# DECISION MEMO

# Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project

**St. Joe Ranger District**
**Idaho Panhandle National Forests**
**Northern Region**
**USDA Forest Service**

**March 2009**

## DECISION

I have decided to treat approximately 3,750 acres with prescribed burning and planting with the Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project to improve stand conditions, improve big game forage, and reduce natural fuels. The project area is in the upper St. Joe River Drainage between the Heller Creek Drainage and the Wisdom Creek Drainage. See attached maps.

This project will be implemented beginning in the spring of 2009 and will be completed by 2019. Annual acreage burned will vary due to weather and fuel conditions.

The majority of conifer trees within the burned areas will die as a result of the burning. Shrubs will be top-killed but will regenerate via sprouting or seed within the burned areas.

Lightning caused fires occurring within the delineated units may be used to meet the purpose and need of this project if they occur within the prescriptive parameters described in this decision document and the subsequent burn plan(s).

Western larch, rust-resistant western white pine, and whitebark pine may be planted in areas where prescribed burns provide adequate site preparation and where evidence indicates these tree species occurred prior to the 1910 fires (for example: snags, live trees, previous inventories). Locations for planting will be determined based on post-burn evaluations.

No road construction is required, and there will be no changes to existing roads. No trees will be cut, and no commercial products will be removed.

Planned containment methods include ignition patterns and timing and natural barriers including topographic features and fuel conditions. In the event that planned containment methods are not effective in keeping fire from moving out of burn units, holding actions, adhering to minimum impact suppression tactics (MIST) (Incident Response Pocket Guide, NFES #1007, 2006), will be utilized to protect resources (i.e. multi-story hare habitat for lynx, riparian habitat conservation areas, sensitive plant populations, etc.). The intent of MIST is to suppress a wildfire with the least impact to the land.

### Description of Treatment Units

Blackburn Lodgepole (≈ 468 acres): Ignitions will occur on approximately 50% of the delineated unit, and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 70% of the unit is acceptable. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning will result in low- to moderate-severity fire effects with some high-severity fire effects due to occasionally heavy fuel accumulations. This will result in a mosaic of burned and unburned areas. The unburned portions of the unit will primarily include riparian areas, alpine balds having low existing fuel loads, and easterly or northerly aspects. The burned portions of the unit will primarily include ridgelines and western and southern aspects.

Heller Lodgepole (≈ 1,099 acres); Sherlock Lodgepole (≈ 1,028 acres); Medicine Lodgepole (≈ 324 acres): Ignitions will occur on approximately 60% of the delineated units, and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 90% of the units is acceptable. Ignitions will not be completed in one year and will be scheduled to occur over multiple years in the Heller and Sherlock Units. The Medicine Lodgepole Unit may be burned in one year. The

prescribed burning will result in mixed-severity fire effects. High-severity fire effects could occur where large fuels resulting from mountain pine beetle activity have accumulated. Low-severity fire effects will occur where fuel loading is light. Some areas within the burn units, regardless of fuel loading, may not burn at all. This will result in a mosaic of burned and unburned areas. The unburned portions of the unit will primarily include riparian areas, alpine balds having low existing fuel loads, and easterly or northerly aspects. The burned portions of the unit will primarily include ridgelines and western and southern aspects.

Sherlock Whitebark Pine (≈ 354 acres): Ignitions will occur on approximately 30% of the delineated unit, and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 50% of the unit is acceptable. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. Ignitions will occur near the center of the unit between the rock scree and the buffered riparian area. This ignition will cause high- to moderate-severity crown fire due to steep slopes and abundant ladder fuels. This will result in a large patch where tree crowns are consumed, surrounded by a narrow band of low- to moderate-severity fire. The unburned portions of the unit will primarily include rock scree and areas devoid of fuels on the ridge top. The burned portions of the unit will primarily include ridgelines and mountain faces where concentrations of lodgepole pine and/or young alpine fir and spruce currently exist.

Cascade Whitebark Pine (≈ 377 acres): Ignitions will occur on approximately 50% of the delineated unit, and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 80% of the unit is acceptable. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning will result in primarily moderate-severity fire effects with some high-severity fire effects due to steep slopes and ladder fuels. This will result in large patches where tree crowns are consumed with some low- to moderate-severity burn areas intermixed. The unburned portions of the unit will primarily include riparian areas. The burned portions of the unit will primarily include ridgelines and mountain faces where concentrations of lodgepole pine and/or young alpine fir and spruce currently exist.

Gold Nugget Underburn (≈ 92acres): Ignitions will occur on the entire delineated unit and may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning will result in low- to moderate-severity fire effects with some high-severity fire effects due to occasionally heavy fuel accumulations. Most of the moderate-intensity burn areas will result in stand replacement due to the presence of fire-intolerant tree species. Most of the unit will be burned with only a few unburned areas. The unburned portions of the unit will primarily include riparian areas and areas where dead fuels are sparse.

**Design Features**

1. Aquatic Environment – Water and Fish

   a. Prescribed fires will not be ignited within the INFS Riparian Habitat Conservation Area (RHCA) buffers. This project will utilize the standard widths for the Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) described in Table 1. Some fire spread may occur into the understory of RHCAs. In the event that the prescribed burn shows potential for fire spread into the RHCA that may threaten attainment of Riparian Management Objectives (RMOs), holding actions adhering to MIST standards would be employed.

**Table 1 - Standard Riparian Habitat Conservation Area (RHCA) Widths**

| INFS Category | Description | RHCA Width |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Fish-bearing streams | 300 feet from either side of channel/floodplain |
| 2 | Permanent, flowing, non-fish bearing stream | 150 feet from either side of channel/floodplain |
| 4 | Seasonally flowing or intermittent streams<br>Wetlands <1 acres<br>Landslide prone areas | 100 feet on either side of channel (priority watersheds) |

   b. Best management practices (BMPs) will be implemented. The Water Report Appendix A *(Soil and Water Conservation Practices for the Heller Cascade Project*) discusses the BMPs that will be used for the proposed action. They include:

      PRACTICE 11.07 - Oil and Hazardous Substance Contingency Planning
      PRACTICE 11.11 - Petroleum Storage and Delivery Facilities and Management
      PRACTICE 15.11 - Servicing and Refueling of Equipment

c. Helispots and staging areas will be located outside RHCAs if there is a suitable location. If there is no suitable location outside the RHCA the resource team may decide on a suitable location within the RHCA which would require conditions and contingency plans (BMPs) that would reduce risk to inland native fish.

2. Cultural Resources

Four sites will be avoided by utilizing measures to prevent prescribed fire from burning near them. The method of avoidance will be determined by the fuels specialist and zone archaeologist on-site and prior to the commencement of the burn. Methods will depend on the site's characteristics, the surrounding fuel load, and proximity to water. Avoidance measures may include:

a. setting up a sprinkler system to moisten the site and surrounding area with water prior to and during burning activities. This will ensure that the site areas are moist enough to resist any fire in the event that it creeps down near the sites,

b. digging hand fireline around the site area to create a physical barrier from fire, and/or

c. reducing fuels in the site and surrounding areas.

3. Recreation

a. Trails 76, 77 and 738 are within the project area; these trails will be protected and then cleared and repaired after management activities are complete.

b. If the trails are used as firelines, trail tread will not be damaged; and if trails are widened beyond 24 inches, the tread will be reconstructed to 24 inches after activities are complete.

c. With the Heller Creek Campground and most of the trails and roads in the area providing spectacular views of the upper St. Joe and this project area, ignition activities on the holiday weekends of July 4 and Labor Day will be avoided, if possible, to minimize impacts to forest visitors.

d. When burn dates are known access roads, Heller Creek Campground, and affected trails will be signed at all trailheads/junctions. Trail 76 has two trailheads; Trail 77 has one trailhead and three junctions and Trail 738 has three trailheads and three junctions. Trail and road closures should be avoided but may be utilized if necessary to meet fire management and public safety needs.

e. Before ignition begins, the affected trails will be hiked in order to notify anyone that may be in the area.

f. If it is necessary to take engines on Road 320, consideration will be given to using a pilot vehicle for public safety.

4. Soils

a. Prescribed burning will be done during times when the majority of soil moisture in the upper surface inch of mineral soil has a moisture content of 25+ percent by weight; or 60 to 100 percent duff moisture; or when post-burn conditions will result in no more than 25 to 30 percent bare soils (excluding natural conditions) within an activity area (burn unit).

   The desired outcome includes retention of organic matter (generally not much less than ¼ of an inch) that protects the soil from rain splash impacts, erosion, a decrease in soil moisture holding capacity, and increased solar surface heating, especially on south-facing slopes.

   This is very important in small headwaters in four different drainages within the Heller Lodgepole Unit (stands 252040-32; -41; -56; -57: -68) and the Sherlock Lodgepole Unit (stands 25202023 & -24) with sensitive landtypes (see Soils Report Appendix A – Soil Map 1).

b. On sensitive soils or slopes at or greater than 40%, no more than 20% of bare soils (excluding natural conditions) will be exposed within the activity area.

c. Units in the Heller Lodgepole Unit and Sherlock Lodgepole Unit will be burned over multiple years.

d. Burning prescriptions will utilize recommendations from Graham and others (1994) by retaining 7 to 23 tons/acre of coarse woody debris for drier sites and 17 to 33 ton/acre for more moist sites.

5. TES Plants

a. If Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) plant species are discovered during project implementation, an agency Botanist will be notified so that measures could be taken to maintain population viability. Measures to protect population viability and habitat for all known and newly discovered occurrences would include altering or dropping proposed units from activity, modifying the proposed activity, or implementing buffers around plant occurrences.

b. If ignition begins in the Sherlock Lodgepole unit during the time frame of late July through the first hard freeze (approximately 7/20-10/15 depending on weather) **and** if fire moves into Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) then St. Joe District botanist will be contacted immediately to determine if measures could be taken to maintain habitat integrity of potential *Botrychium* sites.

6. Visual Quality

Straight burn lines will be avoided on the landscape. This may be accomplished by allowing free-burning fire of varying intensity (i.e. flanking and backing) near burn unit boundaries, manipulating fire intensities by ignition patterns near unit boundaries, etc.

7. Weeds

The following preventative measures willbe taken to reduce the risk of noxious weed introduction and spread in accordance with the St. Joe Weed Control EIS (ROD 10/12/99).

a. All tools will be cleaned prior to entering the project area to remove dirt, plant parts, and material that may carry weed seeds.

b. After implementation, project areas will be reviewed for new populations of noxious weeds. If new populations are found more intensive surveys would be conducted, sites would be mapped, and treatment would be scheduled.

c. If new populations of noxious weeds are found, treatment would be implemented in accordance with priorities set by the noxious weed program. New invader species will be slated for eradication immediately upon discovery. Other weed infestations will be treated according to the St. Joe Noxious Weed Project EIS and district priorities.

d. All weed treatments will be monitored for effectiveness.

8. Wildlife

a. Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Wildlife Species Management: If TES species and/or significant habitat are discovered before or during project implementation the Fire/Fuels Specialist and the District Wildlife Biologist would be notified so that, if needed, measures could be taken to avoid impacts and meet Forest Plan Standards. Measures could include altering or dropping proposed units, modifying the proposed activity, or implementing buffers.

b. Goshawk:

Nests: Existing nests and those found before and during project implementation will be protected with a 40-acre no-activity buffer (Brewer and others 2007).

Post-Fledging Areas (PFA): Proposed project activities will be suspended in the PFA of active goshawk nests between April 15 and August 15. After August 15$^{th}$, treatment-related activities may commence within the PFA but outside the nest area (Brewer and others 2007). Restrictions may be removed after June 30 if the nest is determined by the district biologist to be inactive or unsuccessful.

## PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROJECT

Approximately half of the Heller-Cascade Project Area, including the Heller, Cascade and Sherlock Drainages, burned during the 1910 fires. Stand-replacing fires were the primary landscape-scale disturbance in the project area. Very few fires have occurred within the project area since 1910, and fires that did start were suppressed. The absence of mixed severity and stand-replacement fires since 1910 resulted in homogeneous forest structure over vast areas. The mountain pine beetle has caused extensive mortality in lodgepole pine stands, especially on south to west aspects below 6,000 feet elevation. In addition, white pine blister rust has caused widespread mortality in white pine and whitebark pine within the project area. Accumulating dead and downed fuel loadings will increase the difficulty of fire management west of the project area.

This project is consistent with the "Region One Integrated Restoration and Protection Strategy" because it contributes to regional and local land management objectives on both sides of the Idaho/ Montana state line. This project will result in fuel mosaics that will contribute to conditions that will facilitate fire management in the upper St. Joe River Drainage. It will also restore and/or maintain whitebark pine habitat and may protect values at risk in the vicinity of St. Regis and Superior, Montana and the I-90 corridor.

The purpose of this proposal is to:

- Enhance conditions conducive for regeneration of whitebark pine, western white pine and western larch within lodgepole pine stands affected by the mountain pine beetle.
- Begin to establish a mosaic of stands at varying stages of early seral development within the lodgepole pine stands experiencing the most mortality from the mountain pine beetle.
- Reduce undesired, competitive tree species (mid- to late-seral, shade-intolerant species like grand fir, subalpine fir, spruce, and mountain hemlock).
- Increase forage for big game species.
- Facilitate fire management upwind and west of the project area and increase the flexibility and ability to manage unplanned fire ignitions (lightning) to accomplish resource benefits.
- Reduce natural fuel accumulations that resulted from the mountain pine beetle mortality.

**Example of mortality in lodgepole pine near Sherlock Peak showing recently dead (red) and older dead (gray) lodgepole pine with adjacent live trees. Photo taken by Jason Jerman, project team leader, summer 2008.**

## Forest Plan Direction

The need for this action in the Heller-Cascade Project Area is based on the Forest Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests and the differences between existing and desired conditions. The St. Joe Ranger District is proposing this action to:

- Provide efficient fire protection and fire use to help accomplish land management objectives (IPNF Forest Plan p. II-2).
- Follow the forest-wide standard that states, "Vegetation management will favor the use of fire, hand treatment, natural control, or mechanical methods wherever feasible and cost effective" (IPNF Forest Plan p. II-39)
- Attain forest standards for protection related to insects and disease as they pertain to timbered stands in Management Areas 1, 9, and 10 (IPNF Forest Plan pp. III-4, III-39, III-42) by maintaining and restoring fully-stocked, diverse, vigorous stands.
- Use prescribed fire to meet silvicultural objectives (IPNF Forest Plan p. III-4).
- Meet forest plan standards for wildlife and fish related to habitat improvement in Management Area 10 (Forest Plan, III-42) by using fire to reduce fuel loading and increase forage palatability for big game species.

## PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

I met with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe to discuss projects on the St. Joe Ranger District, including the Heller-Cascade project, on March 18, 2008 (project file PI-1). The representatives of the tribe did not express concerns about the project. On March 27, 2008 I sent a letter, a notice of proposed action, and maps of the proposed action (PI-2) to the public (PI-3) concerning Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project. The notice of proposed action described the proposed action, the purpose and need for action, forest plan direction, and the comment process. That information was posted on the IPNF website on March 28, 2008 (PI-4). The legal notice of the proposed action and 30-day comment period was published in the newspaper of record, *The Coeur d'Alene Press*, on April 1, 2008 (PI-5). The Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project was first listed on the IPNF's Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions in April 2008 (PI-6).

Three groups and two agencies provided input during the comment period. Their comments are summarized below followed by my response to those comments.

- The Idaho Fish and Game is very supportive of this project.
- The Idaho Parks and Recreation Department is concerned about impacts to trails. They suggest that we clean erosion control structures on trails prior to the prescribed burns and rehabilitate trails after the burns if the trails are used as firelines.

  Trail #738 has no water bars or drain dips because it is a relatively flat, ridge trail. Trails receive maintenance, as funds allow, including cleaning of water bars. A design feature for trail rehabilitation is included as part of this decision.
- The Idaho Conservation League (ICL) is strongly supportive of this project. They suggest we consider treating more acres each year and not limit ourselves to the annual 800-1,000 acres described in the notice of proposed action. This decision includes fewer acres than originally proposed in order to protect multi-storied hare habitat in accordance with the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction. Project design requires the burning to occur over more than one year in some units to allow us to review results before proceeding, so we will not burn more than half the total acres in one season. ICL would like us to clarify how the fires will be contained without firelines. As stated above, planned containment methods include ignition patterns and timing and natural barriers including topographic features and fuel conditions. Also, as stated above, in the event that planned containment methods are not effective in keeping fire from moving out of burn units, holding actions adhering to minimum impact suppression tactics would be utilized to protect resources.
- Kootenai Environmental Alliance requested that we include information to indicate whether any firelines

would be constructed within roadless areas. Originally we proposed fireline construction within a roadless area with the Wisdom Peak Larch Underburn Unit. I decided to eliminate that unit from the decision to address concerns about burning in multi-storied hare habitat which is important for lynx. As stated above, planned containment methods include ignition patterns and timing and natural barriers including topographic features and fuel conditions. Also, as stated above, in the event that planned containment methods are not effective in keeping fire from moving out of burn units, holding actions adhering to minimum impact suppression tactics would be utilized to protect resources.

- Friends of the Clearwater (FOTC) indicated support for the project, but they also expressed some concerns. Their biggest concern was construction of firelines in roadless areas; however, as noted above, I do not foresee fireline construction in roadless areas. FOTC stated that impacts on the roadless area/proposed wilderness need to be evaluated. This project does not include activities in proposed wilderness. The effects to roadless area characteristics were evaluated for this project (see discussion under *Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances*). They suggested this project should be documented in an EA or EIS. The project activities fall within a category that may be excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS, and I have determined there are no extraordinary circumstances that may result in significant effects (see discussion under *Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances*). FOTC is also concerned about Elk Habitat Potential. The project will not affect elk security areas and will increase browse for elk and other big game species, so elk habitat potential will increase or be maintained. FOTC suggested that agency-ignited fire be deferred to allow natural fires the opportunity to burn in the area. One purpose of the project is to facilitate use of unplanned natural fires for resource benefits in the upper St. Joe.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ORIGINAL PROPOSED ACTION AND THIS DECISION

- Stands that provide multi-storied hare habitat were removed from the proposed action in order to comply with the standards and guidelines in the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction Record of Decision.
- Riparian Habitat Conservation Area were buffered to protect riparian areas, water quality, and fish habitat.
- Activities originally proposed in MA 11 were eliminated from the proposed action. MA 11 consists of proposed wilderness areas where visual quality objectives of preservation must be met and human activity cannot be evident. Although fire is a natural process, prescribed fire is a human activity, so prescribed burning in MA 11 is not included in this decision.

## FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

This project falls within a category of activities excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement as outlined in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Environmental Policy and procedures Handbook, Chapter 30, Section 31.2 "Categories of Action for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo are required", Category 6 (Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction [Service level D, FSH 7709.56]).

The project will improve timber stand conditions and browse for big game species. This project does not include the use of herbicides or road construction.

I considered all the elements of this proposal and determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances that may result in significant individual or cumulative effects as documented below (see project file for further details):

1. *Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species:* District Wildlife and Fisheries Biologists and Botanist evaluated the proposed action with regard to sensitive, threatened and endangered species and completed biological evaluations and biological assessments.

Sensitive Species

Biological evaluations for sensitive species include determinations that the project will have **no impact** to the following sensitive plant, fish, and wildlife species:

| | Scientific Name | Common Name |
|---|---|---|
| ***Plants*** | *Asplenium trichomanes* | maidenhair spleenwort |
| | *Cardamine constancei* | Constance's bittercress |
| | *Cypripedium fasciculatum* | clustered lady's slipper |
| | *Grindelia howellii* | Howell's gumweed |
| | *Gimmia brittoniae* | Britton's grimmia |
| | *Hookeria lucens* | clear moss |
| | *Mimulus alsinoides* | chickweed monkeyflower |
| | *Rhizomnium nudum* | naked mnium |
| | *Thelypteris nevadensis* | Sierra woodfern |
| | *Triantha occidentalis spp brevistyla* | sticky asphodel |
| | *Waldsteinia idahoensis* | Idaho barren strawberry |
| **Fish** | *Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi* | westslope cutthroat trout |
| **Wildlife** | *Martes pennanti* | fisher |
| | *Bufo boreas* | western toad |

Biological evaluations for sensitive species include determinations that the project **may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species** for the following sensitive plant and wildlife species:

| | Scientific Name | Common Name |
|---|---|---|
| **Plants** | *Blechnum spicant* | deerfern |
| | *Botrychium ascendens* | upswept moonwort |
| | *Botrychium crenulatum* | dainty moonwort |
| | *Botrychium lanceolatum* | triangle moonwort |
| | *Botrychium lineare* | slender moonwort |
| | *Botrychium minganense* | Mingan moonwort |
| | *Botrychium montanum* | western goblin |
| | *Botrychium paradoxum* | paradox moonwort |
| | *Botrychium pedunculosum* | stalked moonwort |
| | *Botrychium pinnatum* | northwestern moonwort |
| | *Botrychium simplex* | least moonwort |
| | *Buxbaumia aphylla* | leafless bug-on-a-stick moss |
| | *Buxbaumia viridis* | green bug-on-a-stick moss |
| **Wildlife** | *Gulo gulo* | wolverine |
| | *Picoides arcticus* | black-backed woodpecker |

Threatened and Endangered Species

Biological assessments completed for this project include the following determinations for threatened or endangered plant, fish, and wildlife species:

- The project **will have no effect** on endangered plant species because no federally listed Endangered plant species are known or suspected to occur in the Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

- The project **may affect but is not likely to adversely affect** bull trout because of the potential for short-term, negligible effects to water quality in or near bull trout habitat.
- The project **will have no effect** on woodland caribou because the St. Joe Ranger District is outside of the woodland caribou recovery area, the species does not occur on the St. Joe District, and the geographic location of the St. Joe Ranger District precludes the presence of caribou and therefore the potential for effects on the species.
- The project **will have no effect** on grizzly bear because the project is not in a recovery area, bear management unit, or areas of re-occurring use; the low potential for grizzly bear occurrence in the project area; the project is consistent with the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan Supplement: Bitterroot Ecosystem Recovery Plan; and the potential for human/bear conflicts is so small it is inconsiderable.
- The project **may affect but is not likely to adversely affect** Canada lynx because the project complies with standards and guidelines of the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction Record of Decision; no treatment will occur in multi-storied hare habitat stands; treatment will occur mainly in open, beetle-affected stands; and there is limited potential for lynx to occur in the project area.
- The project **is not likely to jeopardize** the continued existence of the gray wolf or result in the destruction or adverse modification of proposed critical habitat because of the prey base will be maintained or improved, corridor/linkages will be maintained, known den or rendezvous sites will be avoided, the lack of critical habitat for wolves, and no consequential change in the likelihood of human-wolf interactions.

2. *Flood Plains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds*: Project activities will not occur in flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds, so there will be no effect.

3. *Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas*: Project activities are not proposed in any Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.

4. *Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas*: All of the proposed treatment areas fall within the Sheep Mountain – Stateline Idaho Roadless Area. The proposed treatments do not include timber cutting, sale or removal, or road construction or reconstruction. The project is consistent with the 2008 Idaho Roadless Rule (36 CFR 294) because the rule does not limit or prohibit the use of prescribed fire (73 FR 61463 [October 16, 2008]). The proposed treatments will maintain wilderness attributes and roadless characteristics because they limit ground-disturbing activities (i.e. they do not use mechanical treatments), they will maintain high quality or undisturbed soil and water, diversity of plant and animal communities, habitat for threatened, endangered and sensitive species, natural appearing landscapes, and traditional cultural properties (Heller Cascade Recreation Report).

5. *Research natural areas*: Project activities will not occur in a Research Natural Area; therefore there is no effect on this resource.

6. *American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites*: I met with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe to discuss projects on the St. Joe Ranger District, including the Heller Cascade Project, on March 18, 2008 (project file PI-1); and I sent a letter, a notice of proposed action, and maps of the proposed action (PI-2, PI-3) to the Coeur d'Alene Tribe on March 27, 2008. The representatives of the tribe did not express concerns about the project. No known cultural or religious sites associated with any federally recognized American Indian groups are located in the project area.

7. *Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas*: An appropriate cultural resources inventory has been conducted (CR-1). The Idaho State Historic Preservation Office has concurred with the Forest Heritage Specialist's finding of "No Adverse Effect" to historic properties, provided all eligible and potentially eligible properties are avoided by project activities. Design Feature 2 specifies the methods that will be used to avoid site adjacent to project activity areas (CR-2).

## REGULATORY CONSISTENCY

**National Forest Management Act and the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Forest Plan**

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and accompanying regulations (36 CFR 219 [73 FR 21468, April 21, 2008]) require projects to be consistent with the forest plan. The activity associated with this decision is consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Forest Plan and management area direction for Management Areas 1, 9, and 10. MA 1 standards state that prescribed fire will be used as needed to meet silvicultural objectives. Standards for MA 9 and MA 10 state that specific areas will be identified where prescribed fire may be beneficial and cost effective in achieving the objectives of the management area. The proposed action will:

- Provide efficient fire protection and fire use to help accomplish land management objectives (IPNF Forest Plan p. II-2).
- Follow the forest-wide standard that states, "Vegetation management will favor the use of fire, hand treatment, natural control, or mechanical methods wherever feasible and cost effective" (IPNF Forest Plan p. II-39)
- Attain forest standards for protection related to insects and disease as they pertain to timbered stands in Management Areas 1, 9, and 10 (IPNF Forest Plan pp. III-4, III-39, III-42) by maintaining and restoring fully-stocked, diverse, vigorous stands.
- Use prescribed fire to meet silvicultural objectives (IPNF Forest Plan p. III-4).
- Meet forest plan standards for wildlife and fish related to habitat improvement in Management Area 10 (Forest Plan p. III-42) by using fire to reduce fuel loading and increase forage palatability for big game species.

**The project activities are consistent with Forest Plan direction for specific resources:**

***Fish*** Fish Standards 1 and 2 (fry emergence) do not apply. Standard 3 does not apply to this project because the streams identified in that standard are not located in this project area. Standard 4 will be met because no new road construction is proposed. Standard 5 was met because the information contained in this report uses fisheries surveys to coordinate activities with other resources. Standard 6 was met with the review of the stream systems and the implementation of standards described in INFS. Project activities comply with INFS standards (Fisheries Report Appendix A).

***Noxious Weeds*** The project activities will meet the intent of the Forest Plan for moderate control of noxious weeds through implementation of design features (Design Feature 7).

***Old Growth*** The project activities comply with Forest Plan standards for old growth. No activities are proposed within allocated old growth stands. All stands known to meet criteria for old growth are allocated for old growth management in the old growth management units (OGMU) associated with the project area (OGMU 32 and OGMU 33). No direct, indirect or cumulative effects will result from the proposed action on either existing allocated old growth or stands meeting old growth criteria identified and allocated through this analysis process. Total Forest Plan standards for old growth retention and maintenance would continue to be met. Although OGMUs 32 and 33 do not currently meet the Forest Plan objective of maintaining 5% in old growth per OGMU, the proposed activities will not affect stands meeting old growth criteria or allocated for old growth.

***Recreation*** The activities are consistent with current IPNF Forest Plan standards for recreation, and the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum setting will remain the same.

***Soils*** The proposed activity will comply with Forest Plan Standards for maintaining soil productivity. The proposed action will comply with the standard for maintaining productivity potential because all proposed activity areas will remain below soil quality limits for disturbance and will maintain the acceptable productivity potential for managed vegetation. The proposed activities will maintain approximately 98 percent of the area in its full productivity potential.

***Soils** continued* The proposed action will comply with the standard for maintaining sufficient large woody debris to maintain site productivity because all trees and woody material will remain within the proposed units. Fire may locally consume vegetation, but ashes and residue will be recycled into the nutrient pool. Unburned or lightly burned areas and buffers will stay intact and contribute to the maintenance of site productivity.

***Visual Quality*** Forest Plan visual quality objectives will be met by incorporating the design features. The Sherlock and Cascade Whitebark Pine units may not meet Forest Plan VQO of Retention in the near future but should meet Retention within five years as the whitebark pine release and expand, other trees regenerate, and the standing trunks of the lodgepole pine and alpine fir and spruce fall over and break down.

***Water*** The long-term productivity of the water resource will be protected through the promoted health and vigor of the vegetation in the project area and the reduced risk of potential negative effects from large, high-severity fires which could substantially increase sediment inputs to streams and reduce riparian shade. The short-term sediment increase will not substantially change water resource productivity. Design features include BMPs for project activities that are intended to protect water quality.

***Wildlife*** The proposed action is consistent with applicable goals, direction, standards, and guidelines from the Forest Plan for the management of wildlife habitat and species populations. It complies with applicable conservation strategies for wildlife species.

### Region 1 Soil Quality Standards

Project activities comply with Region 1 soil quality standards. The proposed activity comply with Regional Soil Quality Standards (USDA 1999) related to detrimentally disturbed soils. None of the proposed burn units are expected to surpass disturbance limits of 15%, and existing detrimental disturbance is below this limit in all proposed burn units. The proposed activities will maintain full productivity potential on approximately 98 percent of the activity areas. The proposed activity will comply with the standard for organic matter layer thickness because the design of this project is such that minimal effects to soil and organic matter are anticipated. Due to the mixed prescribed burn severity, implementation time frame over multiple years, and design features, complete consumption of organic matter is projected to be minimal and will be maintained within the natural range of variability. The proposed activity will comply with the standard for large woody debris maintenance because all trees and woody material will remain within the proposed units (Soil Appendix B). Fire may locally consume vegetation, but ashes and residues will be recycled into the nutrient pool. Unburned or lightly burned areas and buffers will stay intact and contribute to the maintenance of site productivity.

### Endangered Species Act

The project complies with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). See discussion about threatened and endangered species in *Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances* above. The project meets the objectives of the National Fire Plan by reducing hazardous fuels, and it falls under the counterpart regulations to the ESA that provide alternative procedures to comply with the federal agency consultation responsibilities described in Section 7 of the ESA regulations.

### Clean Air Act

The burning activities will be monitored and controlled by airshed regulations to avoid violation of air quality standards. Prescribed burning on the IPNF is regulated by the North Idaho Smoke Management Memorandum of Agreement (1990). Under the Clean Air Act, states have the primary responsibility for maintaining air quality standards. All Forest Service prescribed burning is monitored and controlled through this process. Burning is allowed only when current and predicted air quality will allow new ignitions for the next day based on acres to burn, type of burn, anticipated smoke production, location, and predicted meteorological conditions. Restrictions can be issued to curtail all burning or to reduce burning acres or restrict burning to specified elevations. This

regulation process as well as the temporary nature of smoke accumulation should prevent violations of ambient air standards except possibly temporarily at the fire sites directly next to active burning.

### Clean Water Act and Idaho Water Quality Laws

No effect to water quality is expected, therefore, the project will comply with the Clean Water Act and Idaho water quality laws.

### The National Historical Preservation Act (NHPA)

The proposed action is consistent with Section 106 of the NHPA. An appropriate inventory has been conducted (CR-1). Project activities will avoid archaeological sites or historic properties (CR-2). See Design Feature 2. The Idaho State Historic Preservation Office concurred with the Forest Heritage Specialist's finding of "No Adverse Effect" to historic properties, provided all eligible and potentially eligible properties are avoided by project activities.

## DOCUMENTS AND PROJECT FILES

This decision memo summarizes the analyses that led to this decision. Other reports and documents were referenced or were developed during the course of this project and are part of the project files. All project files are available for review by the public. Please contact Cornie Hudson at the St. Joe Ranger District (208-245-2531) to review files.

## APPEAL RIGHTS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Only those individuals or organizations who submitted comments during the 30-day comment period for this project are eligible to appeal this decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations. On March 27, 2008 I sent a letter to individuals and organizations who expressed interest in similar projects on the St. Joe Ranger District in the past. That letter explained the comment process and stated that the comment period would begin following publication of a notice in *The Coeur d'Alene Press*. It stated the expected date of publication would be April 1, 2008. The notice of the proposed action and opportunity to comment for this project was published, as expected, in newspaper of record, *The Coeur d'Alene Press*, on April 1, 2008 (PI-5). During the comment period I received letters from two state agencies and three groups (see previous discussion on Public Involvement).

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the *Coeur d'Alene Press*, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45-day appeal period will not be considered. I anticipate the notice of this decision will be published in *The Coeur d'Alene Press* on or about March 5, 2009, however, the actual publication date in the *Coeur d'Alene Press* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Individuals or organizations who submitted comments during the comment period may appeal this decision. Paper appeals must be submitted to:

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|---|---|---|
| USDA Forest Service, Northern Region<br>ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer<br>P.O. Box 7669<br>Missoula, MT 59807 | or | USDA Forest Service, Northern Region<br>ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer<br>200 East Broadway<br>Missoula, MT 59802 |

Office hours are 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.

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 (.doc), plain text (.txt), or rich text format (RTF). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

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, 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, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the date of the decision;
- The regulation under which the appeal is being filed (in this case 36 CFR 215);
- 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 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.

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

## CONTACT PERSON

Questions regarding this decision should be sent to Cornie Hudson, St. Joe District Ranger, 222 S 7th Street, Suite 1, St. Maries, Idaho 83861 (208)-245-2531. I am the Responsible Official for this decision.

Charles A. Mark

CHARLES A. MARK
District Ranger
St. Joe Ranger District

3/3/09
Date

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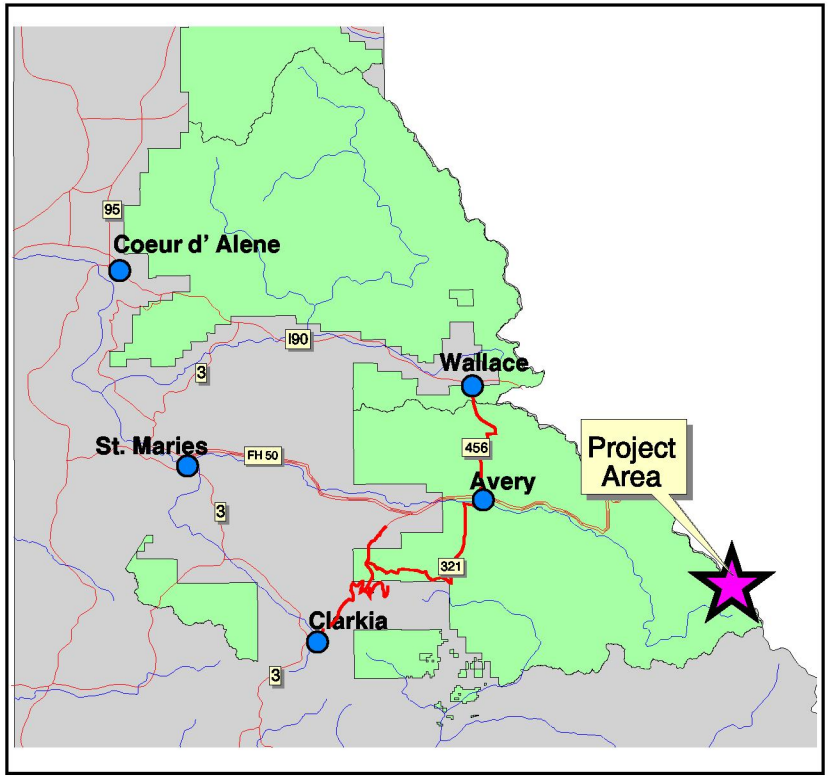
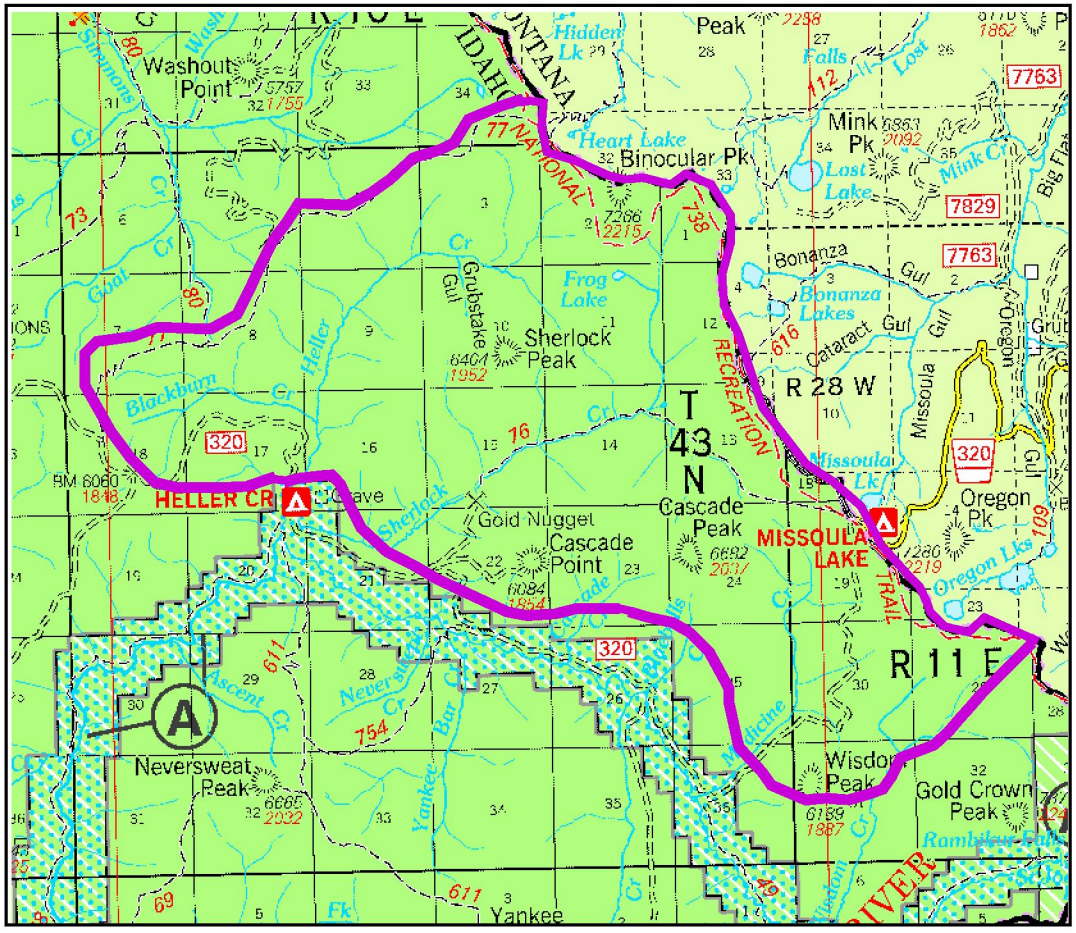



# Heller Cascade Landscape Burning Project

## Vicinity and Project Area Map

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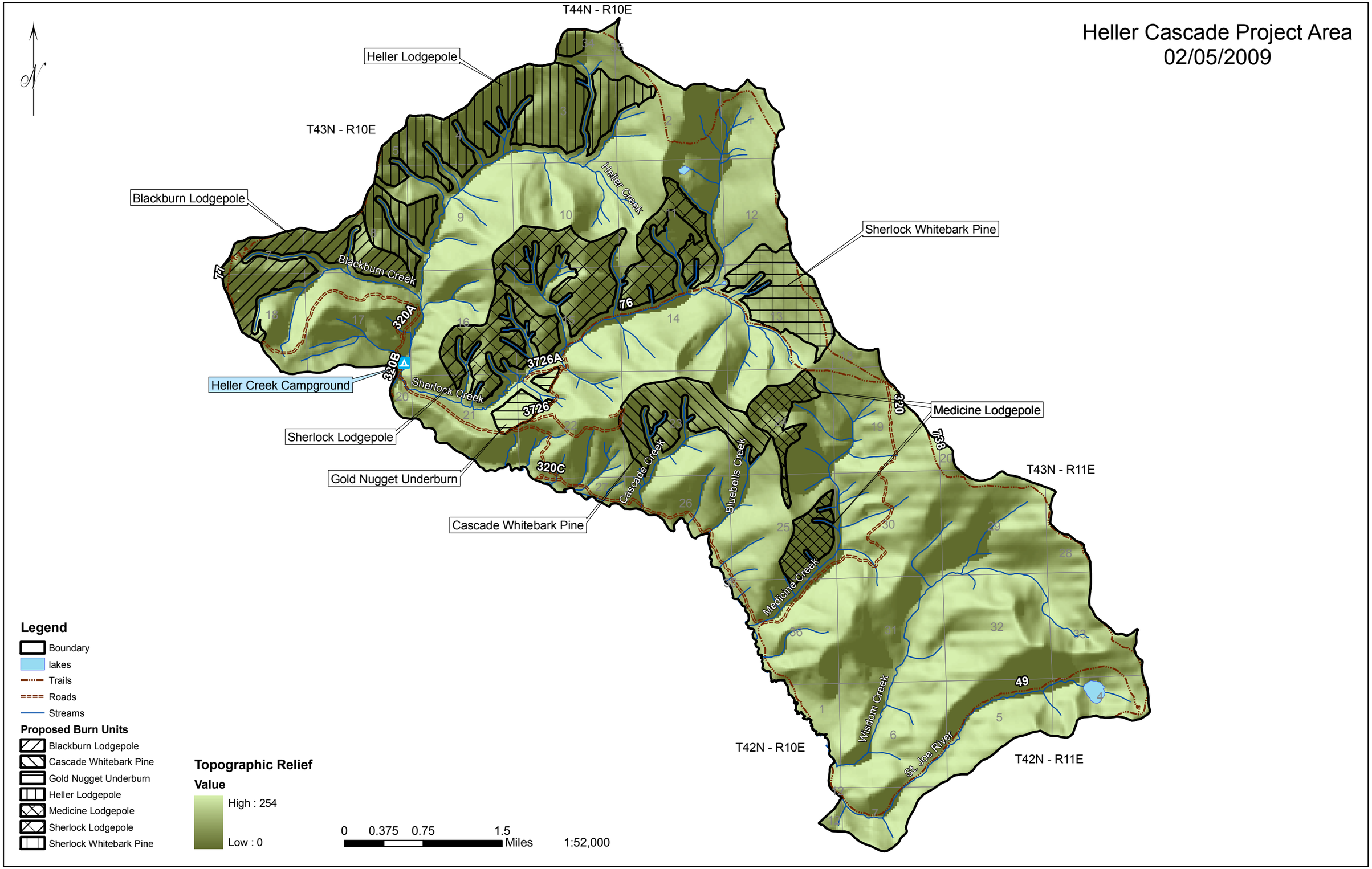
# Heller Cascade Project Area
02/05/2009