

PROJECT SCOPING STATEMENT AND FORMAL REQUEST FOR COMMENTS

Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project Medicine Bow –Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland Douglas Ranger District

Purpose and Need for Action

Introduction and Management Direction

The Douglas Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland is considering a proposal to reduce the current potentially hazardous levels of woody forest fuels on approximately 500 acres of National Forest lands in the Friend Creek area of the Laramie Peak Unit through a prescribed fire treatment. This proposed prescribed fire treatment would be designed to reduce the hazardous fuels on National Forest lands in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and restore health and resiliency to a forest damaged by altered fire regimes and insect infestation

Fuels Specialists generally agree that a frequent, low intensity fire regime played an important role in maintaining relatively open conditions in western ponderosa pine forests by controlling tree population densities and fuel accumulation. Human-caused changes, such as fire suppression have disrupted fire cycles and resulted in increased tree populations and fuel accumulation. As a result of these long-term changes to the forested lands of the Laramie Peak unit, we face fire conditions that are hazardous to life, property, and sensitive resources.

Forest wide direction in the Medicine Bow National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan calls for the use of prescribed fire where appropriate and feasible to reduce the threat of wildfire to public and private developments and manage hazardous fuel conditions in the WUI in a fire safe condition.

The proposed Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project is designed to also address the intent of the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) by reducing hazardous fuel levels on National Forest lands near Friend Creek. The Friend Creek area was identified as a WUI Community within the vicinity of Federal Lands that is at high risk from Wildfire, Federal Register Vol. 66, No. 160.

Description of Project Area

The Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project Area is located on the Douglas Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland . The legal description of the project area is : T26N., R72W., Sections 7, 8, 17 and 18, prominent landmark is Round Mountain (see attached map).

Current Condition and Desired Future Condition

Historically the Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project area was largely dominated by single storied, open park-like stands with an abundance of large diameter, fire resistant ponderosa pine trees. Frequent, low intensity fires maintained the open stand structures by killing brush, small trees, seedlings, and consuming fuels before they accumulated to the level where the entire stand was threatened (Fire Regime 1). The estimated fire return interval was a light burn every 5 to 15 years. Past management activities, in particular fire suppression, have changed stand structure, composition, and landscape pattern.

Currently, Friend Creek is composed of well-stocked and overstocked, multi-storied ponderosa pine stands, with aspen stands in the riparian zones. There are no examples of the historic open, fire-maintained stands remaining. Stands have less of a large tree component and many more small trees than existed in the past. This has created a continuous fuel ladder from the ground to the crowns of the larger trees and contributes to a continuous layer of fuels such as needles, limbs, and dead trees. Growth rates for all trees are low, as competition is high for water, nutrients, and growing space. The slow growth rates and low level of tree and stand vigor makes trees more susceptible to insect attack and disease mortality, and makes trees less likely to survive a wildfire.

The total amount of fuel has also increased over time. Fuels have accumulated from tree mortality due to beetle infestation, needle fall and other conifer litter. Given the current stand structures and fuel loadings, the Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project is rated as high fire hazard and is now susceptible to a stand replacement or uncharacteristically intense fire.

Most of the Friend Creek area is in Condition Class 3, where fire regimes have been significantly altered from historic ranges. There exists a high risk of losing key ecosystem components (most vegetation including old growth trees) from fire. Fire frequencies have departed from historical frequencies by multiple return intervals, and vegetation has been significantly altered from historic norms.

The wildfires occurring at present in similar vegetation on the Douglas District and elsewhere in Wyoming are not low intensity maintenance burns, but are stand replacement or uncharacteristically intense wildfires that kill 80% or more of the existing vegetation. These fires have the potential to cause significant damage to public lands and to private lands and structures. Private lands in and around the Friend Creek Fuels Reduction project area consist of ponderosa pine stands mixed with meadows. Much of the private lands have vegetation and fuels in a similar condition to the federal lands. Improvements include houses on small lots to small acreages and outbuildings.

To meet current direction and the intent of the HFI and the National Fire Plan, the Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project was initiated to move the current conditions on federal lands in the WUI closer to the desired future condition of a more open, large-tree dominated structure that is less susceptible to large-scale, stand replacing fire events. After treatment, fire should function as a stand maintenance process rather than a stand replacement mechanism within treated areas. The Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project proposes to reduce fire hazard and increase stand vigor by thinning dense conifer stands and reducing natural fuel accumulations by using prescribed fire. This will reduce wildland fire spread and improve the ability to suppress fires and protect both public lands and private property. Fire hazard will be reduced and the condition class will be changed through the application of this treatment. Complementary efforts to change conditions and reduce fire hazard on private property within the Friend Creek area is planned through the combined efforts of the Albany County and the Wyoming Department of Forestry.

Proposed Action

The U.S. Forest Service proposes treatment of approximately 500 acres to reduce fire hazard and increase stand health within the Friend Creek Fuels Reduction Project Area. This would be accomplished by reducing the accumulated natural fuels through a mix of fuel treatments including thinning, machine and hand slash piling, and prescribed burning.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

The District Ranger will issue a decision based on the project analysis, whether the proposed actions will proceed, or as an alternative project addressing design features and monitoring requirements.

Comments Requested

At this time the Forest Service seeks information, comments and other assistance from Federal, state, and local agencies, and other individuals or organizations that have an interest in or could be affected by the proposed action. Specific comments are the most useful for the identification of issues and development and analysis of alternatives to the proposal.

No public participation other than this request for comments is planned. All persons who provide comment in response to this request will continue to receive information about this project and will be included in any additional public participation effort that may occur. Those who do not respond will not receive additional information. To be able to appeal any person, non-federal agency or entity has to provide comment or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the close of the comment period which is 30 days following the publication of the legal notice in the Casper Star Newspaper. This is the formal comment period. No other public scoping is planned.

The name and mailing address of the commenter must be provided with his/her comments for appellant standing and so that future documents pertaining to this environmental analysis and the decision can be provided to them. 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 persons submitting anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 215.

Send written comments to the Responsible Official: Robert M. Sprentall, District Ranger, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland, Douglas Ranger District, 2250 East Richards Street, Douglas, WY 82633, Attention: Marilee Houtler. Faxed comments will also be accepted at: 307-358-3072.

E-mail comments may be sent to: comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt-douglas-thunder-basin@fs.fed.us. Our system will accept email, rtf and word formats. If comments are electronically mailed, the sender should receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive such confirmation, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Comments may be hand delivered to the Douglas Ranger District office between 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays.

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 requester 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 requester that the comments may be resubmitted with name and address within 10 days.

Contact Person Information

Clay Westbrook, ZFMO, Douglas Ranger District, 2250 East Richards Street, Douglas WY 82633-8922. Telephone 307-358-4690.

This Public Scoping Notice and the project map are available on the Worldwide Web at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr/projects/foresthalth/index.shtml>

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