



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Medicine Bow – Routt
National Forests and Thunder
Basin National Grassland

Brush Creek/Hayden District
South Hwy 130
PO Box 249
Saratoga, WY 82331-0249
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr>

File Code: 1950-1

Date: May 19, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

The Forest Service is seeking public input on a proposal to conduct prescribed burning on National Forest System (NFS) lands, to promote fire-dependent plant communities, reduce natural fuel build-up, and improve plant vigor. The *Battle Mountain Prescribed Burn Project* is located in the far southwestern portion of the Sierra Madre Range, on the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, in Carbon County, Wyoming, approximately 28 miles southwest of Encampment.

Scoping is an integral part of the environmental analysis process. 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.

Analysis Area Description

To make a meaningful analysis of the existing condition and the potential effects of management on the area's various resources—such as wildlife, vegetation, water, etc., there is a need to look at a larger area to get a better sense of the overall condition of the vicinity. Typically the larger analysis area is based on watersheds. In the case of the Battle Mountain Prescribed Burn project, the larger area to be analyzed is based on three sixth-level watersheds: Lower Savery Creek, Lower Battle Creek, and Little Snake River-Fly Creek.

The analysis area (AA) is an isolated island of NFS lands, surrounded by private, state, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, located in the far southwestern portion of the Sierra Madre Range and the Medicine Bow National Forest, just north of the Colorado stateline. The legal description is T12 & 13N, R88W. Battle Highway (Hwy 70) runs along the north and west boundaries of the analysis area. See Vicinity Map for location.

The analysis area encompasses approximately 11,023 acres--5,500 acres are National Forest System lands and the remaining 5,523 acres a mixture of private, state, and BLM lands. Of these mixed ownership lands, 2,161 acres are situated within the Forest boundary and 3,362 acres are outside the Forest boundary (see Project Area Map).

The analysis area is a mix of rangeland and forest ecosystems; vegetation includes aspen, lodgepole pine, spruce-fir, Gambel oak, Douglas fir, sagebrush/shrubland, serviceberry, mountain shrubs, and grassland. The 1,204-acre Battle Mountain Research Natural Area (RNA) is located within the AA. Elevations range from 7,000 to 9,100 feet at the top of Battle Mountain. There are no motorized roads or trails within the project area, and access to the area is limited.



There are two grazing allotments within the AA--Battle Mountain and West Sheep Mountain. Although motorized access to the Forest Service lands is limited, recreation still occurs in the area and includes activities such as big game hunting, antler hunting, and hiking. Past treatment includes approximately 24 acres of prescribed burn on the east side and 65 acres on the southwest side of Battle Mountain, both in the 1980s.

Existing Condition

The timbered stands within the project area consist of aspen, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and Gambel oak. Most of the conifer stands contain aspen. Aspen is present at varying levels within the stands; some stands are dominated by conifers. After an extended absence of fire, and as the stand ages, conifer such as Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and lodgepole pine begin to encroach on the aspen. Without disturbance aspen is gradually replaced by the more shade tolerant conifer tree species. Currently almost half (45%) of the aspen across the Forest is mature or older (Forest Plan, p. 3-123).

Many of the mixed stands dominated by lodgepole pine are dense, and contain beetle-kill trees. These stands have high canopy bulk densities, low canopy base heights, abundant ladder fuels, and a high surface fuel load. Should a fire ignite, these surface fuel and canopy conditions are conducive to an active canopy fire. Once a fire transitions into the canopy, the increase in stand density would facilitate stand replacement conditions. Suppression efforts would probably be ineffective.

Rangeland in the area consists of sagebrush/shrubland, serviceberry, mountain shrubs, and grassland.

Forest Plan Direction

The Medicine Bow National Forest 2003 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) guides natural resource management activities and provides an overall strategy for managing the Medicine Bow 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-wide Level Management Direction:

- Where feasible and appropriate, use prescribed fire throughout the landscape, including in wilderness areas, special interest areas, research natural areas, and inventoried roadless areas to accomplish resource management goals and objectives. (*Forest-wide Guideline, p. 1-49*)

Management Area Direction:

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 those desired conditions. Application of management area prescriptions and associated standards and guidelines will move specific portions of each geographic area towards the desired condition (Forest Plan, p. 3-1).

Management emphasis within the analysis area is distributed among the following management areas:

Table 1. Ownership/Management Area (MA) Emphasis within the AA

MA	Description	Acres
2.2	Research Natural Area	1,204
3.58	Crucial Deer and Elk Winter Range	2,677
5.12	General Forest and Rangeland, Rangeland Vegetation Emphasis	1,619
	Total NFS Acres	5,500
Mixed Ownership: Private, BLM or State	Inside Forest Boundary	2,161
	Outside Forest Boundary	3,362
	Total Mixed Ownership Acres	5,523
	TOTAL AA ACRES	11,023

MA 2.2 - Research Natural Area

RNAs form a long-term network of ecological reserves designated for non-manipulative research and education and the maintenance of biological diversity. **Desired Condition:** RNAs will be managed to maintain natural conditions by allowing ecological processes to prevail with minimal human intervention. However, under some circumstances, deliberate manipulation may be utilized to maintain the ecosystem or unique features for which the RNA was established or to re-establish natural ecological processes.

- Use prescribed fire when it is necessary to restore a natural fire regime. (*Fire and Fuels Guideline, p.2-30*)
- Consult the Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Research Station on all prescribed fire plans. (*Fire and Fuels Guideline, p.2-30*)

MA 3.58 - Crucial Deer and Elk Winter Range

These areas are managed to provide adequate amounts of quality forage, cover, and solitude for deer, elk, and other species. **Desired Condition:** Vegetation will be managed to provide healthy plant communities with a variety of species present for use as food and cover. Activities may include burning, rangeland vegetation management, timber harvest, habitat manipulation, recreation, etc.

- Design activities to maintain or improve habitat. (*Vegetation Standard, p. 2-51*)

MA 5.12 - General Forest and Rangeland, Rangeland Vegetation Emphasis

These areas are managed to sustain values associated with areas of woody vegetation and open grassland and to provide habitat and forage for livestock and wildlife. **Desired Condition:** Rangeland vegetation will be managed for a mixture of seral stages. Most of the rangelands will be in mid seral stages of development. Habitat is managed to achieve and maintain the desired conditions for livestock, wildlife, and scenic resources.

- Use only those vegetation management practices necessary to meet specific resource objectives other than wood production. (*Vegetation Standard, p. 2-57*)
- Cut or remove trees to reduce fuel loads and fire risk, especially adjacent to private lands. (*Vegetation Standard, p. 2-57*)

Geographic Area Direction:

Analyses at the geographic area level provide a framework for short and long-term projects, for monitoring effectiveness of Forest-wide goals and management area standards and guidelines, and for achieving Forest-wide goals and objectives. The analysis area is located in the 76,479-acre South Savery Geographic Area (GA). Objectives for the South Savery GA include:

- Maintain and enhance fire-dependent species such as aspen, ponderosa pine, Gambel oak, serviceberry, and Douglas-fir and unique riparian species, including narrowleaf cottonwood and blue spruce.
- Enhance the quality of nesting and brood-rearing habitat for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse.

Desired Condition

Based on the Forest Plan and an analysis of existing condition, a desired future condition was developed for the analysis area. Under the desired condition, aspen stands and mixed mountain shrub communities would contain a variety of age classes and sizes; fewer aspen stands would be encroached by conifer, allowing for conditions that are favorable for aspen regeneration. Current distribution of aspen would be maintained or increased. In the event of a wildfire, in the aspen stands fire behavior would be limited to the surface.

Purpose and Need for the Project

The *purpose* of the proposal is to implement direction from the Medicine Bow National Forest Revised Land & Resource Management Plan (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 regenerate aspen stands and to reintroduce fire into a fire adapted ecosystem. Vegetation targeted includes conifer-encroached aspen stands, older aspen stands, and some shrubland communities. Treating these stands with prescribed fire and creating mortality in the conifer will encourage aspen re-sprouting. Aspen is considered a seral or pioneer species in the central Rockies and readily re-sprouts from clones following disturbance. Aspen is also characterized as a "fire safe" species where even under extreme conditions fire behavior is limited to the surface and flame lengths are such that direct attack is possible by hand crews.

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.

Under this proposal prescribed fire would be used to treat National Forest System lands to regenerate aspen in conifer-encroached aspen stands. Although shrublands are not specifically targeted for treatment, this vegetation type is found throughout the area and within the burn area. Even though not specifically targeted for treatment, there are benefits from prescribed fire, such as benefits to wildlife and livestock forage, and benefits to the fuels profile and subsequent fire behavior.

The following table identifies the number of acres in each burn unit:

Table 2. Proposed Action

Primary Burn Units	Acres
Unit 1	45
Unit 2	125
Unit 3	168
Unit 4	297
Total Primary Burn Unit Acres	635

Project Boundary

The total project boundary, including the acreage from the primary burn units, is 5,185 acres. The area outside the primary burn units equates to what was previously referred to as MMA (Maximum Manageable Area). Fire would not be suppressed in these areas. The units are situated within the 2.2 Research Natural Area (25 acres), 3.58 Crucial Deer and Elk Winter Range (64 acres), and 5.12 General Forest and Rangeland, Rangeland Vegetation Emphasis (546 acres) Management Areas. The prescribed burning is concentrated on the east, west, and north sides of Battle Mountain.

Coordination with adjacent private landowners and other federal and state agencies, i.e., BLM and State of Wyoming, must take place prior to implementation of this project; without their involvement and approval, this project will likely not take place.

Description of Treatment

All units are primarily mixed aspen and conifer and will be fall burns. The goal of this proposal is to utilize prescribed fire to cause mortality in the conifer and aspen, creating conditions which are favorable to aspen resprouting, thereby changing the structure and age class of the stand to predominately regenerated aspen. In order to achieve this goal, prescribed fire will be utilized to treat conifer and aspen within the primary burn polygon, stem killing 50% to 100% of the trees. Currently no line construction is planned.

Analysis Schedule

The proposed actions fits 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.

Plans are to complete the NEPA analysis and make a decision 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 2009.

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 *Rawlins Daily Times* (§215.6(a)(2)). Only those who submit timely comments will be accepted as appellants. The Brush Creek/Hayden District Ranger is the Responsible Official for this project. 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:
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District
South Highway 130
Saratoga, WY 82331
Hours: Mon-Fri 7:30a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

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

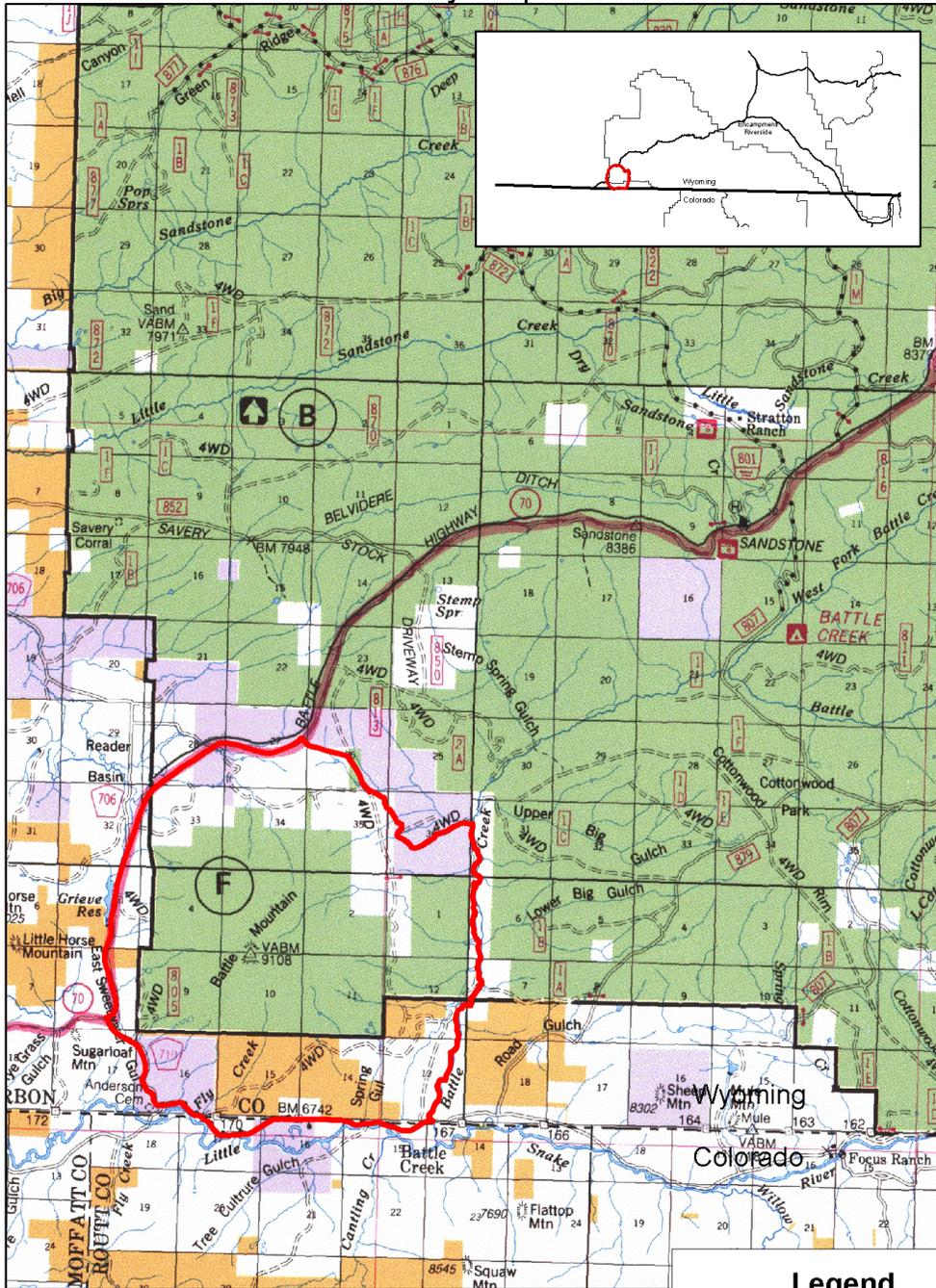
Thank you for your interest in the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests.

Sincerely,

/s/ M. Stephen Best
M. STEPHEN BEST
District Ranger

Enclosures: Vicinity Map
Project Area Map

Battle Mountain Prescribed Burn Vicinity Map



Project Area

