United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Medicine Bow – Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland
Parks Ranger District
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File Code: 1950-1
Date: May 1, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

The Parks Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests is seeking public input on a proposal to conduct vegetation treatments on National Forest System lands within the ***Big Creek Fuels*** project area. The proposal consists of prescribed fire to reduce fuels accumulation and encourage aspen growth, and timber harvest to remove dead fuels, reduce fire hazard, and regenerate aspen in decadent, declining aspen stands. The project area is located approximately 20 miles northwest of Walden, in Jackson County, Colorado (see vicinity map).

The District will conduct an analysis to determine the potential effects to physical, biological, and cultural resources that may result from the fuel reduction work.

The purpose of the public comment period is to identify issues and concerns related to the proposed action. In addition, scoping may identify additional information and management opportunities that may be incorporated into the proposed action.

Background

In 2004 the District developed a proposal to decrease fuel quantity and continuity, lessen fire behavior and intensities, and create defensible space between wildlands and rural home-sites in the vicinity of the NFSR 600 corridor; the project was known as the *Big Creek/Pearl Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project*. On August 6, 2004, a decision memo was signed, authorizing approximately 309 acres of mechanical and prescribed fire vegetation treatments. It was expected that the proposal would take two to three years to accomplish, primarily through non-commercial service contacts. To date, only a small portion of that project has been implemented. On March 16, 2006, the District proposed the *Big Twisty Hazardous Fuels Reduction* project in the same area, to further reduce increased fuels and the overall fire carrying capacity of the area. The project has now been expanded, based on the changed condition of the vegetation caused by the increase in beetle activity and a wind event that occurred during the spring of 2007.

Project Area Description

The project area is located on National Forest System (NFS) lands, in an area commonly known as Big Creek Lakes. There are a number of summer home leases on NFS lands and a number of private in-holdings scattered within the project area. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and private lands lie adjacent to the project area on the north and east sides. The community of Pearl is located on private lands to the northeast. General geographic location is T11N, R82W, Sections 1-4, 9-10, 15-16, and T12N, R82W, Sections 34-36. Access is provided by National Forest System Road (NFSR) 600.

Elevations within the project area range from 8,600' to 9,100'. Topographic features are typical of mountain regions, with rolling to steep terrain, saddles, and ridges. The entire area can be described as a subalpine forest zone with gentle to moderately steep terrain (e.g., 10-60% slope). Lodgepole pine dominates the area; and, to lesser degree, a mix of limber pine, Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and aspen exist as part of the forested stands. Big sagebrush and other shrub-steppe species exist, interspersed with dry and wet meadow complexes along the South Fork of Big Creek. Forested stand conditions can be described as, in the non-managed stands, mature forests with active insect and disease activity, with a recent accumulation of downed dead course woody debris caused by a wind event. Most stands in this cover type had a natural establishment following the last stand-replacement disturbance, such as fire, insect outbreak, or both, that likely took place in the late 1800s.

Past management such as timber harvesting and grazing has occurred and continues to be a distinct part of the area's character. Both summer and winter recreation is evident, and the area can be popular for hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, sightseeing, and camping. Developed recreation improvements are present, such as the Big Creek Lakes, Big Creek Lakes Campground, picnic areas, and sign boards or kiosks.

Existing Condition

The developing mountain pine beetle epidemic has dramatically increased fuel accumulation, associated fire hazard, and hazard trees in the vicinity of the Big Creek Fuels project area. Furthermore, a large wind event during the spring of 2007 caused many live mature conifers to fall and create "caches" of downed and dead fuels that represent an increased potential in readily available fuels. In the event of a wildfire, structures that exist on the private in-holdings and summer home leases would likely be severely damaged, as there is no defensible space surrounding them. Removal of blowdown trees and hazard trees creating safety issues within the Big Creek Campground has already taken place during the summer of 2007. Also, summer home lessees have performed some minimal fuel reduction work within the context of their particular lease agreements. In addition, aspen stands have become decadent and are exhibiting signs of decline. Without treatment aspen will continue to decline and be replaced by conifers.

Forest Plan Direction

The Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 1997 Revision (Forest Plan) guides natural resource management activities and provides an overall strategy for managing the Routt National Forest. Direction is identified at several levels, including: Forest, Management Area, and Geographic Area. Forest Plan direction is implemented with the most site-specific direction superseding the more general direction.

The Forest Plan contains the following direction that is pertinent to this analysis and to the specific project activities identified for the analysis area:

Forest-Level Management Direction

- Manage vegetation in high-use recreation areas to provide for public safety, to improve forest health, and to maintain or improve the desired recreation setting(s). ***(Insects & Disease Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-15)***

- Use integrated pest management techniques, including silvicultural treatments, to meet management area objectives. Treatment activities will be based on values of, and risks to, wildlife habitat and adjacent private lands, as well as public land. Priority should be given to areas in which values to be protected exceed the cost of protection; for example, areas adjacent to subdivisions, metropolitan areas, recreation sites, or areas of concentrated public use. ***(Insects & Disease Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-15)***

- When feasible and appropriate, use broadcast burning to dispose of slash in order to return the inorganic and organic chemicals in the foliage and small woody material to the soil, to reduce fire hazard, and to provide seed beds for natural regeneration. ***(Fire Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-15)***

The Forest Plan describes desired conditions for each of the management areas across the Forest. It also outlines the general type of management activities that may take place in the management areas in order to achieve these desired conditions.

Management Area Direction

Management Area allocation for the project area is 4.3 Dispersed Recreation and 5.11 General Forest and Rangelands, Forest Vegetation Emphasis.

MA 4.3 (Dispersed Recreation) Desired Condition – Vegetative composition and structure will be managed to meet the recreational objectives for the area and maintain vegetation cover and soil stability. Insect and disease outbreaks will generally be allowed to influence forest vegetation unless resource management objectives are threatened. These areas will be characterized by easy access and will be capable of sustaining a relatively high number of recreationists.

- Use only vegetation management practices necessary to meet specific resource objectives other than wood production. Timber harvest is not scheduled and does not contribute towards the allowable sale quantity. ***(Vegetation Standard, p. 2-37)***

- Use direct control or perimeter control as the wildland fire management strategy in this management area. ***(Fire and Fuels Standard, p. 2-37)***

- Focus pest management activities and methods on enhancing or protecting recreation opportunities. ***(Integrated Pest Management Guideline, p. 2-37)***

- Make resource management activities compatible with recreation opportunities. Minimize impacts to other resources. ***(Recreation Guideline, p. 2-37)***

MA 5.11 (General Forest and Rangelands, Forest Vegetation Emphasis) Desired Condition – Forest insects and disease will be present but locally restricted. Wildfires will generally be controlled. Accordingly, vegetation patterns will be developed primarily through the use of silvicultural practices, in conjunction with physical site characteristics.

- To allow direct attack, treat management activity fuels to reduce fire intensity levels within three years after management activities cease. ***(MA 5.11 General Forest and Rangelands, Forest Vegetation Emphasis MA, Fire & Fuels Standard, p. 2-41)***
- Use direct control or perimeter control as the wildland fire management strategy in this Management Area. ***(MA 5.11 General Forest and Rangelands, Forest Vegetation Emphasis MA, Fire & Fuels Standard, p. 2-41)***

Geographic Area Direction

The project area is situated in the Big Creek Lakes Geographic Area (GA). The Forest Plan describes the following desired conditions for this GA: The areas seen from Forest Roads 60 and 600 and frequently used recreation points will have a natural appearance, with some evidence of management activities. Developed and motorized recreational activities will occur around the Big Creek Lake Campground and in the northern part of the geographic area.

Desired Condition

Based on the Forest Plan and an analysis of existing condition, a desired future condition was developed for the Big Creek Fuels project area. The desired future condition includes a healthy, regenerating forest. Current distribution of aspen would be maintained or increased. Aspen stands would contain a variety of age classes and sizes; fewer stands would be encroached by conifer, allowing for conditions that are favorable for aspen regeneration. The areas surrounding and adjacent to the private in-holdings and residences within the project area would be free from safety hazards due to fuel accumulation and falling dead and dying trees.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this proposal is to implement management direction from the Forest Plan to manage for ecosystem needs. Based on Forest Plan direction and the analysis area's current existing condition versus the desired condition, the following resource needs were identified: There is a need to treat area vegetation to reduce fire intensity levels, protect recreation opportunities, and accomplish resource management objectives, such as reducing fuel load buildup. There is a need to provide protection to private in-holdings and residences located in the project area by reducing the amount of existing fuels and hazard trees. There is a need to regenerate aspen in declining aspen stands.

Proposed Action

Based on a review of the purpose and need for the proposal, Forest Plan direction, and a comparison between the existing condition versus the desired future condition, a proposed action was identified for the Big Creek Fuels Project Area. Consideration was given to a larger project area, affecting more acres, using a myriad of commercial and non-commercial timber and fuel treatments. However, due to the urgent need to reduce fuel load buildup and fire intensity levels, protect recreation opportunities, and provide protection to the summer lease homes and in-holdings, a more concise and effective Proposed Action was chosen as the immediate focus.

Three distinct treatments on approximately ***953 acres*** (see Figure 1) have been identified: (1) prescribed fire, (2) timber harvest, and (3) aspen maintenance. Treatment and acreage is displayed in the table below:

Proposed Action

Treatment	Acres
Prescribed fire	575
Timber harvest	245
Aspen maintenance	133
TOTAL	**953**

Prescribed Fire: Prescribed fire will occur on approximately ***575 acres*** on the north side of the NFSR 600 (see Figure 1). It will predominately occur in the grass/sage/shrub/aspen component within the identified area, but conifer may be involved. Burning would likely take place in the spring, but fall may provide a valid burn window. Due to the southwest to southeast exposures, a spring burn can be very successful using snow line as control for prescribed fire operations. Minimal hand line, if any, would be necessary in the spring. Fall burning would require a moderate amount of hand line and black lining operations. Specific hand line location are unknown, but generally would occur at vegetation type changes such aspen to conifer or near other control features such as rock outcroppings or dry slopes with sparse vegetation. Hand lines would be built by means of hand crews using hand tools and chainsaws. All hand line will be rehabilitated appropriately after burning operations were complete. Mechanical line construction (i.e., dozer or other) is not anticipated; however some unidentified needs may arise during implementation. These needs are anticipated to be minimal, if any, and will only be used on a case-by-case basis. The overall intent of using prescribed fire is to reduce fuels accumulation, encourage aspen growth in the area, utilizing its living “fireline-like” qualities, and to promote nutrient cycling.

Timber Harvest: Approximately ***245 acres*** have been identified for timber harvest treatment in the project area. The treatment area is dominated by mature lodgepole pine interspersed with minor amounts of quaking aspen and other conifer species. Due to the levels of mountain pine beetle activity in the area, a great deal of the lodgepole has been, or may likely be, killed by the beetle. In addition, the wind event has created a large amount of deadfall in the area. It is the intent of this treatment to remove the majority of this lodgepole directly adjacent to homes and to promote aspen where possible. It is probable that some areas within this treatment will resemble a clearcut (100% of the trees are removed), others may resemble an overstory removal (all or most of the larger trees are harvested, retaining the stand's understory of younger trees), while still other stands would experience some form of thinning.

Possible treatment scenarios include using mechanical timber harvesting equipment to yard trees "up" to a landing within or near the already hardened road, especially on steeper terrain. Typical timber harvesting operations on lower angle terrain is anticipated. Timber may be removed from the sight, or decked for later disposal or sale as firewood. Some work may occur by hand, using chainsaws and other hand equipment to cut, pile and burn, or chip dead and dying trees, especially those trees which pose immediate hazards. Mechanisms for action may include timber sale contract, service contract, stewardship contract, or in-house implementation. It is likely that some replanting will occur in these timber harvest units. Planting may include a number of different species including lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, or aspen. This will be determined on a site-specific basis.

Aspen Maintenance: Approximately ***133 acres*** of aspen stands will be treated. Forest Plan direction is to "Maintain aspen, even at the expense of spruce/fir or other late-successional stands" (Biological Diversity Guideline, p.1-8). Reasons for this direction are very important for a variety of reasons. Mature aspen cover types are considered to be in decline throughout most of its range on the Routt National Forest. If a coniferous seed source is present, many of the associated conifer species will slowly replace the aspen in the overstory tree canopy. Therefore, by maintaining aspen, we are creating, and thus ensuring, a greater level of diversity benefiting forest health. The aspen maintenance will be conducted by hand crews, using chainsaws to remove some of the conifers. These conifers will likely remain in place but will be lopped and scattered. Or, these trees may be cut and stacked for future pile burning.

No Action

The no action alternative provides the baseline for comparison of environmental effects of the action alternatives. Under the no action alternative, the Forest Service would not implement any vegetation treatments. No action by the agency would result in further accumulation of fuels and corresponding fire hazard potential; facilitating the efforts of the private land owners would be lost; high value safety infrastructure would be left to the forests own disturbance regimes, and aspen would continue to decline.

ANALYSIS SCHEDULE

The proposed actions fit into a category of actions that may be excluded from further analysis and documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental analysis (EA), if there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action [FSH 1909.15 31.2 (6)]. District resource specialists will analyze resource conditions to determine whether extraordinary circumstances exist. If this project does not qualify for a categorical exclusion, the District will proceed with the appropriate level of analysis.

After receiving your comments, we will identify and analyze the issues raised and finalize a proposed action.

The Parks District Ranger will decide whether or not to implement the proposed action and what design criteria and monitoring would be necessary for project implementation. Implementation could begin in fall of 2008.

This project is subject to the notice, comment, and appeal procedures set out at 36 CFR 215. The opportunity to comment ends 30 days following the date of publication of the legal notice in the *Jackson County Star* (§215.6(a)(2). Only those who submit timely comments will be accepted as appellants. Please address written comments to:

Joanne Sanfilippo, ID Team Leader
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District
PO Box 249
Saratoga WY 82331
FAX: 307-326-5250

Delivery:
Parks Ranger District
100 Main Street
Walden CO 80480
Hours: Mon-Fri 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

E-mail: comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-parks@fs.fed.us. (Acceptable formats for electronic comments are: rtf, pdf or word.)

Thank you for your interest in the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests.

Sincerely,

/s/ Michael A. Wright
MICHAEL A. WRIGHT
District Ranger

Vicinity Map

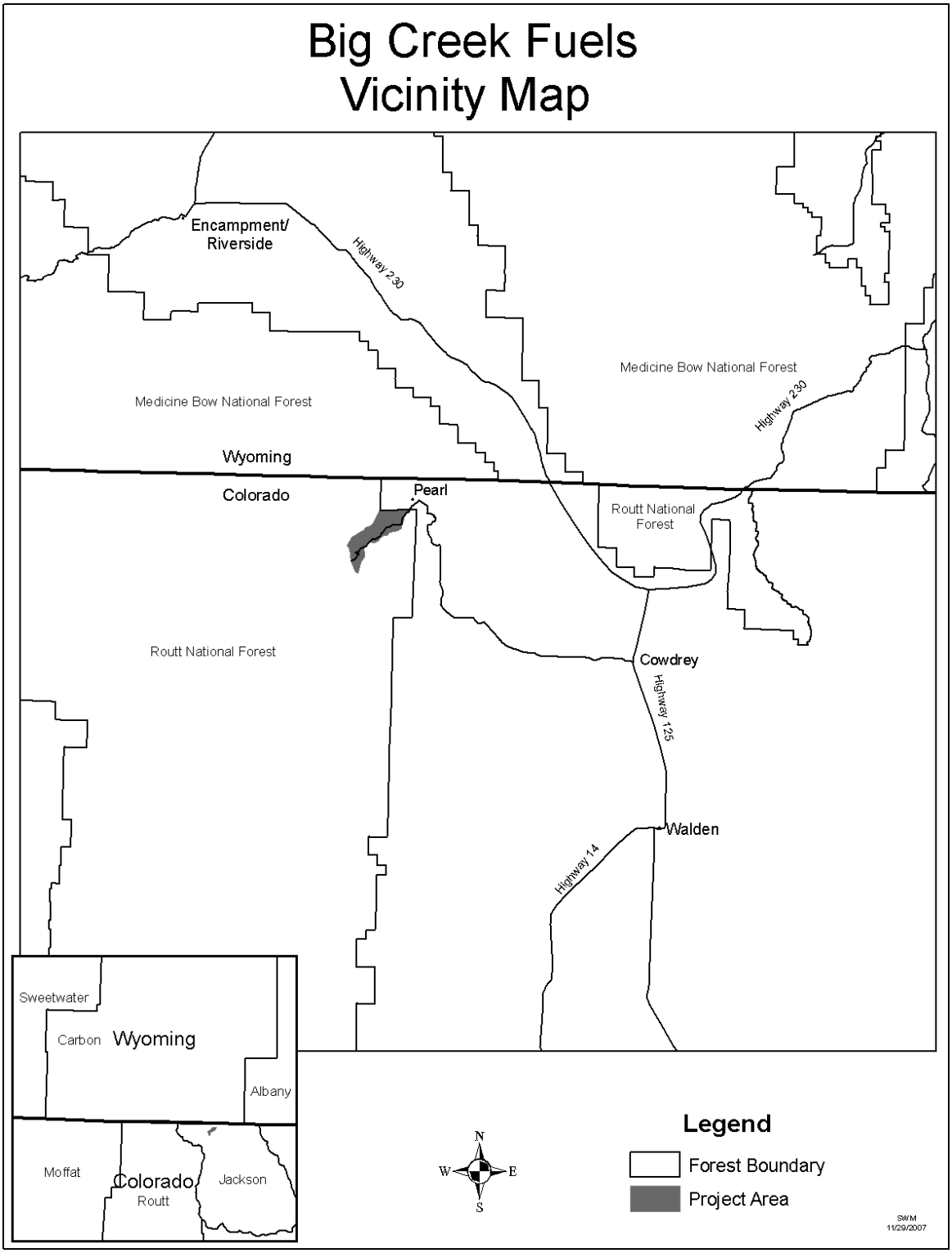
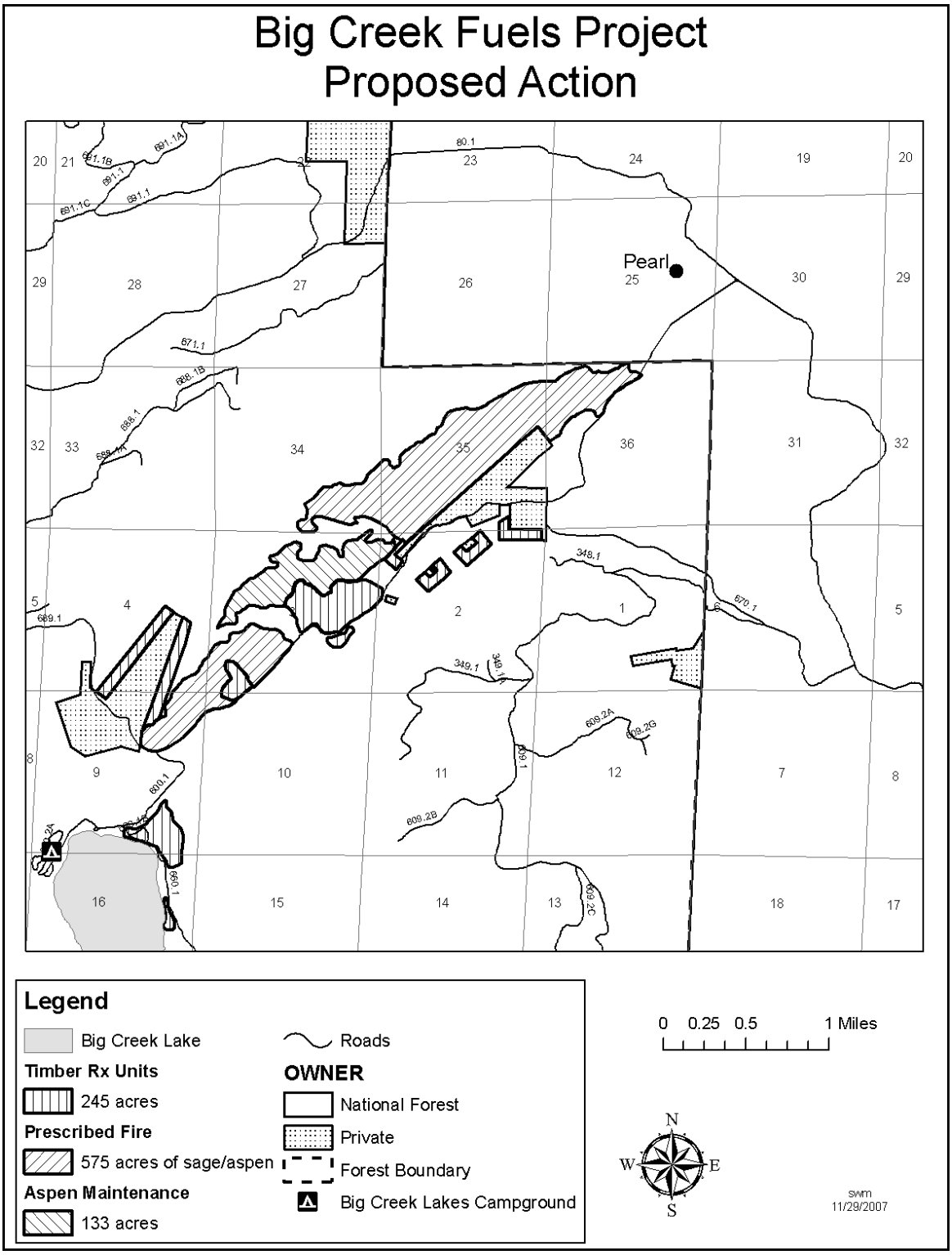
Figure 1 – Proposed Action