Main Fork Rock Creek and Benbow Storm Damage Clean-up and Fuels Reduction Project

Custer National Forest – Beartooth Ranger District

Recreation Technical Specialist Report

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Executive Summary: This analysis describes the existing condition of the recreation resources within the project area and evaluates the potential effects of the alternatives on recreation resources. The project area includes the Main Fork Road, Highway 212, Benbow Road, developed recreation sites, numerous dispersed recreation sites and system trails.

The majority of effects to recreation resources are short term in duration with long term benefits which would help maintain recreation opportunities. Short-term effects of storm damage clean-up and fuels reduction activities are the loss of use or access to recreation opportunities during some if not all of the time project implementation activities occur.

Key issues for the Main Fork Rock Creek and Benbow Storm Damage Clean-up and Fuels Reduction Project include effects to visual resources, recreation uses, access and dispersed camping activities.

If the mitigation measures are implemented, the Action Alternative would meet the goals, objectives and management standards outlined in the Custer National Forest Management Plan. No direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to recreation resources are expected in the long term from the storm damage clean-up and fuels reduction activities. There are no irreversible or irretrievable commitments related to recreation resources from the Action Alternative.

RECREATION - AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Recreation Introduction

The affected environment and the environmental consequences in this specialist report covers the relevant recreation components in the Main Fork and Benbow areas on the Beartooth Ranger District of the Custer National Forest proposed for storm damage and fuel reduction activities. The affected environment and environmental consequences are described by units identified for treatment and the type of treatment proposed in each of the three areas. No action and the proposed action are the two alternatives considered for analysis of this project. This specialist report also discloses environmental effects

(direct, indirect, and cumulative) that would be anticipated to occur for the no action and proposed action alternatives.

Issue #1

Introduction. Effects to recreational users, also addresses effects of project activities to subdivisions adjacent to the Forest boundary. Logging traffic and associated safety concerns may affect recreation users. The issue relates to all of the treatment units proposed and is dependent on the management area prescription assigned to the treatment area in the Forest Plan.

Regulatory Framework for Issue #1

The Forest Plan contains prescriptions for Management Areas to provide guidance for resource activities in them. The MA for the Main Fork of Rock Creek units is MA "F". There are twelve Management Standards for recreation in MA "F" (pp. 61-62) incorporated here by reference. The MA for the Benbow area is MA "B" or MA "D". There are two Management Standards for recreation in MA "B" (p. 45) and two Management Standards for recreation in MA "D" (p. 53) incorporated here by reference.

Assumptions, Methodology & Scientific Accuracy, and Information Used for Issue #1

The effects to recreational users refers to impacts on the ability to utilize roads, trails, developed recreation sites, dispersed recreation sites, outfitted or guided activities for recreational use and public access to National Forest lands. The time of year the impact of a proposed activity occurs directly affects recreational users since the majority of use is during the summer. Fewer recreational users would be affected by proposed project activities during the other three seasons of the year.

Affected Environment of Issue #1

The affected environment includes the roads, trails, developed recreation sites and recreation residence tracts in or accessed through the proposed treatment units. Maps of the proposed treatment units identifying these features are included with this analysis. Dispersed recreation use occurs within 300 feet of the identified roads in these maps.

Effects Common to All Alternatives on Issue #1

The effects common to all action alternatives include limited access and use of roads, trails, developed recreation sites, dispersed recreation sites blocked by blown down timber and hazard trees.

Effects Common to All Action Alternatives on Issue #1

None Identified

Mitigations Included under All Alternatives for Issue #1

None Identified

Mitigations Included under Action Alternatives for Issue #1

The Landscape Architect's mitigation measures for the VQO of each MA are included.

Additional Mitigations for Consideration for Issue #1

Mitigation measures for each MA address timing for implementing proposed treatments to minimize or reduce the effects of the action on recreation users. The mitigation measures would be different by MA, by time of year and type of use to be responsive to recreation users.

Issue #1- EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE ONE – NO ACTION

Mitigations Included in Alternative One for Issue #1

None Identified

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative One to Issue #1

The direct effect of the No Action alternative would be reduced opportunities for recreation users due to blown down trees and hazard trees blocking or reducing access for recreation. The indirect effect of the No Action Alternative would be increased impacts to recreation facilities or use areas such as nearby trails, roads, developed campgrounds and dispersed recreation areas where blown down trees and hazard trees are not affecting access for recreation users. This would be due to the likelihood that recreation users that have made the effort to get to an area they can't use will pursue the opportunity for that type of recreation use nearby before leaving the area completely.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative One to Issue #1

User created and unauthorized activities by forest recreation users would be expected in response to the No Action Alternative. Recreation users would take on clearing trees to or creating new user routes around them to meet their own immediate needs for recreation or access. Increased resource damage and exposure to potential liability due to a lack of clearing standards and resource protection measures is likely.

Short-term Uses vs. Long-term Productivity of Alternative One for Issue #1

None identified.

Irreversible/Irretrievable Commitments of Alternative One to Issue #1

None identified.

Unavoidable Adverse Effects of Alternative One on Issue #1

Adverse environmental effects which cannot be avoided with implementation of the No Action Alternative are detrimental effects to the recreation setting. Leaving blown down and hazard trees in roads, trails, sites and areas utilized by recreation users would result in resource damage and an increase in unmanaged recreation uses due to the concentration of use because of limited access.

Forest Plan Consistency of Alternative One for Issue #1

The resultant effects of the No Action Alternative would result in not meeting some of the Management Standards for recreation in each of the MA. Consistency with the 1986 Custer Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards applicable to Issue #1 would not be met. The goal of providing a spectrum of recreation opportunities and settings would not be met because of limited use and access to national Forest lands created by the blown down and hazard trees. Standards for public safety and removal of hazard trees to protect improvements would not be met because the blown down trees and hazard trees would remain in place.

Other Required Disclosures under Alternative One for Issue #1

None Identified.

Conclusions for Environmental Consequences of Alternative One on Issue #1

The No Action Alternative would result in blown down and hazard trees remaining in areas accessed by recreation users. Therefore the results of this alternative would reduce recreation opportunities because the blown down trees and hazard trees reduce access for recreation in these areas. Increased resource impacts from increased use being focused into nearby areas without blown down and hazard trees would concentrate recreation users and degrade the recreation opportunities in those areas. The increased risk of wildfire and decreased ability to suppress a fire event would increase risk to recreation users in the event of a fire in these areas.

Issue #1- EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE TWO – ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Mitigations Included in Alternative Two for Issue #1

The mitigation measures from the landscape Architect's TSR are included in the action alternative.

The timing of project implementation for treatment of units in the Main Fork of Rock Creek and the Benbow area has a direct impact to recreation users. Project implementation during the summer use season would impact more recreation users than during the other three seasons of the year. Mitigation measures during the summer use season to minimize impacts would allow for utilization of roads, trails, developed recreation sites, dispersed recreation sites, outfitted or guided activities for recreational use and public access in the project areas to the extent possible while not compromising safety of the public or workers. Operations would be limited to weekdays to minimize impacts and avoid higher use of the area by recreation users on the weekends unless the

work could occur without risk to the public. Limiting operations and log hauling to week days whenever possible would reduce impacts to adjacent land owners during evening hours and weekends. Special orders closing operating areas to the public Monday – Friday during project activities would be implemented for public safety when necessary.

Mitigation measures for implementation during the winter use season from December 1st to April 15th on the Main Fork of Rock Creek and Benbow areas would maintain the road to the end of the project area to provide weekend access for winter recreation users from that point on up the road.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative Two on Issue #1

The direct effect of the Action Alternative would remove blown down trees and hazard trees in the treatment units and would result in some loss of use and access for recreation users during project implementation. The indirect effect of the action alternative would temporarily displace users to other areas and create a temporary concentration of users. The impacts would be temporary and short term in duration and limited in scope and effect. The result of project implementation would restore and maintain opportunities for recreation users to nearly those available before the storm event due to blown down trees limiting some access in adjacent untreated areas.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative Two on Issue #1

The cumulative effects of the Action Alternative would restore and maintain the recreation opportunities and access through the treatment areas for the present and foreseeable future.

Short-term Uses vs. Long-term Productivity of Alternative Two for Issue #1

None Identified

Irreversible/Irretrievable Commitments of Alternative Two to Issue #1

None Identified

Unavoidable Adverse Effects of Alternative Two on Issue #1

None Identified

Forest Plan Consistency of Alternative Two for Issue #1

The resultant effects of the Action Alternative on the treatment areas would be consistent with the 1986 Custer Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards applicable to Issue #1. The goal of providing a spectrum of recreation opportunities and settings would be met because the limited use and access to National Forest lands created by the blown down and hazard trees would be eliminated. Standards for public safety and removal of hazard trees to protect improvements would be met because the blown down trees and hazard

trees would be removed. Vegetation in the developed sites would be maintained in the appropriate recreation setting.

Other Required Disclosures under Alternative Two for Issue #1

None Identified

Conclusions for Environmental Consequences of Alternative Two on Issue #1

The Action Alternative would result in a removal of blown down and hazard trees impacting access and use of the treatment units for recreational users. Therefore the results of this alternative would restore and maintain recreational uses in the treatment areas because after project implementation the removal of the blown down trees would help disperse users and reduce impacts of concentrating use in areas unaffected by storm damage.

Issue #2

Introduction. Effects of tree removal and equipment use on future off-road use and car camping sites refers to impacts these potential recreation uses would have in the proposed treatment units. The proposed project has the potential to create new dispersed camping sites due to thinning, skid trails and pile burning activities. The effects of the proposed project create a need to inform, educate and interpret the new opportunities or restrictions, if any, to the public resulting from the project. The issue relates to all of the treatment units proposed and is dependent on the management area prescription assigned to the treatment area in the Forest Plan.

Regulatory Framework for Issue #2

The 2001 Tri-State off-Highway Vehicle Decision issued a decision that prohibited cross-country or off-road motorized vehicle travel except for dispersed vehicle camping within 300 feet of motorized routes. The Beartooth Ranger District Travel Management Plan (TMP) Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision dated June 2008, addresses off-road and dispersed camping activities (USDA 2008). The Forest Plan contains prescriptions for Management Areas to provide guidance for resource activities in them. The MA for the Main Fork of Rock Creek units is MA "F". There are twelve Management Standards for recreation in MA "F" (pp. 61-62) incorporated here by reference. The MA for the Benbow area is MA "B" or MA "D". There are two Management Standards for recreation in MA "B" (p. 45) and two Management Standards for recreation in MA "D" (p. 53) incorporated here by reference.

Assumptions, Methodology & Scientific Accuracy, and Information Used for Issue #2

The Beartooth Ranger District Travel Management Plan (TMP) Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision dated June 2008, addresses off-road and

dispersed camping activities (USDA 2008). This analysis assumes Alternative B Modified is decision that would be enforced as the framework to use for response to this issue.

Affected Environment of Issue #2

The affected environment is the lands adjacent to the existing roads and dispersed camping opportunities in or accessed through the proposed treatment units.

Effects Common to All Alternatives on Issue #2

The effects common to all action alternatives are the limited access and use of roads and dispersed recreation sites blocked by blown down timber and hazard trees.

Effects Common to All Action Alternatives on Issue #2

None Identified

Mitigations Included under All Alternatives for Issue #2

None Identified

Mitigations Included under Action Alternatives for Issue #2

The Landscape Architect's mitigation measures for the VQO of each MA are included. The mitigation measures listed under Additional Measures for Consideration for Issue #2 are included.

Additional Mitigations for Consideration for Issue #2

None identified.

Issue #2- EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE ONE – NO ACTION

Mitigations Included in Alternative One for Issue #2

None Identified

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative One to Issue #2

The direct effect of the No Action alternative would be reduced opportunities for dispersed recreation users due to blown down trees and hazard trees blocking or reducing access to dispersed recreation sites. The indirect effect of the No Action Alternative would be increased impacts or use of areas such as nearby trails, roads, developed campgrounds and dispersed recreation areas where blown down trees and hazard trees are not affecting access for recreation users. This would be due to the likelihood that dispersed recreation users which have made the effort to get to an area they can't use will pursue the opportunity for that type of recreation use nearby before leaving the area completely.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative One to Issue #2

User created and unauthorized activities by forest recreation users can be expected in response to the No Action Alternative. Dispersed recreation users would take on clearing trees to or creating new user routes around them to meet their own immediate needs for recreation or access. Increased resource damage and exposure to potential liability due to a lack of clearing standards and resource protection measures would be likely.

Short-term Uses vs. Long-term Productivity of Alternative One for Issue #2

None identified.

Irreversible/Irretrievable Commitments of Alternative One to Issue #2

None identified.

Unavoidable Adverse Effects of Alternative One on Issue #2

Adverse environmental effects which cannot be avoided with implementation of the No Action Alternative are detrimental effects to the dispersed recreation setting. Leaving blown down and hazard trees in dispersed recreation sites utilized by recreation users would result in resource damage and an increase in unmanaged recreation uses due to the concentration of use because of limited access.

Forest Plan Consistency of Alternative One for Issue #2

The resultant effects of the No Action Alternative would result in not meeting some of the Management Standards for recreation in each of the MA. Consistency with the 1986 Custer Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards applicable to Issue #3 would not be met. The goal of providing a spectrum of recreation opportunities and settings would not be met because of limited use and access to national Forest lands created by the blown down and hazard trees. Standards for public safety would not be met because the blown down trees and hazard trees would remain in place.

Other Required Disclosures under Alternative One for Issue #2

None Identified.

Conclusions for Environmental Consequences of Alternative One on Issue #2

The No Action Alternative would result in blown down and hazard trees remaining in dispersed recreation areas accessed by recreation users. Therefore the results of this alternative would reduce recreation opportunities because the blown down trees and hazard trees reduce access for dispersed recreation in these areas. Increased resource impacts from increased use being focused into nearby areas without blown down and hazard trees would concentrate dispersed recreation users and degrade the dispersed recreation opportunities in those areas. The increased risk of wildfire and decreased

ability to suppress a fire event would increase risk to dispersed recreation users in the event of a fire in these areas.

Issue #2- EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE TWO – ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Mitigations Included in Alternative Two for Issue #2

Routes or access points used in the treatment of units in the Main Fork of Rock Creek where the routes or dispersed recreation sites are identified for closure in the TMP would be rehabilitated and physically blocked off at the end of the project.

Routes or access points used in the treatment of units in the Benbow area where the routes not designated for motorized recreation use in the TMP would be rehabilitated and physically blocked off at the end of the project.

Signing, new releases and field level contacts to inform and educate the public regarding dispersed recreation opportunities or restrictions would form the basic plan to raise public awareness. Interpretive education efforts focusing on forest health and fuel reduction would raise public awareness to the goals and objectives of the proposed project.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative Two on Issue #2

The direct effect of the Action Alternative would remove blown down trees and hazard trees in the treatment units and would result in some loss of use and access for dispersed recreation users during project implementation. The indirect effect of the action alternative would temporarily displace users to other areas and create a temporary concentration of users. The impacts would be temporary and short term in duration and limited in scope and effect. The result of project implementation would restore and maintain opportunities for dispersed recreation users to nearly those available before the storm event due to blown down trees limiting some access in adjacent untreated areas.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative Two on Issue #2

The cumulative effects of the Action Alternative would restore and maintain the dispersed recreation opportunities and access through the treatment areas for the present and foreseeable future.

Short-term Uses vs. Long-term Productivity of Alternative Two for Issue #2

None Identified

Irreversible/Irretrievable Commitments of Alternative Two to Issue #2

None Identified

Unavoidable Adverse Effects of Alternative Two on Issue #2

None Identified

Forest Plan Consistency of Alternative Two for Issue #2

The resultant effects of the Action Alternative on the treatment areas would be consistent with the 1986 Custer Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards applicable to Issue #3. The goal of providing a spectrum of recreation opportunities and settings would be met because the limited use and access to National Forest lands created by the blown down and hazard trees would be eliminated. Standards for public safety and removal of hazard trees would be met because the blown down trees and hazard trees would be removed.

Other Required Disclosures under Alternative Two for Issue #2

None Identified

Conclusions for Environmental Consequences of Alternative Two on Issue #2

The Action Alternative would result in a removal of blown down and hazard trees impacting access and use of the treatment units for dispersed recreational users. Therefore the results of this alternative would restore and maintain dispersed recreational uses in the treatment areas because after project implementation the removal of the blown down trees would help disperse users and reduce impacts of concentrating use in areas unaffected by storm damage.

/s/ Jeff S. Gildehaus *September 3, 2008*

SPECIALIST SIGNATURE DATE

References Cited for Specialist Report

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