



August 8, 2007

Dear Planning Partner:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that the Ashland Ranger District, Custer National Forest is starting a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, for the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project (WHFRP). The project area is approximately 17 miles east of Ashland, Montana and north of Hwy 212 in Powder River County, Montana (**See figure one, Project Locale Map**).

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action.

The purpose and need for the Whitetail Fuels Reduction Project is to reduce hazardous fuel conditions in the project area by changing condition classes 2 and 3 (described as having high, unnatural fuel loads) towards condition class 1 (described as a more natural, balanced fuel load and setting). This goal could be achieved through the use of prescribed fire, thinning, commercial and pre-commercial forest vegetation management treatments.

The objectives for the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project are to:

- Reduce the likelihood of a stand replacing wild-land fire by removing down woody and ladder fuels
- Create a distribution of forest age classes and structure that is more resistant to high-severity stand replacing wild-land fires.
- Reduce hazardous fuel conditions over the project area as demonstrated by specific and measurable actions.
- Maintain or enhance wildlife habitat specific for Northern Goshawk over the long term.

The need for the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was identified in the Powder River Community Fire Plan (PRCFP). The PRCFP was a collaborative approach for identifying wildland fire risks between local landowners, Powder River County personnel, Broadus Volunteer Fire Department and state and federal government personnel. The Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Project Area was identified as the highest priority for fuel reduction within the 2,102,400 acres of Powder River County. The project is located adjacent to or within close proximity of private landholdings and Forest Service infrastructure including the historic Whitetail Cabin and Holiday Campground.

The WHFRP area is characterized by densely stocked, multistoried stands that are at risk for stand replacing wildfires. This risk is attributed to high fuel loading which has altered vegetative patterns and composition.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003

The WHFRP meets the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148) criteria to expedite hazardous-fuel reduction and forest-restoration projects on specific types of Federal land that are at risk to wildland fire or insect and disease epidemics. Criteria for projects to be



authorized under the act include identification through a County Wildfire Protection Plan, condition class associations and location to communities at risk (Federal Register, January 4, 2001, Vol. 66, No. 3, p. 751-777). The act also requires collaborative alternative development processes. The WHFRP meets all of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act requirements in that it was identified in the 2004 Powder River County Wildfire Protection Plan, has vegetative condition classes of 2 and 3 and is located near communities at risk.

Proposed Action.

The use of prescribed fire, thinning, no treatment, commercial and pre-commercial forest vegetation treatments was evaluated for 9852 acres of National Forest System Lands on the Ashland Ranger District. A cadre of specialists combined in an interdisciplinary fashion arranged treatments based on a multitude of factors. Some the issues interdisciplinary team members evaluated in developing the proposed action were topography, tree crown densities, access, ladder fuel components, wildlife concerns, and past management activities.

Table one describes the type of treatment proposed in detail with the amount of acreage and or miles per treatment type. Two maps are enclosed to aid in your understanding of the proposal. Figure one is a map showing the general vicinity of the proposed activities, and Figure two is a more detailed map displaying the management activities planned for the proposed action. The proposed activities include project design features that will be described in detail in the environmental analysis.

Generally the area east of Forest Service Road # 4769 and north of Forest Service Road # 4423 have a current condition of high density, continuous closed tree canopies and high concentrations ladder fuels. In order to meet the purpose and need for the Whitetail project the focus for this area would include commercial and non commercial treatments.

The area south of Forest Service Road # 4423 and east of Forest Service Road # 4027 (Whitetail Cabin and Holiday Springs Campground area) is described as a current condition of high density forest structure with not as continuous closed tree canopies and lower concentrations of ladder fuels, with more natural openings of grasslands and non forest vegetation. The emphases for treatments in this area are commercial activities focusing on retaining more trees per acre along with non commercial activities such as pretreatment and prescribed fire.

Difficulties in accessing areas west of Forest Service Road # 41338 and lager natural openings of grasslands and non forest vegetation provide better opportunities to pre-treat areas with higher fuel loads followed by prescribed fire to meet the purpose and need of the project.

Table 1. Proposed Action Treatments with acres and miles effected

Treatments	Acres (A) or Miles (M)
Non Commercial Activity, Broadcast Burn (NCBB)	975 A
<p>Non Commercial Activity, Broadcast Burn (NCBB) The NCBB treatment is designed to thin from below in the 0 to 7” diameter class to reduce ladder fuels, and restore open grown large diameter ponderosa pine stands. These stands occur on southern, and/or dry aspects that naturally do not support high crown densities. These areas will be opened to resemble more naturally occurring conditions. Prescribed burning would be utilized to reduce the fuel loading to an average of 3-7 tons per acre.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximate average conditions of residual stand where available. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Canopy cover range greater than 7”, 10 to 55%. 	
Non Commercial Activity, Jackpot Burn (NCBJ)	1604 A
<p>The NCBJ treatment is designed to thin from below to a canopy cover range of 55-70% within 10 years of thinning to eliminate ladder fuels while maintaining wildlife habitat and vegetative diversity. Prescribed burning would be used to reduce the residual surface fuels to an average of 3-7 tons per acre.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trees per acre greater than 7” diameter: 25-160; Trees per acre 1-7”: 0-100 (The focus will be elimination of ladder fuels and/or reduction in trees per acre). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Spacing between trees: Range of 16 feet to 26 feet, average of 22 feet. When a full overstory (>7” diameter) exists the primary thinning purpose will be elimination of ladder fuels. When a scattered overstory (>7” diameter) exists or does not occur the intent of the thinning will be elimination of ladder fuels and/or reduction in trees per acre. ➤ Average canopy cover range 30 to 65+%. <p>Thinning will be accomplished by two means.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manual thinning with the use of chainsaws on slopes greater than 30% • Slopes 30% or less will have the option of thinning utilizing mechanical means or the use of chainsaws. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mechanical machinery, not to exceed 5 Gpsi,. <p>Specific areas within each unit will need to be further analysed and their effects will be disclosed in the NEPA document.</p>	
Prescribed Fire (RxB)	2328 A
Prescribe burn to maintain and/or improve nonforest ecosystems and open grown ponderosa pine areas.	
Commercial Harvest (SH, ST, CT, CT1)	2681 A
<p>Three systems of commercial harvest are proposed. They are seed tree (ST), shelter wood (SH), and commercial thin (CT) (CT1)</p> <p>The design of the ST harvest system is for stocking reduction to create pattern and structure diversity to alter landscape hazardous fuel conditions. These areas occur predominately on moist aspects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximate average conditions of residual stand where available. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Trees per acre greater than 9” diameter: 12 to 14 trees per acre of the largest, best formed, disease/insect free individuals, for purposes of seed production, capturing good genetic traits for growth, yield and to promote healthy forest conditions. ➤ Average spacing between trees would approximate 55 to 60 feet. ➤ Canopy cover range of 5 to 15%, average 10%. <p>The design of the SH harvest system is for stocking reduction to create pattern and structure diversity to alter landscape hazardous fuel conditions. These areas occur predominately on dry</p>	

Table 1. Proposed Action Treatments with acres and miles effected

<p>aspects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximate average conditions of residual stand where available. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Trees per acre greater than 9" diameter: 20 to 25 trees per acre of the largest, best formed, disease/insect free individuals, for purposes of seed production, protection of regenerating seedlings, and capturing good genetic traits for growth and yield to promote healthy forest conditions. ➤ Average spacing between trees would approximate 42 to 47 feet. ➤ Canopy cover range 15 to 25%, average 20%. <p>The design of the CT, harvest system is to thin from below to reduce fuel hazard, and promote healthy growing conditions. The best-formed, least disease/insect damaged trees and most vigorous trees will be left. Stand composition will depend on size and age classes present.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximate average spacing, ages, and diameters classes of residual stand where available. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Young Forests (40 to 80 years); 7 to 14" diameter; range of 125 to 200 trees per acre. Range of spacing between trees: 15 to 19 feet. ➤ Mid Aged to Mature Forest (80 to 150 years); 14" plus in diameter, range of 30 to 60 trees per acre. Range of spacing between trees: 27 to 38 feet. ➤ Canopy cover range 20 to 30%, average 25%. <p>The design of the CT1, harvest system is to thin from below to an average canopy cover range of 40-60% within 10 years of harvest for wildlife habitat and vegetative diversity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximate average conditions of residual stand where available. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Trees per acre range greater than 9" diameter 40-150; Trees per acre 5-9": 0-100. ➤ Spacing between trees: Range of 17 feet to 33 feet, average of 26 feet. ➤ Canopy cover range 30 to 40%, average 35%. 	
Seed Tree Removal (STR)	22 A
<p>The STR treatment is designed to remove seed trees from past harvest activity or girdle 10-20 percent and leave standing for snag dependent wildlife species.</p> <p>Thin sapling size class (1-5" diameter) to a density of 125 to 260 trees per acre and pole size class (5-8" diameter) to a density of 125-200 trees per acre, leaving the fastest growing, most disease free and damage-free trees.</p>	
Pre-commercial Harvest (PCT)	107 A
<p>The PCT activities are designed to thin sapling size class (1-5" diameter) to a density of 125 to 260 trees per acre and pole size class (5-8" diameter) to a density of 125-200 trees per acre, leaving the fastest growing, most disease free and damage-free trees. These are old harvest units, residual seed trees will be retained for diversity. Jackpot burn to reduce the concentrated activity fuels.</p>	
Special Cuts, Aspen and Woody Draw Treatments (SC)	105 A
<p>SC treatments for identified aspen clones is to remove all ponderosa pine trees to an average spacing of 60 feet and within two mature tree heights (approximately 120 ft) out from the perimeter of aspens stands to maintain habitat diversity. SC treatments as identified for woody draws is to maintain an average spacing of 60 feet between ponderosa pine trees within two mature tree length (approximately 120 ft) from the outer edge of the woody draw. Inside the woody draw boundary it is proposed to maintain approximately 10% of the ponderosa pine tree component where available. Jackpot burning will be used to reduce activity fuels.</p>	
Non Commercial Nest Stand (NCNS)	573 A
<p>The proposal to treat the NCNS will be split in to two types of treatments. The northern two nest stands will have hand thinning with the use of chainsaws only. Thinnings will be hand piled followed by burning piles under appropriate conditions. The NCNS northern two units are designed to thin from below without altering the overstory canopy to maintain identified</p>	

Table 1. Proposed Action Treatments with acres and miles effected

<p>Goshawk nest stands and alternate nest stands. The purpose is to maintain mature high forest crown cover habitat for those wildlife dependent species.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Thin from below by removing trees up to 5" and snow/wind damaged trees between 5.1 and 9.0". ➤ Remove up to 2 ladder fuel layers. ➤ Retain trees in openings where trees are limited, thin to a spacing equal to the distance of the existing tree height. <p>The southern two nest stands east and south of the Whitetail Cabin area will be hand thinned with the use of chainsaws only. Thinnings will be loped and scattered, followed by a jackpot burn. The NCNS south units are designed to thin from below without altering the overstory canopy to maintain identified Goshawk nest stands and alternate nest stands. The purpose is to maintain mature high forest crown cover habitat for those wildlife dependent species.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Thin from below by removing trees up to 5" and snow/wind damaged trees between 5.1 and 9.0". ➤ Remove up to 2 ladder fuel layers. ➤ Retain trees in openings where trees are limited, thin to a spacing equal to the distance of the existing tree height. 	
Roads Fuel Break	11 M
<p>On designated roads (4769, 4777, 4427); the design of the roads fuel break will be to create up to a 300 foot wide fuel break using treatments to reduce hazardous fuels (ladder fuels and crown coverage) to aid in effective containment of wildland fire and create a zone for firefighter safety .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The roads fuel break will favor retention of wind firm trees and a mix of size classes, and minimize the effect of slash piling near or on residual leave trees, fences, and drainage ditches alongside roads. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Maintain a minimum canopy spacing of 10 feet. ➤ Maintain a minimum canopy base height of 10 feet (no branches between ground and canopy). 	
No Treatment (NT)	1479 A

Road Management Activities

Approximately 12 miles of temporary road would be needed to access treatment areas. Temporary roads would be closed and obliterated after management activities are completed. Closure of temporary roads and obliteration would occur using a variety of methods such as scarifying/ripping, seeding (with native vegetation), signing, obstructing, and re-contouring slope were needed. Approximately 15 miles of maintenance would occur on existing roads.

All roads used to facilitate commercial operations would receive either pre-haul maintenance; haul maintenance; post-haul maintenance or a combination thereof. Road maintenance activities include where applicable: surface blading, dust abatement, slide removal and slump repair, surfacing repair, shoulder maintenance, ditch cleaning, maintenance of minor drainage structures, clearing roadway vegetation, cutting roadside vegetation, seeding, maintenance of major drainage structures, maintenance of miscellaneous structures, and maintenance of traffic signs. Road re-alignment activities would include some vegetation and incidental tree removal.

Project Design Features

Project design features are incorporated into the proposed action alternative. Design features are intended to reduce impacts on resources. Project design features are an integral part of the proposed action alternative activities. An example of a project design feature is the use of noxious weed free seed for revegetation of roads and disturbed soil. Design features were guided by direction from the Forest Plan, Montana Streamside Management Zone Best Management Practices, Montana Forestry Management Practices, Soil and Water Conservation Practices Management Practices, Region 1 Noxious Weed Management Practices, project specialists' local knowledge, and applicable Forest Service Manuals and Handbooks. The design features will be described in detail in the environmental analysis.

Custer National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (CNFMP). The Proposed Action will meet existing Custer National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan standards in timber, wildlife, heritage, soil and watershed productivity, and range values. The project is expected to meet the following Forest-wide standards and guidelines, and Management Area direction:

- 9703 acres of the project area is within Management Area D. The goal for this management area is to maintain or improve the long-term diversity and quality of habitat for the selected species identified by the Ranger District as well as accommodating the other resource management activities such as timber harvest, livestock grazing, and oil and gas development. Some short term habitat impacts may be necessary to achieve long-term wildlife goals (CNFMP p.53).
- 40 acres of the project area is within Management Area P which is the area surrounding the Whitetail Rental Cabin. The goal for management area P is to provide adequate facilities for the administration of the Custer National Forest. Timber harvest may be used to protect or maintain other values and planned ignitions may be used for debris disposal and maintenance of administrative pastures (CNFMP pg 88).
- 4 acres of the project area is within Management Area F, which is the Holiday Springs Campground. The goal for management area F is to provide a spectrum of recreation opportunities and settings in the and around developed sites and the access corridors to the sites in the categories of Semiprimitive Non Motorized/Motorized, Roaded Natural Appearing and Rural. Resource management conflicts are resolved in favor of maintaining or enhancing the recreation opportunities including the visual setting (CNFMP pg 61.)
- Currently 105 acres in the project area lie within Management Areas M and N, riparian areas and woody draws, respectively. The management area goals for both riparian areas and woody draws is to provide healthy, self-perpetuating plant and water communities that will have optimum diversity and density of under-story and over-story vegetation (CNFMP pp. 80-82, and pp. 83-85, respectively).

Public Involvement Opportunity

Your comments and concerns about this proposed action are invited during this scoping period. After scoping, issues will be identified and any issues or concerns that the analysis shows to be significant will be resolved or mitigated through design criteria, mitigation, and/or development

of an alternative that addresses that issue. If the environmental analysis indicates there are no significant effects, then a final Environmental Assessment (EA) document will be completed after the formal 30-day notice and comment period and will be sent out with the Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact determination to those publics that express interest in the project or commented on the project.

As part of the public involvement process, your attendance is requested for a project meeting to be held in Ashland Montana, at the Ashland Ranger District Office on **August 28, 2007** starting at 10:00 A.M. The purpose of the public meeting is to provide you with another opportunity to ask questions of the project, gain better insight of the rationale for proposed treatments, and to discuss the future development of the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project.

If you choose to continue to participate in the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, but do not have any comments at this time, or choose not to attend the public meeting, please let us know. If we do not hear from you, your name will be removed from any future correspondence for this project. Comments received in response to this request, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. For your comments to be the most helpful, please respond by **August 22, 2008**. Letters should be addressed to:

**Project Leader
Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project
Ashland Ranger District
P.O. Box 168
Ashland, MT 59003**

In addition you may submit comments via FAX to 406-784-2596. Electronic comments via email must be submitted in one of the following formats: an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to: comments-northern-custer-ashland@fs.fed.us. Use the name of the project as the subject line of your email (Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project). Please provide your name, postal address, and telephone number.

Information on the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project is also available for viewing and downloading on the Custer NF website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/custer/>. For further information about the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project please contact Nathan Gassmann at (406) 784-2344

ELIZABETH MCFARLAND
District Ranger

Date

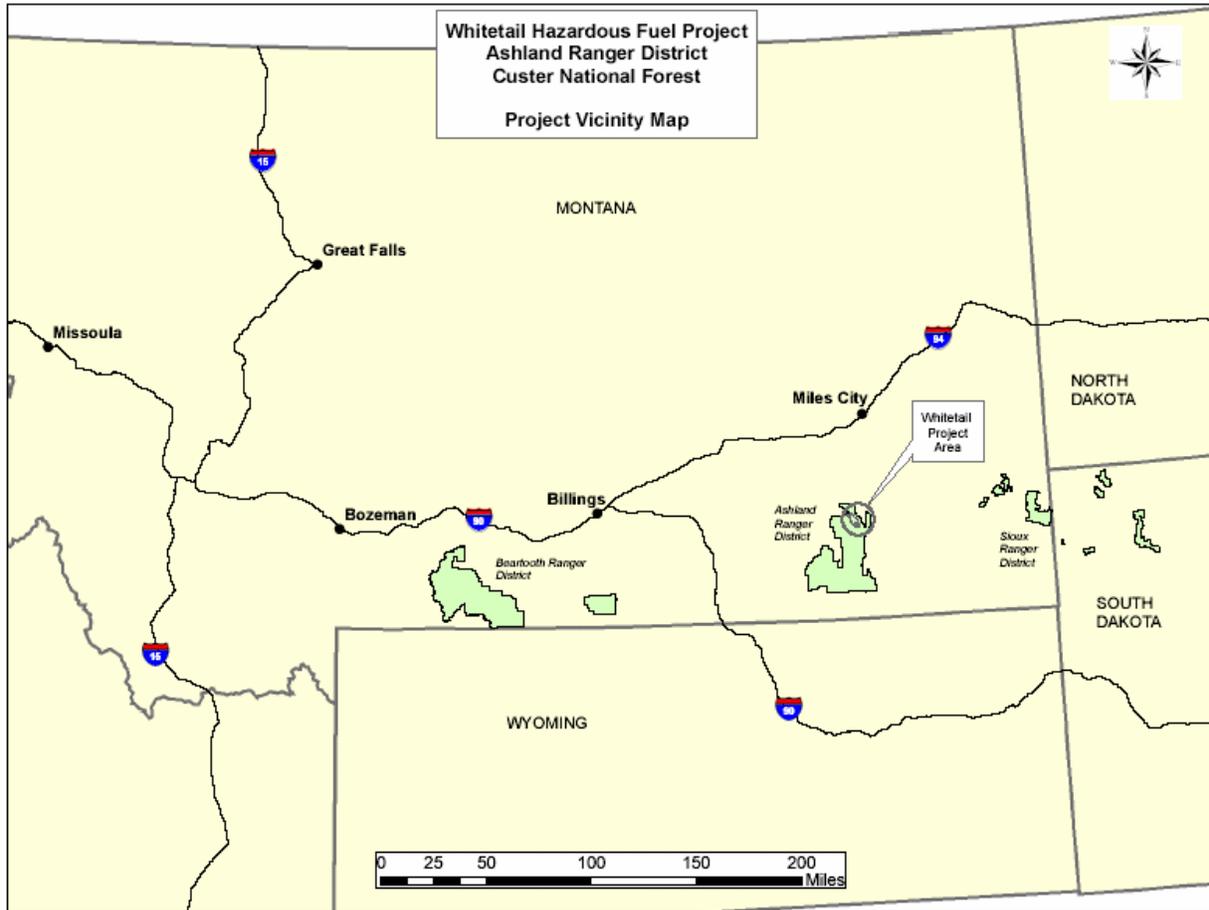


Figure One. Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Locale Map

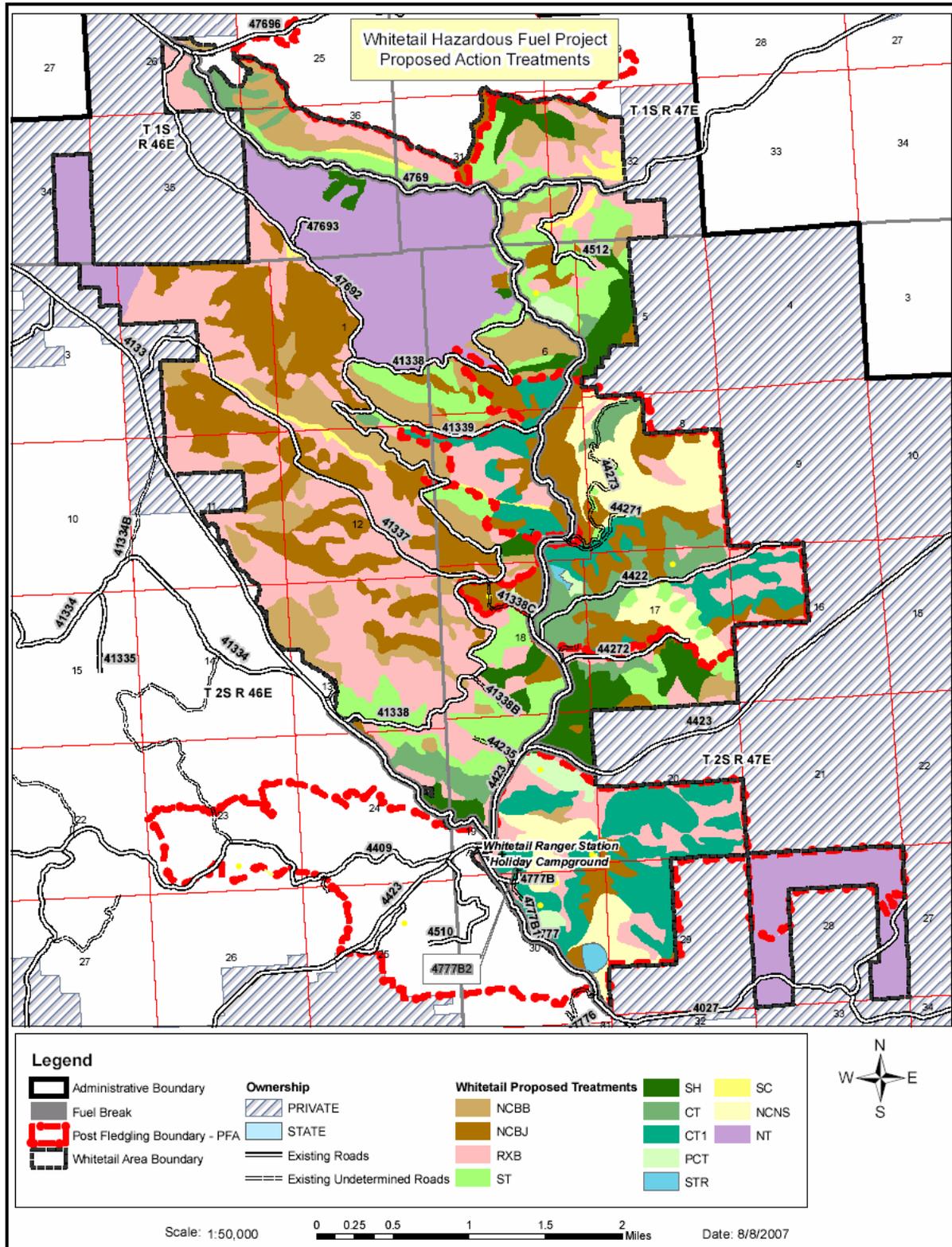


Figure Two. Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Proposed Action Map