

DECISION MEMO

EASE PRECOMMERCIAL THINNING PROJECT

USDA Forest Service
Norwood Ranger District
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, Gunnison National Forests

Montrose County, Colorado

Sections 19, 20, 22, 26, 27, 30, and 35 of T46N, R12W; Section 31 of T46N, R11W; Section 6 of T45N, R11W; and Sections 1, 2, and 5 of T45N, R12W, New Mexico Principal Meridian

Background

During the 1970s and the 1980s, approximately 3000 acres of ponderosa pine plantations were established on the Uncompahgre Plateau as part of a nation-wide effort to restock open stands. Following extensive mechanical site preparation to eliminate oak competition, ponderosa pine seedlings were machine planted at an approximate spacing of 8 feet by 8 feet (about 680 trees per acre). Plantation survival rates have been good. Presently, there are approximately 500 trees per acre in these plantations based on stocking survey plots taken in the autumn of 2007. The overstocked condition of these plantations is one factor contributing to a decrease in tree growth.

Decision

I have decided to implement the Ease Precommercial Thinning project. The project area is approximately six air miles northeast of Norwood, Colorado and is located in the Sanborn Park vicinity of the Uncompahgre Plateau. There are twelve ponderosa pine plantations in the project area, totaling approximately nine hundred acres, which will be precommercially thinned. The plantations are all accessed by National Forest System Roads (please see the attached Project Map).

The primary purpose of the project is to improve the vigor, health, and economic value of the trees in these overstocked plantations within the project area. This will be accomplished by applying a precommercial thinning treatment to these plantations. Thinning will fulfill the need to provide more growing space for the trees in these overstocked plantations. This activity will also improve the remaining trees' growth potential and reduce their susceptibility to disease and insect infestation.

Opening up these plantations through a precommercial thinning will also benefit both big game and livestock by allowing more light to reach the ground thus creating favorable growing conditions for forage.

This project will be a starting step towards the long term process of improving each plantation's survivability in a wildfire through the break up of the current horizontal and vertical continuity of the fuels.

Thinning these stands will provide economic opportunities for the local economy through a series of service contracts used to implement the proposed action and through the sale of posts and firewood after the stands have been thinned. Additionally, through subsequent, long term silvicultural treatments, these stands will provide future commercial forest products to local communities and industries.

Stand specific silvicultural prescriptions will designate the smallest and least vigorous ponderosa pine for removal. Examples include those trees with dead or forked tops, bole damage, disease, or that are suppressed. The stands will be thinned at an approximate spacing of 17 feet x 17 feet to reduce their stocking levels to about 150 trees per acre with an average leave tree diameter at breast height of 5 inches. Only chainsaws will be utilized to cut the trees designated for removal. The use of mechanized harvesters was considered but dropped so as to help reduce the spread of noxious weeds. The slash generated from this project will be treated through lopping and scattering. Slash will be lopped to a depth of 18 inches or less to facilitate natural decomposition. Thinning slash will be pulled away from roads, ditches, trails, fence lines, and power line right of ways. Slash treatment will be accomplished concurrently with the thinning of each stand. The boles of cut trees may be offered for sale as fence posts and firewood to further help reduce slash. Only existing roads will be used to access the plantations in this project. Plots taken during the contract inspections will determine if the thinning goals of the project are met.

Service contracts will be utilized to accomplish this project within five years of my decision. The first service contract is planned to be awarded in the summer of 2008.

This action falls under Category 6 as described in section 31.2 of the Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook (FSH 1909.15). Categories of actions within this section of the handbook may be excluded from documentation in an EIS or an EA but do require a project or case file and Decision Memo. Category 6 allows “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”. There is a project file for this action located at the Norwood Ranger District Office.

Environmental impacts associated with this action will be minimal. No extraordinary circumstances exist which could potentially have significant effects on the environment. This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement.

Public Involvement

Scoping was conducted to solicit public and agency input to the proposed action. The proposed action was submitted for input into the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests on June 9, 2008. On June 13, 2008, a Legal Notice was published in the Telluride Daily Planet notifying the public of the proposed action and giving the opportunity to comment. Also, on June 13th, the Norwood Ranger District provided a news release describing the proposed action and soliciting public comment on the project. The new release was electronically mailed to the Norwood Post, the Telluride Watch, the Telluride Daily Planet, the San Miguel Basin Forum, and the Montrose Daily Press for

publication. A personal scoping letter was mailed to 27 interested and affected individuals, organizations, and agencies on June 13th to solicit their comment on the proposed action.

A total of four responses were received during the scoping period of June 14, 2008 to June 30, 2008. All respondents expressed support for the project. Those responding included:

1. Raymond Snyder – Norwood, Colorado - Grazing permit holder within the project area
2. Marjorie M. Miller – Sedona, Arizona – Landowner in the vicinity of the project
3. Martha Abernathy – Durango, Colorado – Landowner in the vicinity of the project
4. Guy Parker – Palisade, Colorado – Landowner in the vicinity of the project

Findings Required by Other Laws

The Forest Plan has been reviewed and a determination made that this decision is consistent with the Forest Plan, the Management Area direction contained under the management prescriptions 7A (wood fiber production and utilization on suited timber lands) and 6B (livestock grazing), and the Forest wide standards and guidelines found in Chapter III of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (1991, Amended) known as the Forest Plan.

Flood plains, wetlands, prime lands, threatened and endangered species, and heritage resources have been considered and these resources will not be adversely affected.

Implementation Date

Implementation of this decision may proceed immediately after publishing the Legal Notice in the Telluride Daily Planet {36 CFR 215.9 (c) (1)}.

Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to the Notice, Comment, and Appeal provisions of 36 CFR 215. The comment period for this project ended 15 days following the date of publication of the Legal Notice of Proposed Action in the Telluride Daily Planet.

All comments received during the public notice and scoping period of June 14, 2008 to June 30, 2008 were supportive of the proposed action. Based on the proposed action qualifying for categorical exclusion and the supportive public comments received, this decision is not subject to appeal {36 CFR 215.12 (e) (1)}.

Contact Person

For further information, please contact Jim Tambling at the Norwood Ranger District office on 1150 Forest St. in Norwood. Phone: (970) 327-4261; Mail: PO Box 388, Norwood, CO 81423; E-mail: jtambling@fs.fed.us

/s/ Judy Schutz

July 10, 2008

Judy Schutz

Date

District Ranger

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