

DECISION MEMO

SNOGO ALLEY TIMBER SALE

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

San Miguel County, Colorado
Section 23 of T43N, R13W; New Mexico Principal Meridian

Background

Near the head of Busted Arm Draw, there is an overstocked stand of ponderosa pine in need of thinning. This action would create more growing space for the remaining pine. Established around 1933, this ponderosa pine stand consists of mature and immature trees with diameters at breast height (DBH) ranging up to about 23 inches. The majority of the ponderosa pines are between 9 and 15 inches DBH. Scattered within the stand are old yellow bark ponderosa pine, small groups of declining aspen, and older Gambel oak. In their present state, these closely grown trees will decline in vigor as they continue to compete for moisture and nutrients. Over time, the trees may become susceptible to disease and insects such as mountain pine beetle. In the event of wildfire, the continuous canopy of the current stand would easily carry a crown fire.

Decision

I have decided to implement the SnoGo Alley Timber Sale project. A commercial timber sale will be utilized to implement this project within five years of my decision. The project area is approximately 10 air miles south of Norwood, Colorado. Located in the Busted Arm Draw vicinity, the project consists of a single overstocked ponderosa pine stand about 48 acres in size. The stand is accessed by San Miguel County Road 44ZS (Lone Cone Road) and National Forest System Road (NFSR) 642.

The primary purpose of the project is to improve the vigor, health, and economic value of the trees in this overstocked stand. This will be accomplished by applying a commercial thinning treatment to the stand. Thinning will fulfill the need to provide more growing space for the remaining trees thus improving their growth potential and reducing their susceptibility to disease and insect infestation and fire.

The stand will be thinned from a basal area per acre of about 113 ft² to approximately 60 ft² to improve the growth potential in the remaining trees. This is roughly equivalent to reducing the number of trees in the stand from approximately 95 trees per acre (TPA) to about 30 to 40 TPA. Marking guides developed from a site specific silvicultural prescription will designate the least thrifty ponderosa pines for removal. Generally, trees 15 inches and above in diameter will be favored as leave trees. The old yellow bark ponderosa pines and aspen within the stand will be retained. Approximately 400 CCF (hundred cubic feet) of harvested timber volume is anticipated to be generated from this commercial thinning project.

While the project will be restricted to slopes less than 20%, the majority of the project area is on ground less than 10% in slope. The designated trees may be harvested by either a chainsaw or a mechanical harvester and hauled to log landings by a rubber-tired skidder. Log landings will be located alongside NFSR 642. Should the timber sale extend into the winter, no harvest activity would be allowed during the weekends and on holidays to accommodate the use by snowmobilers of an existing winter trail passing through the eastern portion of the project area. Logs and slash will not block the trail. Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook FSH 2505.25 standards will be followed. Winter logging operations will only be permitted on dry or frozen ground or on a foot of packed snow. Wintertime log landings will be located alongside NFSR 642 or on a portion of the snowmobile parking lot which is on the north side of the project area. NFSR 642 is plowed in the winter from NFSR 610 (County Road 44ZS) to the snowmobile parking lot. This plowed section of road runs along the northern edge of the stand. Only existing roads will be used for this project. The likely haul route will be east on NFSR 642 and then north on NFSR 610 and County Road 44ZS to Colorado State Highway 145.

Slash generated from this thinning project will be treated to reduce fuel loading by either the lop and scatter or pile and burn methods. The slash treatment will be accomplished by the timber sale purchaser. In lop and scatter, the slash will be scattered about the forest floor to a depth no greater than two feet. With pile and burn, the slash will be either hand or machine piled. The slash piles will be about 6 feet tall and 12 feet in diameter and will be placed in openings well away from any leave trees. The piles will be burned in the winter by the Forest Service.

This project will be a starting step towards the long term process of improving the stand's survivability in a wildfire through the break up of the current horizontal and vertical continuity of the fuels. Following the timber sale, any remaining ladder fuels within the treatment area will be cut by the Forest Service. The resulting slash will be either lopped and scattered or piled and burned by the Forest Service.

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

The Biological Assessment (BA) and Biological Evaluation (BE) for this project determined that the proposed action will have *no effect* upon any federally listed, proposed, or candidate species or their habitats. The BA and BE also determined that the proposed action will have *no impact* upon Gunnison sage grouse, Northern goshawk, Brewer's sparrow, Sage sparrow, and the Olive-sided flycatcher.

Of the nine management indicator species identified in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests Forest Plan (1991; 2005 MIS amendment), four management indicator species or their habitat are present within the project area. They are Rocky Mountain Elk, Merriam's wild turkey, Northern goshawk, and Abert's squirrel. Of these, the proposed action may reduce cover and forage values for Abert's squirrel. To alleviate the potential impact to Abert's squirrel nesting habitat, all existing nest tree groups and additional potential nest tree groups will be designated for retention. These nest tree groups, up to nine groups per acre, will consist of three or more trees with interlocking crowns.

Prior to any timber sale operations, a Northern goshawk survey will be conducted by the Forest Service within the project area. Any active nest will be protected by retaining the nest tree and imposing timing restrictions on timber sale operations.

In order to prevent the introduction of noxious weeds, a timber sale contract provision will be utilized which requires the timber sale purchaser to clean their logging equipment of dirt, seeds, and debris prior to its use on the project. Exposed soil on landings and skid rows will be seeded with a seed mix prescribed by the district range management specialist.

While taking care of the vigor and health of this stand, the project will also provide the opportunity for economic growth of industries and communities dependent upon Forest outputs.

This action falls under Category 12 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 12 allows the “harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. The proposed action may include incidental removal of trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing. Examples include but are not limited to: a) removal of individual trees for sawlogs, specialty products, or fuelwood and b) commercial thinning of overstocked stands to achieve the desired stocking level to increase health and vigor”. 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 February 1, 2008. During a Norwood Board of Trustees Meeting on February 13th, project leader Jim Tambling informed those present about the proposed action and the upcoming scoping and public comment period. On March 7, 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 March 12th, the Norwood Ranger District provided a news release to the Telluride Daily Planet describing the proposed action and soliciting public comment on the project. A personal scoping letter was mailed to 18 interested and affected individuals, organizations, and agencies on March 7th to solicit their comment on the proposed action.

A total of two responses were received during the scoping period of March 8, 2008 to April 7, 2008. One respondent expressed support for the project, and the other respondent had no comment. Those responding included:

1. Philip S. Miller – Telluride, Colorado – Interested individual

2. Town of Norwood – Norwood, Colorado

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 30 days following the date of publication of the Legal Notice of Proposed Action in the Telluride Daily Planet.

The two comments received during the public notice and scoping period of March 8 to April 7, 2008 were supportive of the proposed action. Therefore, 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

November 18, 2008

Judy Schutz
District Ranger

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (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 TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.