellant upon request;
- The name of the project or activity for which the decision was made (Broadaxe), the name and title of the Responsible Official (Ranotta McNair, Forest Supervisor), and the date of the decision;
- The regulation under which the appeal is being filed, when there is an option to appeal under either 36 CFR 215 or 36 CFR 251, subpart C;
- Any specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks and rationale for those changes;
- Any portion(s) of the decision with which the appellant disagrees, and explanation for the disagreement;
- Why the appellant believes the Responsible Official's decision failed to consider the substantive comments; and
- How the appellant believes the decision specifically violates law, regulation, or policy.

If an appeal is received on this project there may be informal resolution meetings and/or conference calls between the Responsible Official and the appellant. These discussions would take place within 15 days after the closing date for filing an appeal. All such meetings are open to the public. If you are interested in attending any informal resolution discussions, please contact the Responsible Official or monitor the following website for postings about current appeals in the Northern Region of the Forest Service:

http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/projects/appeal_index.shtml.

The Responsible Official for this project is Ranotta McNair, Forest Supervisor of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

For more information or to review the project file contact Chuck Mark, District Ranger or Pete Ratcliffe at St. Joe Ranger District, 222 S 7th St. Suite 1, St. Maries, ID 83861 (208) 245-2531. The documents cited in this decision notice can be obtained from the St. Joe Ranger District office in St. Maries, Idaho or from the Idaho Panhandle National Forests website (www.fs.fed.us/ipnf/eco/manage/nepa/index). Project file documents are located at the St. Maries office of the St. Joe Ranger District.

for

RANOTTA K. MCNAIR
Forest Supervisor
Idaho Panhandle National Forests
(208)765-7223

9-26-05
Date