



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Northern
Region

March, 2008



FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

Custer National Forest
Ashland Ranger District
Powder River County, Montana



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250, 9419 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TTY). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

WHITETAIL HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

**United States Department of Agriculture
Custer National Forest
Ashland Ranger District
Powder River County, Montana**

After considering the environmental effects described in the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment (EA), I have determined that the proposed action will not have significant effect on the quality of the human environment based on the context and intensity of its impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I considered the following in making this determination:

The proposed action would implement project activities that are of limited scope and duration, affecting only the immediate area around the proposed treatment units. The project is anticipated to be implemented over the next two to five years. The project was designed to minimize environmental effects through harvest unit location, logging methods, silvicultural prescriptions, and project design criteria (EA, pages 4-6; 13-17; 20-30). No significant issues or unresolved conflict were identified concerning alternative uses of available resources that warrant further consideration of additional alternatives (17-18).

Within the project area, approximately 3,059 acres (31%) of forest and grassland would be treated with prescribed burning. Approximately 5,199 acres (53%) would be treated with a variety of mechanical activities including slashing, hand or machine piling, pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, commercial harvest, and broadcast or jackpot burning. No treatment is proposed on 1,506 acres (15%).

In addition, an approximately 300 foot wide fuel break (about 150 ft. each side) along roads #4769 (Sartin – Stacey Cr.) #4427 (Beaver Crk./ Pumpkin Crk. Divide), #4777 (East Fork. Otter / Pumpkin Creek Divide), #4769, 4133 (Beaver Creek), and #4423 (Pumpkin Cr.) would be constructed. The fuel break design includes: 1) a minimum 10 feet between canopies of individual trees, 2) reducing ladder fuel canopy base height of greater than 10 feet (no branches between ground and canopy), 3) reduce surface fuels to less than 3 tons per acre on average.

Approximately eight miles of temporary road segments are necessary to access fuel treatment areas. Following treatment, these roads would be obliterated by scarifying in a random pattern, restoring to contour if a cut-slope exists and scattering of debris

(where available). Signing may or may not be required to keep vehicle traffic from using the route. Signing needs will be addressed as rehabilitation activities are completed.

A year long gate closure would be instituted on roads #4512, #4473, #44237, #4777B1. These roads would be open for administrative use only. The closures will mitigate the effects of the project on big game wildlife security until such time as they are no longer necessary.

I also considered the following elements in making this decision:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. I considered beneficial and adverse impacts associated with the Proposed Action as presented in the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project EA (EA page 18-30). These impacts are within the range of effects identified in the Forest Plan for the Custer National Forest. I conclude that the specific direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the Proposed Action are not significant, and this action does not rely on beneficial effects to balance adverse environmental effects.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety: Project design criteria have been established to ensure any threats to public health and safety have been mitigated and resolved during project formation (EA, page15).

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farms, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical area: The Proposed Action will not impact any known cultural sites (EA, pages 28-29). The project does not contain any parklands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, wetlands, or ecologically critical areas (EA, page 11).

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial: The effects of the quality of the human environment are not like to be highly controversial. Effects analysis was conducted using scientific literature (see Literature Cited/ or References Cited). The literature that applies to this project did not indicate that this project would be highly controversial. I received several public comments through the scoping process. One organization questioned numerous aspects of the project while the local community and county was very much in favor of the proposed action. No highly controversial or significant issues related to the human environment were identified during the scoping period (EA, page 1). No significant issues were raised during the analysis process (EA, pages 18-30).

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk: Specialist involved with this project have knowledge of and experience with the types of activities

to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (Whitetail EA pages 18-30).

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or presents a decision in principle about future consideration: The Proposed Action will not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects. The proposed activities are similar in nature and effects to many other projects in the immediate area and are consistent with the Forest Plan for the Custer National Forest. This action does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individual insignificant but cumulative significant impacts: The cumulative impacts are not significant. Consideration of potential cumulative impacts of this proposal on wildlife, plants, watersheds, soils, heritage, fuels, and air shed resources were analyzed to consider past present and reasonable foreseeable future activities. The resulting analysis disclosed in the EA and supporting documents maintain this proposal would not cause significant cumulative effects on biological or physical resources, even when considered in relation to other actions (Whitetail EA pages 18-30).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affects districts, sites, highway structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources: A comprehensive evaluation of heritage resources was conducted and there are no known sites that would be impacted (EA, pages 28-29).

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973: The proposed project would have no effect on the federally endangered black-footed ferret because the species is absent from the project area. The proposed action would have no impact on the bald eagle, plains spadefoot toad, and Baar's milkvetch. The proposed action could impact individuals or their 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 Townsend's big-eared bat, pallid bat, spotted bat, fringed myotis, long-eared myotis, long-legged myotis, black-tailed prairie dog, burrowing owl, loggerhead shrike, great plains toad, northern leopard frog, greater short-horned lizard, milksnake, western hog-nosed snake, or heavy sedge (EA, pages 29-30).

10. Whether the proposed action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment: The Proposed Action meets federal, state, and local laws for, heritage resources or cultural sites (EA, pages 28-29), water quality (EA, pages

24-26), and Threatened and Endangered species (EA, pages 29-30). It also meets National Environmental Policy Act disclosure requirements (Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project EA and this Finding of No Significant Impact).

The proposed action is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the Forest Plan for the Custer National Forest. This proposal does not require any Forest Plan amendments. According to 36 CFR 219.7 (a) (2) (iv) (Subpart A - National Forest System Land and Resource Management Planning; Developing, amending, or revising a plan; General planning requirement ; Plan components; Suitability of areas) a final determination of suitability for timber production is made through project decisions.

16 USC 1604(g)(3)(E) National Forest System Land and Resource Management Plans

(i) Timber harvest is not expected to result in irreversible damage to soil, slope, or watershed conditions (EA, pages 24-27).

(ii) Openings will be restocked within five years after harvest (Silviculturist Report, page 39-41).

(iii) The proposed harvests will not seriously or adversely affect water shed conditions (EA, pages 24-26).

(iv) The proposed harvesting system is not selected primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output of timber. The proposed location and size of the harvest units were determined to best meet the purpose and need of the project both spatially, and create the development class in greatest need identified during the Fire Regime Condition Class assessment.

16 USC 1604(g)(3)(F0 National Forest System Land and Resource Management Plans

(i) In some areas the selected harvest methods will result in areas of even-aged stands of timber, but only ponderosa pine will be harvested. All other species will be left.

(ii) An interdisciplinary team reviewed and assessed the project. Their findings are reported in detail in each resource report and are summarized in the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project EA.

(iii) Opening size limitations for harvest units applies to this proposal. All harvest units, except for eight of the harvest units, within the proposed action meet the acre size limitation of harvest openings created by even-aged silvicultural systems. Approval to create an opening greater than 40 acres on

the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was sought by the Forest Supervisor and granted by the Regional Forester (memos dated 10/5/2007 and 11/2/2007, respectively). The public was notified in a letter dated August 29, 2007 that the Forest Service was seeking comment on the proposal to exceed the 40 acres size limitation of harvest openings created by even-aged silvicultural systems within the Whitetail Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project (project record, public involvement section).

(iv) The proposed harvests will be carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, wildlife, range and heritage resources, and the regeneration of the timber resource (EA, pages 5; 14-18).

ELIZABETH A. MCFARLAND
District Ranger
Ashland Ranger District
Custer National Forest
406-784-2344