

**Notice of Proposed Action  
for 30-Day Comment Period  
Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project**

St. Joe Ranger District, Idaho Panhandle National Forests

March 27, 2008

The St. Joe Ranger District is proposing prescribed burning 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 on the northeast side of the St. Joe River up to the Idaho/Montana state line and extends from the Heller Creek Drainage to the Wisdom Creek Drainage. See attached maps.

**Proposed Action**

The St. Joe Ranger District proposes to use prescribed fire to treat approximately 7,700 acres in T. 44 N., R. 10 E., Section 34; T. 43 N., R. 10 E., Sections 1-5, 7-18, 21-25, 36; T. 43 N., R. 11 E., Sections 18-19, 29-31; Boise Meridian. See descriptions of proposed treatment units below.

No road construction would be required, and there would be no changes to existing roads. No commercial timber products would be removed.

This project would be implemented beginning in the fall of 2008. Over a period of ten years an average of approximately 800-1000 acres would be burned each year. Some years the weather and fuel conditions may not permit this many acres of prescribed burning, but other years may permit more.

Firelines in the Gold Nugget Underburn Unit and the Wisdom Larch Underburn Unit would be constructed by hand and would include 20 feet of brushing and limbing, snagging up to 100 feet of the line inside the unit (for firefighter safety), and a mineral scrape of 12-18 inches. Firelines would be rehabilitated after burning is completed by constructing waterbars as needed and by covering them with brush that was cut during fireline construction. Fireline may also be constructed as need to protect cultural resources as identified by a qualified archaeologist. It is not anticipated that any other fireline would be required.

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).

**Proposed Treatment Units**

Blackburn Lodgepole (≈ 1,150 acres): Ignitions would 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. The prescribed burning would result in low to moderate severity fire effects with small isolated occurrences of high severity fire effects due to occasionally heavy fuel accumulations. This would result in a mosaic of burned and unburned areas. The unburned portions of the unit would primarily include riparian areas and eastern aspects. The burned portions of the unit would primarily include ridgelines, western, and southern aspects.

Heller Lodgepole (≈ 1,740 acres); Sherlock Lodgepole (≈ 1,590 acres); Medicine Lodgepole (≈ 710 acres): Ignitions would occur on approximately 40% of the delineated units and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 70% of the units is acceptable. Ignitions would not be completed in one year and would be scheduled to occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning would result in low to moderate severity fire effects with small isolated occurrences of high severity fire effects due to occasionally heavy fuel accumulations. This would result in a mosaic of burned and unburned areas. The unburned portions of the units would primarily include riparian areas and eastern aspects. The burned portions of the units would primarily include ridgelines, western, and southern aspects.

Sherlock Whitebark Pine (≈ 1,010 acres): Ignitions would occur on approximately 20% of the delineated unit and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 40% of the unit is acceptable. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning would result in high to moderate severity fire effects due to steep

slopes and abundant ladder fuels. This would result in large patches where tree crowns are consumed. Narrow bands of low to moderate severity fire would surround those areas. Unburned areas would separate each burned patch. The unburned portions of the unit would primarily include riparian areas. The burned portions of the unit would primarily include ridgelines and mountain faces where concentrations of lodgepole pine and/or young alpine fir and spruce currently exist.

Cascade Whitebark Pine (≈ 460 acres): Ignitions would occur on approximately 40% 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 would result in primarily moderate severity fire effects with some high severity fire effects due to steep slopes and ladder fuels. This would result in large patches where tree crowns are consumed with some low to moderate severity burn areas intermixed. The unburned portions of the unit would primarily include riparian areas. The burned portions of the unit would primarily include ridgelines and mountain faces where concentrations of lodgepole pine and/or young alpine fir and spruce currently exist.

Wisdom Whitebark Pine (≈ 720 acres): Ignitions would occur on approximately 40% of the delineated unit and fire spread beyond initial ignitions on up to 60% of the unit is acceptable. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning would result in low to moderate severity fire effects with most of the high severity fire effects occurring on the heavily timbered west aspect because of heavy live and dead fuel accumulations. This would result in a mosaic of burned and unburned areas. The unburned portions of the unit would primarily include riparian areas and mountain meadows. The burned portions of the unit would primarily include ridgelines and mountain faces where concentrations of lodgepole pine and/or young alpine fir and spruce currently exist.

Gold Nugget Underburn (≈ 140 acres): Ignitions would occur on the entire delineated unit. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning would result in low to moderate severity fire effects with small isolated occurrences of high severity fire effects due to occasionally heavy dead and live 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 would be burned with only a few areas unburned. The unburned portions of the unit would primarily include riparian areas and areas where dead fuels are sparse. Approximately 1,420 feet of hand fireline may be constructed on the west flank (from the creek at the bottom to the road at the top) prior to ignition to prevent fire spread.

Wisdom Peak Larch Underburn (≈ 170 acres): Ignitions would occur on the entire delineated unit. Ignitions may occur over multiple years. The prescribed burning would result in low to moderate severity fire effects with small isolated occurrences of high severity fire effects due to occasionally heavy dead and live fuel accumulations. Most of the moderate intensity burn areas would result in mortality of fire-intolerant tree species in the understory. Most of the unit would be burned with only a few areas left unburned. The unburned portions of the unit would primarily include riparian areas and areas where dead fuels are sparse. Approximately 6,830 feet of hand fireline may be constructed around the entire unit boundary above the road (the road forms the unit boundary on the bottom) prior to ignition to prevent fire spread.

### **Purpose and Need**

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 suppressing unwanted wildland fires and managing for wildland fire-use 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 would result in fuel breaks that would contribute to conditions that would allow for more wildland fire-use in the upper St. Joe River Drainage. It would also restore and/or maintain whitebark pine habitat and 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 the management of wildland fire use upwind and west of the project area.
- Reduce natural fuel accumulations that resulted from the mountain pine beetle mortality.

### **Forest Plan Direction**

The need for this proposed 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.

### **Background**

The majority of the project area falls within two inventoried roadless areas: Sheep Mountain–Stateline #799 and Meadow Creek–Upper North Fork #302. Preliminary analysis indicates that the proposed treatments are consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule because they do not include timber harvest, road construction or road reconstruction.

The entire project area falls within a lynx analysis unit. Proposed treatments would follow standards and guidelines in the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction Record of Decision.

Proposed treatment units fall within Old Growth Management Units 32 and 33 and do not include any stands allocated for old growth management.

### **Environmental Documentation**

The preliminary analysis of this proposal indicates it fits a category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. This proposed action falls under FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2, 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)."

## **Comments and Appeal**

This project includes prescribed burning which is subject to public comment, notice, and appeal under the 36 CFR 215 rules. A 30-day comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known before a decision is made. Only those individuals and organizations providing comments during this 30-day comment period will be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. Comments received from an authorized representative(s) of an organization are considered those of the organization only; individual members of that organization do not meet appeal eligibility solely on the basis of membership in an organization; the member(s) must submit comments as an individual in order to meet appeal eligibility.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of this notice in the *Coeur d'Alene Press*. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. You should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The expected date of publication is April 1, 2008.

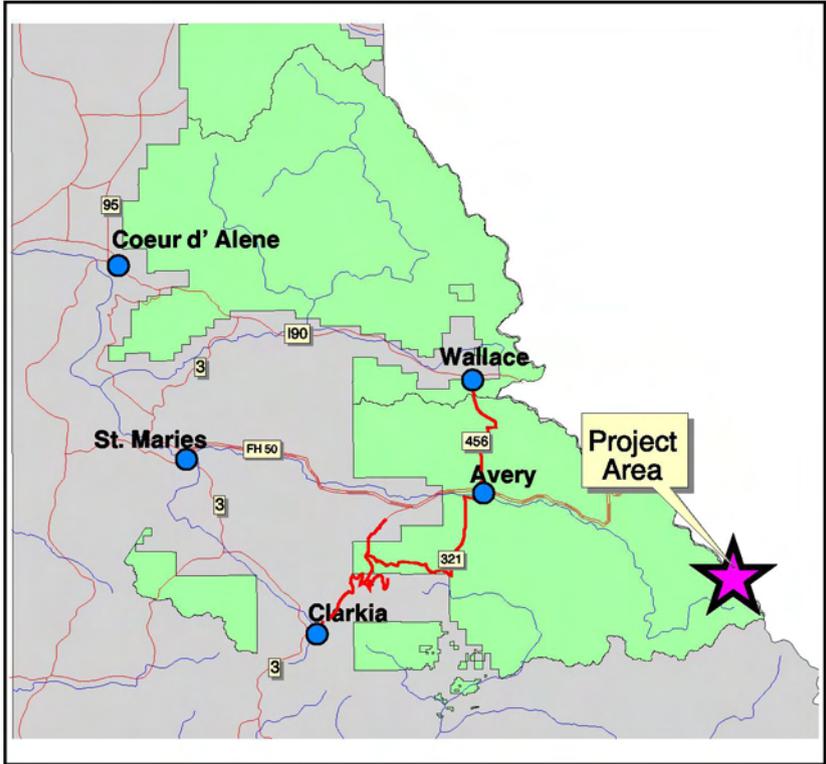
Written comments must be submitted to: Charles Mark, District Ranger, St. Joe Ranger District, 222 S. 7<sup>th</sup> St, Suite 1, St. Maries, ID 82861. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Oral comments must be provided at the St. Joe Ranger District office in St. Maries, Idaho during normal business hours via telephone (208)245-2531 or in person; or at an official agency function (i.e. public meeting) that is designed to elicit public comments. Electronic comments must be submitted in Word (.doc) or Word Perfect format to comments-northern-idpanhandle-stjoe@fs.fed.us. The subject line must contain the name of this project. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. For appeal eligibility each individual or representative from each organization submitting comments must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request.

The decision memo will be mailed to those individuals and organizations who submit comments during the project planning process or who specifically requested documents pertaining to this project. Your comments will be used to complete the decision memo for the project. You must comment or notify us that you want to remain on the mailing for this project.

## **Contact**

For additional information contact Cornie Hudson at (208)245-2531.

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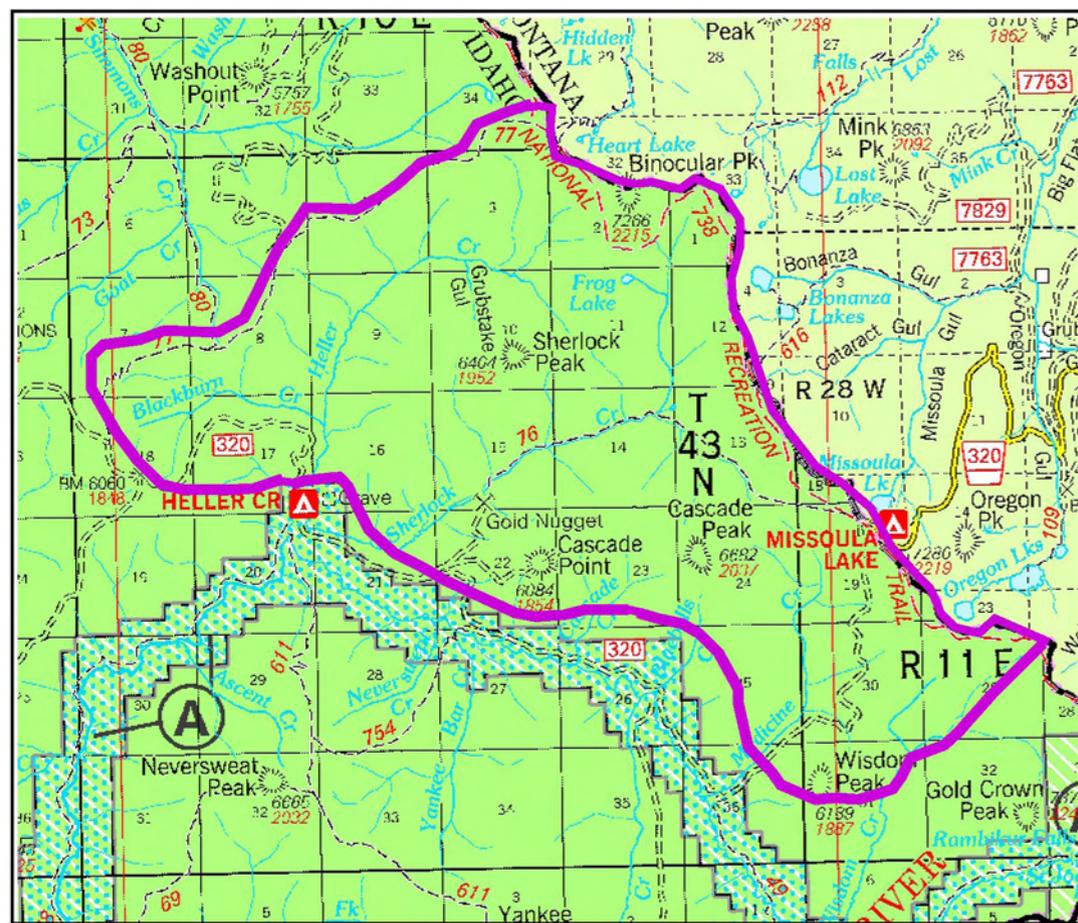


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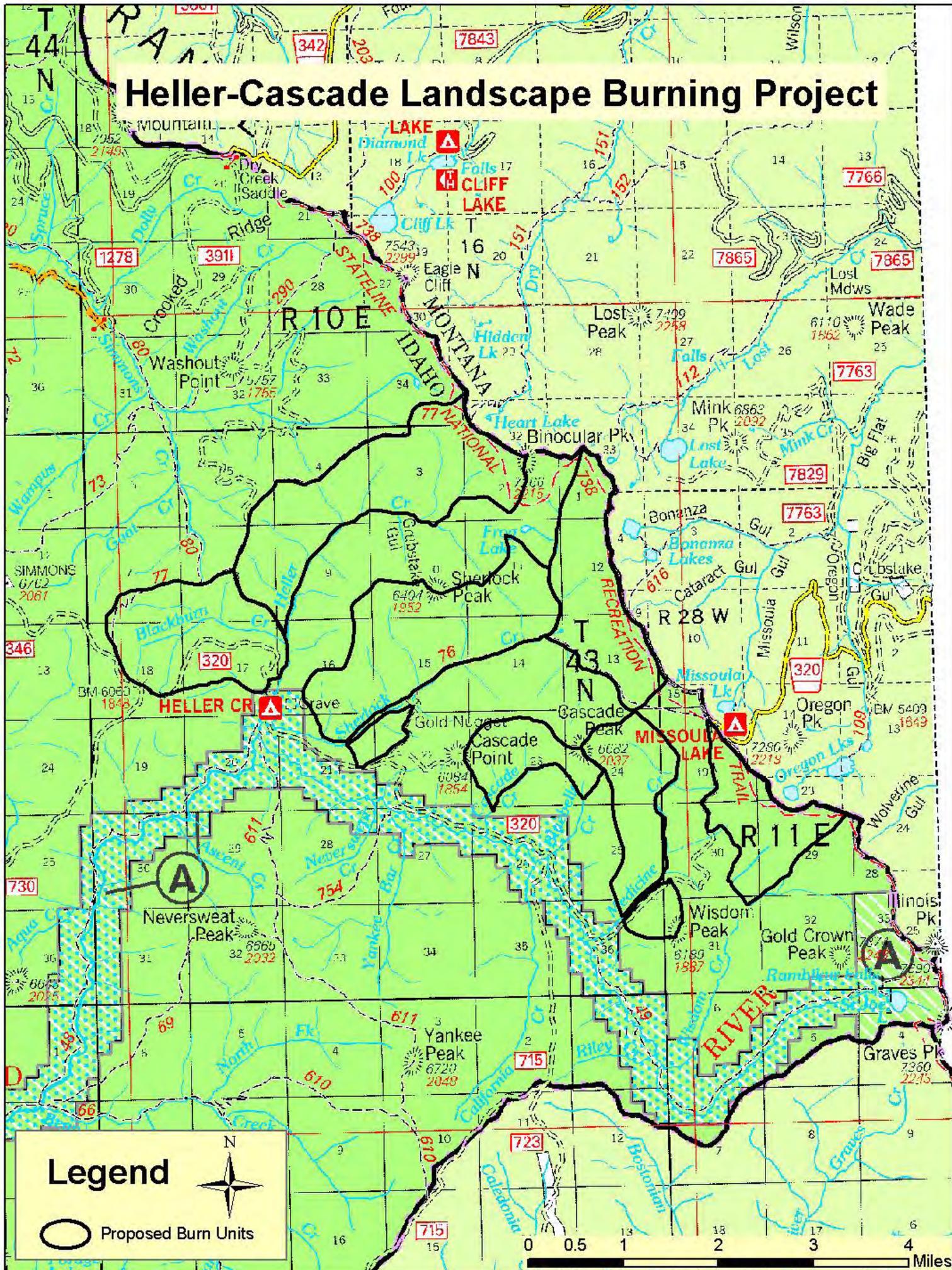
## Vicinity and Project Area Map



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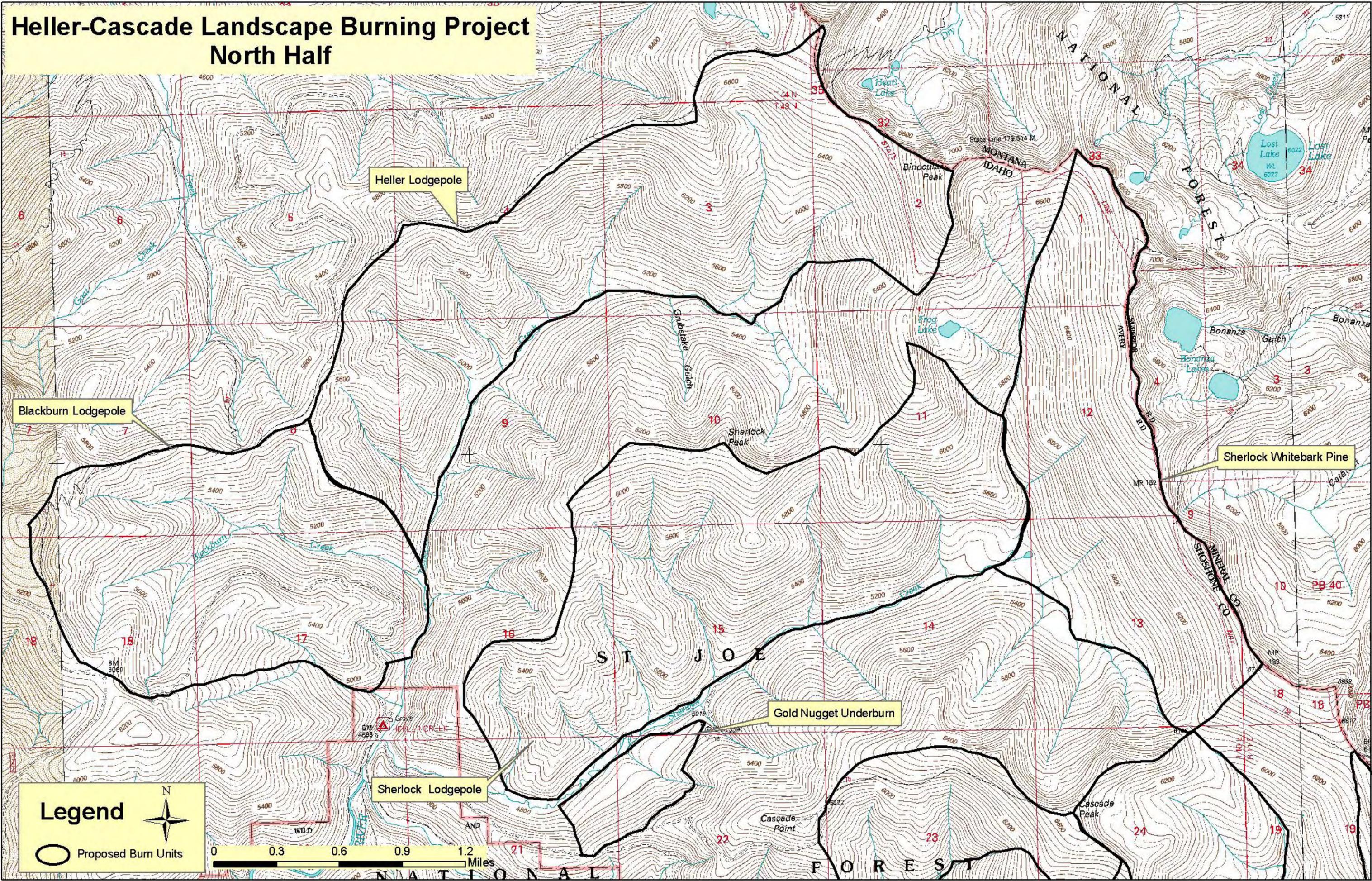
## Legend



○ Proposed Burn Units

0 0.5 1 2 3 4 Miles

# Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project North Half



Heller Lodgepole

Blackburn Lodgepole

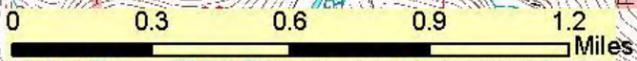
Sherlock Whitebark Pine

Gold Nugget Underburn

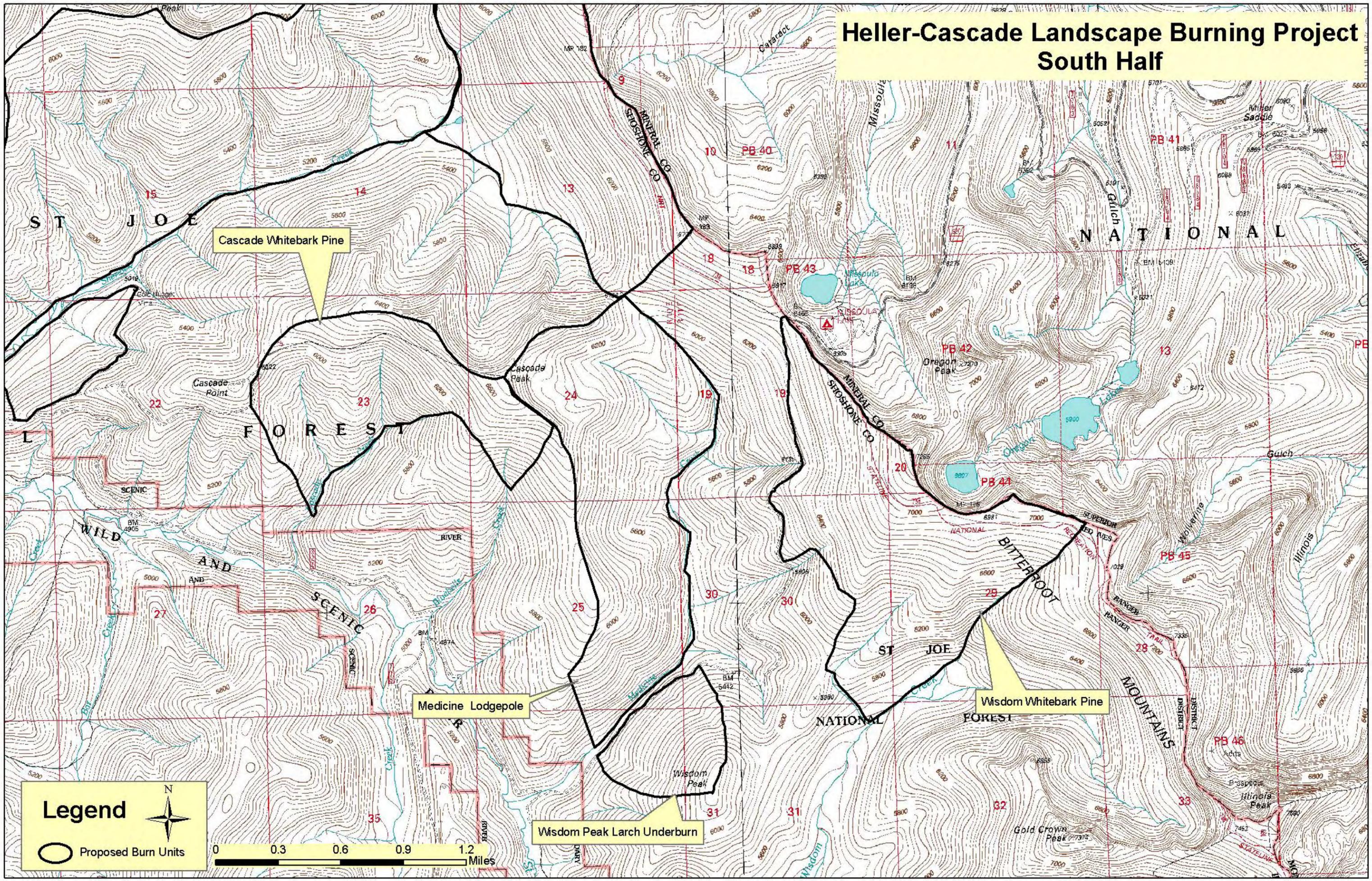
Sherlock Lodgepole

**Legend**

○ Proposed Burn Units



# Heller-Cascade Landscape Burning Project South Half



Cascade Whitebark Pine

Medicine Lodgepole

Wisdom Peak Larch Underburn

Wisdom Whitebark Pine

**Legend**

○ Proposed Burn Units

