

DECISION MEMO

Stateline Whitebark Pine Release Project

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

DECISION

I have decided to restore and improve conditions for whitebark pine (WBP) by thinning and pruning to reduce competition from other conifers and reduce white pine blister rust cankers on WBP in two treatment areas totaling approximately 150 acres. The treatment areas are between Ward Peak and Flattop Mountain along the Stateline Road near the Idaho/Montana border in Shoshone County, Idaho. Permanent test plots will be installed to monitor survival and growth. See attached maps.

Whitebark pine taller than two feet with d.b.h. less than 5 inches will be released by cutting all competing conifers within a 6-foot radius around each WBP tree. The release of the larger (>5.0" d.b.h.) WBP will include cutting competing trees for a 12-foot radius which are ½ the height of the WBP or larger. Smaller adjacent trees less than ½ the height will not be cut. No whitebark pine will be cut, and no tree of any species larger than 10 inches d.b.h. will be cut.

These sites have approximately 125 competing saplings per acre and 2–5 mature WBP per acre. Slash will be minimal and will not need to be treated except to protect remaining WBP trees in case of a fire and to reduce visual effects as seen from Stateline Road. Resulting slash will be pulled away from the WBP trees and slash seen from the Stateline Road would be lopped and scattered.

This project will also include pruning white pine blister rust cankers. This involves using hand pruners to remove two to three branches from saplings that have cankers.

The project areas are directly adjacent to the Stateline Road which is open to all vehicles. No road construction is required and no closed roads will be opened. No commercial timber products will be removed.

The thinning and pruning will be done in the next one to three years, and the permanent plot monitoring will be done the first year then continue every five years for 20 to 25 years.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROJECT

The purpose is to improve health and vigor of WBP by releasing, pruning, and then determine effectiveness of the treatments by following up with long-term monitoring using test plots.

Whitebark pine trees are an important source of food for many animal species because their large seeds are high in fats. Red squirrels and Clark's nutcrackers usually harvest the big share of whitebark pine seeds. Bears raid squirrel caches that contain cones to get pine seeds, one of their favorite foods. Other mammals, large and small, and many species of birds also feed on whitebark pine seeds, or pine nuts, as they commonly are called. Because whitebark pine are long-lived and can grow large trunks, they provide valuable cavities for nesting squirrels, northern flickers and mountain bluebirds.

Whitebark pine is rapidly declining and is being lost throughout its range due to a combination of factors including fire exclusion, white pine blister rust and mountain pine beetles. Releasing competition and pruning branch cankers should increase growth, vigor and survival of the WBP. Releasing the few larger WBP trees would increase the health and vigor which in turn should produce larger and more frequent cone crops. Seeds from

these cones can be widely dispersed by the Clark's nutcracker and thereby improve whitebark pine regeneration success.

Whitebark pine is a fire-dependent species that is able to regenerate in harsh conditions following fires, but fire exclusion tends to favor other species. Whitebark pine is often the first species to colonize areas, and often acts as a nurse tree that ameliorates sites so that other species can grow. In these mixed species stands it tends to be replaced by natural competition if competition is not kept in check by disturbances such as low-intensity ground fires.

Whitebark pine is extremely susceptible to white pine blister rust, a fungal disease introduced from Europe that attacks all sizes of trees. In the northern Rocky Mountains, whitebark pine mortality in some areas exceeds 90%. Blister rust results in canopy losses in large trees that can greatly reduce cone crops and causes rapid mortality of smaller trees which can prevent natural regeneration.

The threat to whitebark pine by blister rust is currently complicated by widespread outbreaks of mountain pine beetle near the project area in Idaho and Montana. Mountain pine beetles have killed large numbers of whitebark pine in the northern Rocky Mountains. Increasing the health and vigor of whitebark pine should help fight off mountain pine beetle attacks which are currently affecting lodgepole pine in the vicinity.

Whitebark pine responds to thinning, but very little is known about the effects of thinning on small whitebark pine especially in northern Idaho. The long-term monitoring proposed with this project would provide some important data regarding project effectiveness and survival of small whitebark pine.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

On March 21, 2008 information about the proposed action was sent to people who have requested to receive information about all projects on the St. Joe Ranger District. A legal notice announcing the 30-day comment period was published in the newspaper of record, *The Coeur d'Alene Press*, on March 24, 2008. Project information was posted on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' website on March 25, 2008. Two people provided positive comments on the proposed action, and I received no other comments.

Consultation with federally recognized, affected American Indian Tribes has been completed in accordance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Any religious or culturally significant sites in the project area will be avoided and protected from project activity.

The Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation stated that the project would have minimal effects on recreation and suggested a visuals analysis should be conducted because the project is located along the Stateline Road, which is part of the Idaho Centennial Trail. A visuals analysis was conducted for this project. Where trees are slashed within a sight distance of the Stateline Road #391 stumps will be cut low to the ground (no more than four inches high), and slash will be lopped and scattered.

The Idaho Conservation League stated that they appreciate the efforts to reverse the decline of and restore whitebark pine and are supportive of the project. They offered suggestions for the project. These are discussed below with my response to those suggestions in italics.

- In areas where medium-large tree classes are underrepresented we suggest the FS consider girdling trees >10" if deemed necessary to adequately restore whitebark.

In general medium-large size classes are not underrepresented in this area. The representation is a little less in the stands proposed for treatment due to the open, scattered clumpy distribution of big trees. We are not proposing to cut any trees >10" so we would not reduce the medium-large tree component of this size class.

- All trees within 150 feet of trails should be cut flush with the ground.

There are no trails in treatment stands. Trees slashed within a sight distance of Stateline Road 391 would be cut low to the ground (no more than four inches high) and slash would be lopped and scattered. We generally don't require cuts flush to the ground because of potential damage to saws.

- We encourage you to consider posting signs to educate motorists on the project and the ecological importance of WBP.

The project is not going to be very visible, and we don't want to draw attention to permanent research plots which could be damaged.

- We encourage you to evaluate any potential for Ips beetle in the slash and to consider burning piles if beetles could threaten adjacent trees or stands.

We would not make slash piles. The small amount of slash will be scattered to avoid this.

- We ... encourage you to monitor blister rust infection and/or pine beetle attack.

We will monitor blister rust infection and beetle activity.

- We encourage you to consider a small-scale prescribed fire in association with this project.

We did consider prescribed fire, but the majority of whitebark pine in the area proposed for treatment are seedling/sapling size, and potential mortality from prescribed fire would be too high to risk. Depending on the vegetative response, this treatment may set up the possibility of an underburn in the future.

FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

This project is categorically 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]).

I considered all the elements of this proposal in my determination that there will be no extraordinary circumstances or significant direct, indirect or cumulative effects based on the scale and duration of the proposed activities and the low risk of environmental impact.

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. See *Threatened or Endangered Species or their Critical Habitat* below for discussions of threatened and endangered species. Biological evaluations for sensitive species include determinations that the project **will not impact** the following sensitive fish and wildlife species: westslope cutthroat trout, American peregrine falcon, bald eagle, black-backed woodpecker, black swift, common loon, flammulated owl, harlequin duck, pygmy nuthatch, fisher, fringed myotis, North American wolverine, northern bog lemming, Townsend's big eared bat, Coeur d' Alene salamander. There would be **no impact** to sensitive plant species.

The proposed action is consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Forest Plan as amended by Inland Native Fish Strategy and that there are no extraordinary circumstances that may result in significant individual or cumulative effects as documented below (see project file for further details):

- a. Threatened or Endangered Species or their Critical Habitat: Biological assessments have been completed and include determinations that the project **will have no effect** on the following Threatened or Endangered species: bull trout, Water howellia, Spalding's catchfly woodland caribou, and grizzly bear. 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.

The effects on Canada lynx from activities in the project were adequately analyzed in the USFWS BO on the effects of the Northern Rocky Mountain Lynx Amendment (USFWS 2007) as documented in a letter from the USFWS (July 23, 2008). The project conforms with management direction in the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction ROD and the USFWS BO (including RPMs and TCs).

There are no previously recorded TES plant sites for these location. However, if any TES plants are found the site will be marked and buffered as to decrease disturbance.

- b. Project activities will not occur in flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.
- c. Project activities are not proposed in any Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.
- d. The project is not within an inventoried roadless area and is consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule.
- e. Project activities will not occur in a Research Natural Area.
- f. No known cultural or religious sites associated with any federally recognized American Indian groups are located in the project area. A site visit will be conducted prior to project implementation. If any American Indian religious sites are located in the project area, they will be flagged and avoided by project activity so there would be no effects to the site(s).
- g. There will be no adverse effects to archaeological sites or historic properties in project activity areas. Both project areas have been previously surveyed for archaeological and historic sites. No cultural sites have been located in either project area. A site visit will be conducted prior to project implementation. If any historic or cultural resource sites are located in the project area, they will be flagged and avoided by project activity.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and accompanying regulations require that several specific findings be documented at the project level. These findings are as follows:

Forest Plan Consistency

The activity associated with this decision is consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Forest Plan as amended by the Inland Native Fish Strategy.

Resource Protection: All proposals must meet the twelve resource protection requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27(a). The Stateline Whitebark Pine Release Project is designed to protect or enhance resource conditions; and therefore, is in compliance with the resource protection criteria.

Silvicultural Practices: All proposals that include timber harvest and cultural treatments must meet the seven requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27(c). The Stateline Whitebark Pine Release Project does not include timber harvest and treatment is in compliance with Silvicultural Practice criteria.

Endangered Species Act

The project will comply with the Endangered Species Act. See discussion about Threatened and Endangered species *Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances* above.

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 area was surveyed and there are no archaeological sites or historic properties in the area where project activities will occur. No impacts to historical resources are expected. The proposed action would be consistent with Forest Plan direction and Section 106 of the NHPA.

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

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (e). Under this section, projects or activities are not subject to appeal if a notice of the proposed action and opportunity to comment is published (§215.5) and there are (1) no comments expressing concerns or only positive comments are received during the comment period for a proposed action (§215.6). A notice of the proposed action and opportunity to comment for this project was published in newspaper of record, *The Coeur d'Alene Press*, on March 24, 2008. During the comment period I received positive comments from the Idaho Conservation League and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. I discussed the project with representatives of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. They asked that if any cultural resources are located during project implementation that they be flagged on the ground and require project work to avoid them. This is incorporated in project design.

I anticipate the notice of this decision will be published in *The Coeur d'Alene Press* on or about July 29, 2008. Implementation may occur immediately after publication of the notice pursuant to (§215.9 (c)(1)) that states when a project or activity decision is not subject to appeal, implementation may occur immediately after publication (§215.7(b)) of a decision.

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. I have been delegated the responsible official for this decision.



CHARLES A. MARK
District Ranger
St. Joe Ranger District

7/25/08
Date

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