



**File Code:** 1950-1/2430

**Date:** January 23, 2009

Greetings:

We are seeking comments on a proposed timber sale on the Norwood Ranger District of the Uncompahgre National Forest. This letter and attached maps provide you with detailed information about the purpose and need, the Proposed Action, and decision framework. This opportunity to comment will serve as both scoping for this project under the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, and the comment period required at 36 CFR 215.3. Comments concerning this proposal must be received by the Forest Service on or before March 24, 2009. Please refer to the "Public Involvement" section for additional information about submitting comments.

## **BACKGROUND**

The proposal under consideration involves the clearcut harvest and regeneration of several aspen and aspen/conifer mix stands. The project, known as the Spartan Timber Sale, is located on the Uncompahgre Plateau, approximately 30 air miles north of Norwood, Colorado. See attached maps.

Since 2005, the project has been listed on the Schedule of Proposed Actions as Plateau Aspen Timber Sale. However, following the discovery of rapidly declining conditions during field reconnaissance in 2007, Plateau Aspen was redesigned as two projects: Wolverine and Spartan timber sales. The Wolverine sale NEPA was completed in 2008.

The management emphasis for the Spartan Timber Sale, as identified in the Amended Land and Resource Management Plan for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests (the Forest Plan), is to provide for a semiprimitive motorized experience (2A), livestock management (6B) and to provide for even-aged sawtimber production on slopes less than 40% (7A). Units 31, 33, 35 and 36 are within the 2A management prescription, while units 27, 34 and part of 26 are within the 6B management emphasis. The majority of unit 26 falls within the 7A management prescription. An Environmental Assessment will be completed to document the Spartan sale analysis.



## **PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION**

The purpose and need is to apply silvicultural treatment to stands in the Spartan Project Area through commercial clearcutting to regenerate mature aspen stands, converting species composition to aspen where it is currently aspen/conifer. There is a need to provide commercial forest products from National Forest system lands suitable for such purpose to local timber companies by harvesting before the commercial potential of these stands is lost. The harvest will also serve to promote a diversity of age classes among the aspen stands in the area to provide greater ecosystem resilience and to manage vegetation to reach the multiple use objectives as described in the Forest Plan on pages III-2 and III-3.

## **PROPOSED ACTION**

We propose to utilize the commercial timber sales program to accomplish the goals of the Purpose and Need for Action. These goals are consistent with the Forest Plan.

The Proposed Action involves the clearcut harvest on National Forest System lands of an estimated three-hundred fifty-eight acres of aspen in seven harvest units. The project is within Sections 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, and 29 of T47N., R12W.; and Section 13 of T47N., R13W., New Mexico Principal Meridian, Montrose County, Colorado. The proposed harvest units are located in three areas. The first area contains two harvest units, units 26 and 27, and is located off National Forest System Road (NFSR) 603, the Houser Road. Unit 26 is approximately 50 acres and unit 27 is approximately 31 acres. The second area is located on the west side of the Tri-State power line and consists of two units; unit 33, approximately 25 acres and unit 34, approximately 85 acres. These units will be accessed from NFSR 559, West Antone Spring. The third area consists of three units, units 36, 31, and 35, ranging in size from 38 to 84 acres. Old Highway 90 transects unit 36. Unit 31 is accessed off of Old Highway 90. NFST 139.1A, a motorized trail constructed on an old road bed, is adjacent to unit 31 and a short distance of the trail would possibly coincide with a temporary haul road. Unit 35 is accessed from NFSR 549, States Draw Road. Red Canyon Trail, NFST 118, transects this unit. Red Canyon Trail is a motorcycle trail that is open from July 1 through Labor Day. The trail could be rerouted temporarily using existing trails. See the attached maps.

Harvest would occur in aspen stands that are progressing successional from aspen to conifer-dominated vegetation types or in aspen stands that are declining in vigor due to age and disease. The expected result of aspen harvest is the regeneration of aspen dominated stands. About 358 acres of suitable aspen forest land would be harvested and regenerated in this entry.

In the relatively few instances across the Uncompahgre Plateau where adequate aspen regeneration has not occurred after clearcut harvest, livestock and wildlife browsing on aspen regeneration has been usually the cause. In light of this, the Proposed Action includes several design features to help ensure aspen regeneration. Unit 35, which lies within the Red Canyon/Dry Creek sheep allotment, is of particular concern. The sheep grazing permittee who operates in the vicinity of this unit will be required to keep sheep out of the clearcut area for a period of 3 - 5 years after harvest. To help achieve this objective, the two sheep camps that are currently located along the southern boundary of unit 35 will be moved to a mutually agreeable

location. Additionally, the Forest Service will collect K-V funds to burn units 35 and 26, which are aspen/conifer mix composition, following harvest completion. Burning increases soil pH, which some soil scientists believe improves aspen sprouting. Prescribed burning will be accomplished with sale K-V funds, which will be classified as essential, ensuring their collection and availability. To further reduce the potentially adverse effects of browsing on aspen regeneration, the Forest Service proposes that several units (26, 34, 35 and 36) exceed the 40-acre maximum set forth in the National Forest Management Act (36 CFR 219.27(d)) and the Forest Plan, page III-43. Large units help reduce browse effects by dispersing potential impacts across a greater area. In cases where the Forest Service proposes to exceed the 40 acre maximum, Region 2 Supplement 2400-2003-1 of Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2471.1 requires a 60-day public notification period prior to issuing a decision. This requirement will be satisfied at the completion of the combined 60-day comment and scoping period initiated by the publication of the legal notice of this comment and scoping notice. Finally, the Forest Service will install monitoring exclosures in all harvest units using K-V funds. These small exclosures exclude livestock and big game, providing browse-free areas that provide baseline information for assessing browse impacts across regenerating harvest units.

Timber will be harvested using ground-based logging systems. Existing roads will be used where their location and condition permit reasonable access. Existing roads include NFSR's 603 (Houser); 402 (Divide); 540 (Old Highway 90); 549 (States Draw) and 559 (West Antone Spring). Several closed roads will be re-opened and used as temporary roads for the life of the sale. New temporary road construction, which does not include the re-opening of existing closed roads, is not expected to exceed about 1.7 miles. All temporary roads will be obliterated following completion of their use. Obliteration will include recontouring where significant sideslope exists. Obliteration of the temporary roads requires the purchaser to remove bridges and culverts, eliminate ditches, outslope the roadbed, remove ruts and berms, effectively block the road to normal vehicular traffic where feasible and to build cross ditches and water bars.

If requested by the timber sale purchaser, winter haul and snowplowing of these roads may be permitted, subject to terms and conditions agreed upon by the Forest Service and the purchaser. Plowing and hauling could be in either direction from the units, depending on the mill location to which logs will be delivered. Timber from units 26 and 27 would be hauled east from the unit to the Divide Road. From there, logs would be hauled either down Transfer Road or Highway 90 toward Montrose and Delta or north on the Divide Road and south on the Delta-Nucla Road. Timber from Units 31 and 36 would be hauled north on Highway 90 to Divide Road and then either down Transfer Road or Highway 90 toward Montrose and Delta or south on Old Highway 90 towards Nucla. Units 33 and 34 would be hauled north on NFSR 559 to the Divide Road and then down Transfer Road or Highway 90 toward Montrose and Delta or west on the Divide Road and then south on the Delta-Nucla Road towards Nucla. Unit 35 would be hauled north on NFSR 549 to the Divide Road and then down Transfer Road or Highway 90 toward Montrose and Delta or west on the Divide Road and then south on the Delta-Nucla Road towards Nucla. Colorado state law prohibits the use of snowmobiles on roads open to wheeled traffic; plowed roads will be closed to snowmobile use during non-holiday weekdays, and closed to wheeled traffic on weekends and holidays. The timber purchaser will post signs on plowed roads advising the public of these restrictions.

Snow plowing will be done in a manner to preserve and protect the roads, to ensure safe and efficient transportation, and to prevent unacceptable erosion of road surfaces, streams, and adjacent uplands. A minimum of four inch depth of snow will be left on the road surface.

The Houser Road is under a grooming permit by the West End Sledders. Also, the Uncompahgre Trail Riders have a grooming permit that includes Transfer Road, Highway 90 from the northern National Forest boundary to the junction with Divide Roads and on Divide Road from its junction with Dave Wood Road to Columbine Pass. Should the timber purchaser be permitted to plow any of these roads, he would install signs advising the public of closure, as described above.

Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook FSH 2505.25 standards will be followed during project implementation. Winter logging operations will only be permitted on dry or frozen ground or a foot of packed snow.

Equipment cleaning will be required to ensure that logging equipment will not introduce invasive species of concern or spread them between units. Post-sale weed monitoring and treatment will be included in the timber sale K-V plan.

### **DECISION FRAMEWORK**

The Environmental Assessment (EA) will document the analysis of site-specific, on-the-ground activities. The analysis documented in the EA will be tiered to the Forest Plan and the Travel Plan. It will not reanalyze management area allocations already specified in the Forest Plan nor will it seek to reexamine federal regulations or Forest Service policy regarding timber harvest on National Forest lands.

The Norwood District Ranger will be the Responsible Official. Her decision will be detailed in a Decision Notice. Given the purpose and need, the Responsible Official will review the Proposed Action, other alternatives and mitigation measures in order to make the following decisions;

1. Whether or not to harvest timber, construct temporary roads and conduct other support activities to meet the stated purpose on National Forest lands within the Project Area.
2. If an action alternative is selected, under what conditions and by which methods timber harvest and associated activities would be conducted.

### **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

This opportunity to comment serves several purposes: 1) as scoping for this project under the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act; 2) as the comment period required at 36 CFR 215.3; 3) as the notification period for exceeding the maximum 40 acre unit size as required under Region 2 Supplement 2400-2003-1 of FSM 2471.1. The opportunity to comment on the Proposed Action ends 60 days following the date of publication of the legal notice of opportunity to comment in the Telluride Daily Planet. After receiving your comments, we will

identify and analyze the issues raised, finalize a Proposed Action, and if necessary, develop alternatives to the Proposed Action. Plans are to complete the NEPA analysis and make a decision whether or not to implement the Proposed Action or another alternative during the spring of 2009 and implement the decision during the 2009 field season.

Comments may be submitted as follows and must be received by March 24, 2009:

<b>Written Comments via the U.S. Postal Service or hand delivered:</b> Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests Spartan Timber Sale Environmental Assessment Attention: Monica Ruiz-Diaz OR 1150 Forest Street 2505 South Townsend Ave. P.O. Box 388 Montrose, CO 81401 Norwood, CO 81423
<b>Written Comments via e-mail:</b> To: <a href="mailto:comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-norwood@fs.fed.us">comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-norwood@fs.fed.us</a> Subject: Spartan Timber Sale
<b>Written Comments via facsimile:</b> (970) 240-5367 Attention: Monica Ruiz-Diaz, Spartan Timber Sale EA
<b>Oral Comments via telephone or in person:</b> Monica Ruiz-Diaz (970) 240-5406 USDA Forest Service 2505 South Townsend Montrose, CO 81401

In accordance with 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3), individuals or organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must comment during this 60-day comment period and provide the following information: submitter's name and address, title of the Proposed Action, specific substantive comments on the Proposed Action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision, and signature or other verification of identity. Those submitting electronic comments (fax or e-mail) may submit a scanned signature. Oral comments must be provided at the location indicated above during normal business hours via telephone or in person, or if during non-business hours, must be at an official agency function, which is designed to elicit public comment.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, 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. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decisions under 36CFR Part 215. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the

requestor of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requestor that the comments may be re-submitted with or without name and address within 15 days.

Office hours for hand delivery are 8:00 am to 4:30 pm weekdays in the Ouray Ranger District office that is located at 2505 S. Townsend Ave. in Montrose. Those people responding to this scoping letter will be included on the mailing list for future information related to this project.

At this time, the Forest Service plans to document the effects of this proposal in an environmental assessment. A Decision Notice documenting the Responsible Official's decision will be issued after the environmental assessment is completed. A Legal Notice of Decision will be published at that time in the Telluride Daily Planet newspaper.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** For more information concerning this proposal, please contact Monica Ruiz Diaz at (970) 240-5406.

Sincerely,

JUDY SCHUTZA  
District Ranger