



File Code: 1950-1/3440

Date: October 21, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

The Forest Service is seeking public comments on a proposal submitted by Carbon Power and Light, Inc. The proposal involves felling and/or removing trees, including those impacted by the mountain pine beetle (MPB), along approximately 34 miles of primary voltage, aboveground powerlines in Albany and Carbon Counties, Wyoming. Your comments on the information provided below will help us to: 1) Fine-tune Carbon Power and Light, Inc.'s proposal; 2) Identify issues and concerns related to the proposal; and 3) Develop alternatives to the Proposed Action. For these reasons, I encourage you to take the time to consider the proposal and to submit your comments on it by **November 24, 2008**.

This comment period represents the only opportunity for the public to comment on this proposal prior to an objection process. Only those individuals and organizations who submit specific written comments related to the Proposed Action will be eligible to file an objection (36 CFR 218.6).

Project Location

The Powerline Clearing Project analysis area is located on the Laramie and the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger Districts in Albany and Carbon Counties, Wyoming. The majority of the powerlines within the analysis area are located in the "medium, large, and very large" lodgepole pine cover type; however, some of the powerlines do cross small pockets of Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir. Although the powerlines are located primarily on National Forest System lands, including areas authorized under Special-use Permits, they also extend into private lands located within the Forest boundary.

Existing Condition

Aerial survey data of the Medicine Bow National Forest was examined for mountain pine beetle (Dendroctonus ponderosae) and spruce bark beetle (Dendroctonus rufipennis) related mortality in lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce stands, respectively. The data demonstrate an increasing number of lodgepole pine trees killed by MPB and spruce trees killed by spruce bark beetle (SBB) over the last several years. For example, aerial survey data sets from 1999 revealed negligible acres of trees impacted by MPB and SBB; by 2007, however, tree mortality had escalated to over 178,000 acres. Findings from this summer's on-the-ground reconnaissance of areas within or adjacent to the powerlines further indicate that losses of lodgepole pine, and the minor component of spruce, continue to increase significantly in number and extent across the Forest and exceed endemic-level losses to these bark beetles.



In 2007 the Lakewood Service Center issued Report LSC-07-06 which assessed the status of MPB populations in lodgepole pine stands in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming. The Report addressed conditions in Albany and Carbon Counties, Wyoming, including areas along and adjacent to the powerlines. It also provided the technical basis for the Deputy Regional Forester to issue a Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic Declaration for northern Colorado and southern Wyoming on June 25, 2007. The declaration allows Forest Supervisors of the affected NFs to implement streamlined NEPA authorities offered by the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) if they determine that ecosystem components are threatened by the beetles.

On September 23, 2008, I determined that the current bark beetle situation poses a threat to ecosystem components and Forest resources in Carbon Power and Light's Powerline Clearing Project analysis area. Therefore, I concluded that the *Powerline Clearing Project* is an authorized project under Section 102(a)(4) (insect and disease epidemics) of the HFRA and that the environmental analysis associated with the proposal will be completed according to HFRA, Section 104.

Section 104 of the HFRA provides expedited procedures to complete project planning and decision-making, as consistent with Forest Plan direction or covered by plan amendment. HFRA projects are expedited because they are exempt from the appeal provisions set forth in 36 CFR 215; instead, they are subject to a pre-decisional administrative review and objection process under 36 CFR 218, subpart A.

Purpose and Need for the Project

The purpose of this project is to allow Carbon Power and Light, Inc. to fell and/or remove trees, including those impacted by the mountain pine beetle (MPB), along approximately 34 miles of their primary voltage, aboveground powerlines.

Given the widespread tree mortality associated with the bark beetles, the project is needed to:

- 1) Ensure reliable electric service to its Member-Owners on the Medicine Bow National Forest;
- 2) Reduce the potential for wildfires caused by hazardous trees falling onto the powerlines;
- 3) Reduce hazardous fuel loadings associated with treatments and beetle killed trees; and
- 4) Partially offset the cost of treatments by salvaging forest products.

Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, Carbon Power and Light, Inc. could fell and remove all salvageable sawtimber size trees (greater than 7 inches diameter at breast height (DBH)) and products other than logs (POL) size trees (5 – 7 inches DBH) that are within 150 feet (75 feet from the centerline) of primary voltage, aboveground powerlines. If removal is not feasible or would cause unacceptable resource damage, then the salvageable size trees would be felled and left in place. Non-salvageable trees (those less than 5 inches DBH) within said corridor would be felled and left in place. Slash associated with the felling operations may be lopped and scattered to a depth not to exceed 24 inches or it may be piled and burned by the Forest Service at a later date if fuels build-up is a concern.

Under this proposal, all trees could be felled and/or removed along approximately 34 miles of Carbon Power and Light, Inc. powerlines within the Medicine Bow National Forest boundary.

Following initial felling and/or removal of trees within 150 feet of powerlines, the powerline corridor would be maintained to a width of 50 feet (25 feet from the centerline). Trees within the 50 foot corridor would be cleared and maintained in perpetuity. Trees would be allowed to regenerate outside the 50 foot corridor.

Exceptions:

- Salvageable trees within 300 feet of Level 5 Forest Service Roads may be removed by Carbon Power and Light, Inc. or they would be cut in to 8 foot lengths and decked in locations approved by the Forest Service. Decked timber would either be available for public firewood gathering or would be burned by Forest Service personnel.
- The Forest Service would define the necessary parameters for felling and/or removing the trees within the clearing corridors around or near its permitted lands within the National Forest boundary. Examples of permitted lands include recreation residences, ski areas, and lodges.

Commercial timber sale contracts, non-commercial service contracts, free use permits and contracts, and Stewardship contracts could be used to fell and/or remove the affected trees.

Design criteria would be applied to protect sensitive areas including, but not limited to, streamside management zones, old growth, and wildlife resources during the felling and/or removal operations. Winter logging may also be considered in specific areas, and on a case-by-case basis, to further protect sensitive resource areas.

If approved, Carbon Power and Light, Inc. would like to begin implementing the Proposed Action during the spring/summer of 2009. Priority for scheduling treatments would be as follows: a) Ten Mile/Ryan Park; b) Hog Park Reservoir; c) Highway 230/Boswell; d) Rob Roy/Lake Creek/Albany; e) Lake Owen; and f) Centennial/Brooklyn Lake.

Design Criteria: Proposed Action

A Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) identified design criteria to reduce or prevent undesirable effects resulting from management activities. Design criteria include such measures as Best Management Practices (BMPs), Watershed Conservation Practices (WCPs), Forest Plan standards and guidelines, and other environmental protection required by laws and regulations. They are as follows:

Developed Recreation Sites, Trails, Trailheads, and Administrative Sites

1. Minimize damage to designated infrastructure from tree felling and/or removal operations.
2. Coordinate closure, if necessary, of impacted trailheads, administrative sites, campgrounds, and travel corridors with District recreation staffs to minimize impacts to the public. Provide information to the recreating public on the purpose and duration of the closure as well as on alternative recreation opportunities in the vicinity.

Heritage Resources

3. Heritage resource sites that are discovered within areas identified for treatment will be evaluated for National Register eligibility.

Sites that are eligible for, or listed on, the National Register of Historic Places will not have ground disturbance occur within the site boundary plus a 50 foot buffer around the site. If treatment is necessary, these sites, and the 50 foot buffer, will be hand-treated for hazard trees and accumulated fuel build up.

Invasive Species

4. Off-road equipment shall not be moved onto treatment areas without having first taken reasonable measures to make sure each piece of equipment is free of soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold invasive seeds.
5. Revegetation on any area may be required where ground cover is disturbed (e.g. landings, burned slash pile sites, skid trails, etc.). As a general guideline, ground cover should recover to its normal range of variability for the landtype and geoclimatic area by the end of the third growing season. Native plant species should ultimately dominate the site, although introduction of non-persistent species may be used to ensure vegetation cover initially.

Old Growth and Late Succession Forest

6. Hazard trees within mapped and inventoried old growth areas and in those polygons identified in the old growth strategy on the MBNF will be hand felled and left in place. If necessary, felled trees may be stabilized to prevent movement onto a roadway. Lop and scatter slash to a height of less than 24 inches above the ground. Do not designate landings in these areas.

Public Safety

7. On Level 3 – 5 roads and on county and state highways, warning signs and traffic control shall be in accordance with the “Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices.”
8. Level 2 roads will be temporarily closed to general public access during felling and/or removal operations.
9. Erect barricades and/or proper signs at any traffic hazards left in or adjacent to the road at the end of each workday. All felled trees and slash shall be removed from the bladed, mowed, or brushed road corridor each day before crews leave the work area for the day.

Riparian Areas/Aquatic Protection

10. Locate staging areas and refueling locations at least 100 feet away from streams and wetlands.
11. The Forest Service will designate heavy equipment crossings for streams that have definable beds and banks.
12. Stream crossings and other instream structures will be designed to provide for passage of flow and sediment, withstand expected flood flows, and allow free movement of resident aquatic life.
13. Any hazard tree and associated debris cut down or lying within 200 feet upstream of a perennial or intermittent stream/road culvert crossing, that has the potential to obstruct a bridge or culvert, will be moved at least 100 feet upslope away from the stream. Ground based equipment can be used up to the edge of, but not within riparian areas, wetlands or hydric soils. This design criterion takes precedence over design criteria 8 and 31.
14. Trees within 100 feet of tie driven streams will not be removed if they provide a potential source of large woody debris to the stream system. Felled hazard trees should be left in place.

15. Ground based equipment will not be permitted within 100 feet of identified riparian areas or within 200 feet of identified wetlands/fens (by GIS or located on ground during implementation); hand felling of hazard trees is permitted in the 100 foot riparian buffer and the 200 foot wetland buffer. Felled trees will either be left in place in riparian areas or may be removed by winching where there will be no disturbance such that bare ground is exposed. If tree removal (including whole tree yarding) is not possible, slash may be lopped and scattered to a height of less than 24 inches above ground level.
16. Ground based equipment will not be permitted on identified hydric soils¹ (by GIS or located on ground during implementation); hand felling of hazard trees is permitted in the hydric soils. Felled trees will either be left in place on hydric soils or winched as specified by the Forest Service. If tree removal is not possible, slash may be lopped and scattered to a height of less than 24 inches above ground level.

Roads

17. No new specified road or temporary road construction will be authorized. No excavated skid trails will be authorized except where necessary to gain access up the cut slope or down the fill slope of an existing road.
18. Decking and landing areas will be designated by the Forest Service.
19. Minimize damage to drainage structures and road features. Repair any damaged drainage structures and road features and rehabilitate any damage to cut and fill slopes.
20. When operating on or along the road prism, do not skid within or across drainage ditches; limit impacts to road surface. When damage is unavoidable, reconstruct and/or replace surfacing as necessary. Engineering will determine post-operation/haul road maintenance, repair, reconditioning, or resurfacing needs on an individual basis.
21. Honor existing seasonal road closures and other road restrictions during hazard tree removal operations for species or resources that are sensitive to disturbance.
22. Remove felled hazard trees and slash from wing ditches, lead-off ditches, tail ditches, and culvert outlets. Place all slash such that it will not fall, roll, or be blown into these areas.

Slash Disposal/Fuels Treatments

23. The preferred slash treatment method for the majority of the potential project area is to whole tree skid and/or removal of the whole tree where the entire tree, including the top and limbs, is removed. If it is not feasible to remove the whole tree, then slash will be lopped and scattered to a maximum depth of 24 inches or slash may be piled and burned by the Forest Service at a later date if fuels build-up is a concern.
24. Remove slash from felled hazard trees from stream channels unless otherwise specified by the Forest Service. Lop and scatter slash to a height of less than 24 inches above the ground.

Snowy Range Scenic Byway

25. Remove only those trees that are dead, dying, and/or leaning within powerline clearing corridors adjacent to the Snowy Range Scenic Byway. The Forest Service will be responsible for marking the removal trees.

¹ Hydric soils are defined as “a soil that formed under conditions of saturation, flooding, or ponding long enough during the growing season to develop anaerobic conditions in the upper part (Federal Register, July 13, 1994).”

Visuals

26. Minimize damage to natural features such as rock outcrops, young healthy trees, and understories of trees and shrubs. Cut stumps as low to the ground as feasible and remove heavy slash within the immediate foreground (approximately 25 to 200 feet from edges of road) of roads and trails located in MAs that are assigned Retention and Partial Retention Visual Quality Objectives and High and Moderate Scenic Integrity Objectives.

Wildlife and Botany

27. Prior to each field season, district wildlife biologists and botanists will be provided with GIS layers and hardcopy maps of potential treatment areas. Proposed, Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (PETS) species and species of local concern (known or discovered during project layout or implementation) will be individually evaluated as they occur within proposed hazard tree removal projects.
28. District wildlife biologists and botanists will determine consultation and site protection needs on an individual and as needed basis. For any Proposed, Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive species or species of local concern with identified viability concerns, the wildlife biologist and/or botanist will identify activity restrictions (area, timing, retaining felled trees on-site to provide connectivity/linkage of habitats, etc.) such that implementation will not result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of **population viability**.

Winter Logging

29. Conduct winter logging operations when the ground is frozen to a depth of six inches or more or when snow cover is adequate to minimize site disturbance.
30. Plow or pack snow in the operating area to minimize the insulation value and facilitate ground freezing; clear enough area to accommodate future snow plowing.
31. When hauling on constructed specified roads, haul only on roads that have been cleared, allowing the ground to freeze and snow to compact on top.
32. Monitor the operating conditions closely after consecutive nights of above freezing temperatures; cease operations on roads and in salvage units if resource damage begins to occur.
33. When daytime temperatures are above freezing, but nighttime temperatures remain below freezing, plan to operate only in the morning; cease operations when ground temperature is above freezing.
34. Return the following summer and build drainage features on any skid trails that are steep enough to erode or over 10 percent.
35. When plowing snow for winter operations, provide breaks in the snow berm to allow road drainage.

Forest Plan Direction

The Revised Medicine Bow Land and Resource Management Plan (December 2003) provides the overall strategy designed to guide the management of the Forest. The Forest Plan provides guidance at three different geographic scales. Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines (Forest Plan pages 1-25 to 1-64) apply to the entire forest and outline the most general and basic direction. From there, the direction becomes more focused and applies to Geographic Areas and Management Areas, respectively.

Management emphasis along the powerline corridors is distributed between 11 Management

Area (MA) prescriptions, as displayed in Table 1. Each MA prescription contains direction on management activities will be implemented on that particular piece of land.

Table 1: Powerline Management Areas

MA	Description	Powerline Miles
1.13	Wilderness, Semi-primitive	0.04
1.31	Backcountry Recreation, Year-round Nonmotorized	0.25
1.33	Backcountry Recreation, Summer Nonmotorized with Winter Snowmobiling	0.09
3.58	Crucial Deer & Elk Winter Range	0.73
4.2	Scenery	3.66
4.3	Dispersed Recreation	1.70
5.13	Forest Products	7.03
5.15	Forest Products, Ecological Restoration	15.20
8.21	Developed Recreation	2.70
8.22	Ski-based Resorts, Existing and Potential	2.05
8.6	Administrative Sites	0.87
PVT		7.61
TOTAL		41.22 (33.60 NFS lands)

Decisions to be Made

After the analysis process is completed, a decision will be made that includes the following:

- The Selected Alternative. The selected alternative could be the Proposed Action as described in this scoping letter, an alternative to the Proposed Action, or the No Action alternative;
- Rationale for the decision; and
- Design criteria and monitoring requirements necessary for project implementation.

Analysis Schedule

It is anticipated that *Powerline Clearing Project* would be implemented as early as spring/summer of 2009. The Forest Supervisor for the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests is the Responsible Official for this proposal.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) will be prepared to analyze and disclose the environmental effects of the Powerline Clearing Project. As previously mentioned, the proposal is an “authorized project” under the HFRA, Title I, Sec. 102(a)(4). Therefore, expedited procedures under this Act will be used to complete project planning and decision-making.

HFRA projects are expedited because they are exempt from the appeal process set forth in 36 CFR 215; the appeal process generally takes 105 days from start to finish. Instead, HFRA projects are subject to a pre-decisional administrative review and objection process under 36 CFR 218, Subpart A. This process generally takes 60 days; 30 days to allow for filing of an objection and 30 days for the Forest Service to respond, in writing, to the objection.

To ensure eligibility in the objection process, comments in response to this letter must be submitted within 30 days following publication of a legal notice in the newspaper of record (Laramie Boomerang). Please address your comments to:

Melissa Martin, ID Team Leader
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests
2468 Jackson Street
Laramie, Wyoming 82070

The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the 30-day formal comment period. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The legal notice announcing the formal comment period will be published on October 25, 2008; therefore, **the comment period will end November 24, 2008.**

Those commenting should include: 1) name, address, telephone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of the document on which the comments are being submitted; 3) specific facts and supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider.

The Forest Service will also accept E-mail comments on this proposal. Please use the following E-mail address: comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt@fs.fed.us. (Acceptable formats for electronic comments: rtf, pdf, and word.)

As previously mentioned, this comment period represents the only opportunity for the public to comment on this proposal prior to the objection process. Only those individuals and organizations who submit specific written comments related to the Proposed Action will be eligible to file an objection (36 CFR 218.6).

For more information concerning the Proposed Action, please contact Melissa Martin, Project Coordinator, at (307) 745-2371.

Thank you for caring about your National Forest!

Sincerely,

/s/ Mary H. Peterson
MARY H. PETERSON
Forest Supervisor