



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

January 2008



Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction Project

Scoping Document and Request for Comments

Laramie Ranger District

**MEDICINE BOW-ROUTT NATIONAL FORESTS &
THUNDER BASIN NATIONAL GRASSLAND**

Albany County, Wyoming

T.12 & 13N, R.78, 79, & 80W.

Responsible Official:

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INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service is seeking public comments on a proposal to implement timber harvest activities to reduce the spread of mountain pine beetles (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) and spruce bark beetles (*Dendroctonus rufipennis*) in the Spruce Gulch analysis area (see the attached Vicinity Map). The proposal also includes reducing the risk and hazard of catastrophic wildfire in proximity of private lands and homes located within and adjacent to the analysis area boundary. Your comments on the information provided below will help us: 1) Fine-tune our 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 (see pages 4 – 6) and to submit your comments on it by **February 15, 2008**.

In addition to this opportunity to comment, the Laramie Ranger District will also be hosting an **Open House meeting** for the Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction project. The Open House meeting will be held on **January 31, 2008** at the Howard Johnson's Motel at Foster's Country Corner located at the I-80 and Snowy Range exit (Exit 311). The meeting will begin at 3:00 p.m. and last until 7:00 p.m. Forest Service employees assigned to the Spruce Gulch analysis will be available to discuss and answer any questions the public may have about the proposal described below.

ANALYSIS AREA LOCATION

The Spruce Gulch Analysis Area is located approximately 40 miles southwest of Laramie, Wyoming and 25 miles north of Walden, Colorado, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland (see attached map). It is located entirely on the Laramie Ranger District in Albany County, Wyoming, T.12N. & T13N., R.78W., 79W., & 80W. The analysis area encompasses approximately 32,322 acres, most of which are located within the Pelton Creek watershed and its related tributaries. There are approximately 390 acres of private land and 150 acres of State of Wyoming land within the analysis area boundary. Roughly 4,185 acres in the western portion of the analysis area are located within the Platte River Wilderness Area. The main access routes into the area are via National Forest System Road (NFSR) 898 (Pelton Creek Road), NFSR 530 (Spruce Gulch Road), and State Highway 230 that passes through the southeastern part of the area.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in mountain pine beetle activity and conifer tree mortality in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming. In an attempt to define and track the effects of the infestation, entomologists from the Lakewood Service Center in Lakewood, Colorado were employed to analyze aerial survey data and ground survey data sets of forests containing lodgepole pine at risk for mountain pine beetle infestation. Results from the analysis (LSC-07-06) confirmed the following: 1) the mountain pine beetle is at epidemic levels; and 2) they are not likely to depart from their current course unless a period of prolonged and severe low temperatures (<-30° F) occurs during late fall-winter-early spring months.

Based on the above analysis, the Rocky Mountain Regional Office issued a Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic Declaration for northern Colorado and southern Wyoming on June 25, 2007. The declaration encompasses the Spruce Gulch analysis area. The declaration allows Forest

Supervisors of the affected National Forests to implement streamlined National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) authorities offered by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA 2003) if they determine that ecosystem components are threatened by the beetles.

On October 1, 2007, the Forest Supervisor of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests determined that ecosystem components in the Spruce Gulch analysis area are threatened by the beetle infestation. She further determined that the project is authorized under Section 102(a)(1) (Federal land in wildland-urban interface areas) and Section 102(a)(4) (insect and disease epidemics) of the HFRA. Accordingly, the Laramie Ranger District will be completing the NEPA analysis for the Spruce Gulch project under the HFRA, Title I, Section 104.

The HFRA provides for expedited analysis and treatments of lands that are at risk of wildland fire, have experienced windthrow or blowdown, or are at risk of insect and disease epidemics. Projects authorized under the HFRA are exempt from the notice, comment, and appeal procedures set out at 36 CFR 215. Instead, they are subject to a separate review and objections process, as outlined in 36 CFR 218, subpart A (see *Analysis Schedule* for more details on this process).

The Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement to analyze and disclose the environmental effects of this proposal. As such, a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement was published in the Federal Register on January 17, 2008.

EXISTING CONDITION

Forest Insects

Aerial survey data of the Spruce Gulch Analysis Area for the period from 1999 through 2004 were examined for spruce beetle and mountain pine beetle related mortality in Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine stands, respectively. The data demonstrate an increasing number of dying spruce trees killed by spruce beetle and lodgepole pine trees killed by mountain pine beetle during this time period. For example, the number of acres affected by bark beetle increased from incidental acres affected in 1999 to 5,538 acres in 2006. Further, although the exact expansion of acres affected as of the 2007 aerial survey has not yet been calculated, a review of the preliminary map indicates a continued expansion of affected acres on a large scale. This expansion was verified by on-the-ground reconnaissance of the area during the summer of 2007. The findings indicate that losses of lodgepole pine, and the minor component of spruce, have increased significantly in number and extent within the Spruce Gulch analysis area over the past seven years and exceed endemic-level losses to these bark beetles.

Ground surveys were conducted in 2006 in the adjacent Devils Gate analysis area, located to the north of the Spruce Gulch analysis area. Survey results demonstrated a greater than tenfold increase in the number of trees infested with bark beetles between the 2005 and 2006 field seasons, further verifying a rapidly increasing trend in mountain pine beetle populations. Ground reconnaissance within the Spruce Gulch analysis area indicated similar impacts by bark beetle. This was expected given the similarity of topography, stand conditions, and climatic conditions.

Stand data collected during the ground surveys indicate that conditions are favorable for continued losses to bark beetle in the future; in many of the surveyed stands, salvage of bark

beetle related mortality is the only option versus prevention treatments. Stands composed of large diameter pine and/or spruce with high basal area are considered to be at moderate to high risk of attack if increasing populations of beetle are present in the area and within the stands. Considering the aerial survey analysis, the ground reconnaissance results, current stand conditions, and the recent drought conditions, it appears that the current beetle infestations represent a range of late-stage to early-stage levels of infestations throughout the analysis area, with the area west of Pelton Creek being most severely affected.

Wildland-urban Interface Areas

Wildland-urban interface areas were identified under the National Fire Plan as having the highest priority for reducing forested areas prone to fire. Under the National Fire Plan and the Revised Medicine Bow National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan 2003), the Forest Service is directed to work cooperatively with private and county officials on thinning, planned burns, and forest restoration projects within these interface areas.

In 2004, Land Stewardship Associates, in collaboration with the Forest Service and Albany County Fire, completed the Albany County Wildfire Hazard Assessment and Mitigation Plan for wildland-urban interface communities within Albany County. The Plan identified Mountain Home/Wycolo, Wold Tract, Pelton Creek properties, and Porter Ranch as high priority projects in Albany County. All of these areas are within or adjacent to the Spruce Gulch analysis area.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

In accordance with Title 1, Section 104 of the HFRA the Forest Service engaged in a collaborative process with local stakeholders prior to developing the Proposed Action described below. Members of the collaborative group included, but were not limited to, private landowners within or adjacent to the analysis area boundary, timber industry representatives, State and local government officials, and a member of Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, a local public interest group. The collaborators participated in three meetings hosted by the Forest Service during the months of November and December of 2007. As a result of the collaborative effort and recommendations provided by Forest Service resource specialists, the initial proposal set forth by the District Timber Staff Officer was substantially reduced, both in terms of proposed acres to be harvested and miles of road to be constructed. Tables 1 and 2 (pgs. 5 and 6, respectively), as well as the attached maps, display the differences between the initial proposal and the Proposed Action.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to reduce current mountain pine beetle populations in forested stands dominated by lodgepole pine trees, decrease the risk and hazard of catastrophic wildfire in the proximity of private lands and homes, and to reduce the susceptibility of vegetation to catastrophic fire and further mountain pine beetle attacks.

The project is needed to:

- Reduce the threat of future beetle infestations in stands that have a moderate to high beetle risk;

- Reduce the risk of high intensity/high severity wildfires within treatment areas by reducing hazardous fuel loadings associated with treatments and beetle killed trees;
- Reduce the effects of tree mortality on the overall health, scenic quality, and condition of forested areas; and
- Salvage forest products from forested lands classified as being suitable to keep them in production and positively contributing to the Forest's Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ).

The action responds to goals and objectives outlined in the Revised Medicine Bow Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, December 2003) and helps move the analysis area towards desired conditions described in that Plan. Specifically, it responds to:

Goal 1 – Ensure Sustainable Ecosystems

Promote ecosystem health and conservation using a collaborative approach to sustain the Nation's forests, grasslands, and watersheds (pg. 1-2).

Subgoal 1.c: When appropriate or where necessary to meet resource management objectives, increase the amount of forests and rangelands restored to or maintained in a healthy condition with reduced risk and damage from fires, insects and diseases, and invasive species (pg 1-5).

Objective 2: Within 15 years, implement vegetation management practices to reduce the threat of wildfire damage to communities and to reduce fuel loadings in the interface next to homes, cabins, and other structures (pg. 1-5).

Objective 3: Within 10 years, implement vegetation management activities in areas most susceptible to losses from insects and disease as directed in management area and geographic area direction (pg. 1-6).

Strategy f: Limit mortality from insect and disease outbreaks in management areas where primary emphasis is timber production or developed recreation (pg. 1-6).

Strategy g: Plan management activities by considering the potential for insect and disease outbreaks. Design management activities to meet or enhance management area objectives (pg. 1-6).

Goal 2 – Multiple Benefits to People

Provide a variety of uses, values, products, and services for present and future generations by managing within the capability of sustainable ecosystems (pg. 1-7).

Subgoal 2.c: Improve the capability of the Nation's forests and rangelands to provide a desired sustainable level of uses, values, products, and services (pg. 1-9).

Objective 1: Between the Medicine Bow and Routt National Forests, implement a consistent timber program each year (pg. 1-9).

PROPOSED ACTION (Incorporates Collaborative Efforts)

The HFRA recognizes healthy forests or forest health as an important part of forest management. The Proposed Action responds directly to forest health objectives as described in the HFRA.

Under the Proposed Action, the Laramie Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests would implement a variety of bark beetle related salvage, suppression, and prevention silvicultural treatments and hazardous fuels abatement treatments on approximately 4,369 acres.

Current estimates identify 1,859 acres of clearcutting, 146 acres of commercial thinning, 38 acres of overstory removal, and 2,326 acres of adaptive management prescriptions (see Table 1). Adaptive management prescriptions include salvage, sanitation/salvage, shelterwood, group selection, individual tree selection, commercial thinning, and overstory removal¹. Although treatment locations (units) have been determined, adaptive management strategies are proposed on these acres because it would be difficult, at this point in time, to determine the exact timing, treatment types, and specific amounts of treatment type that would best address the rapidly spreading mountain pine beetle epidemic. The treatments would be located primarily within Forest Plan Management Areas (MAs) 5.15 - Forest Products, Ecological Maintenance and Restoration and 7.1 - Residential/Forest Interface, with a small amount of treatments within MA 5.13 – Forest Products.

Approximately 904 of the 4,369 acres identified above fall within MA 7.1 - Residential/Forest Interface; these acres would be managed using a combination of silvicultural treatments to reduce hazardous fuels. Management activities would generally occur less than one-half mile, or as identified within specific community wildfire protection plans, from the identified communities and would be subordinate to more restrictive management areas. Appropriate treatment boundaries would be based on site-specific conditions such as topography, vegetation conditions, and fuel loadings.

Approximately 0.3 miles of specified road construction, 2.7 miles of temporary road construction, and 8.8 miles of road reconstruction could be required for project implementation (see Table 2). The final assessment of road needs has not been determined, and could be more or less. To accommodate the amount of harvest and road construction, the proposal may include some soil and water projects to mitigate road related problems.

Table 1: Proposed Harvest Acres by Silvicultural Prescription

Treatment	Proposed Action* (acres)	Initial Proposal (acres)
Clearcut	1,859	2,396
Clearcut-POL	146	146
Overstory Removal	38	38
Adaptive Management	1,833	2,650
Adaptive Management-Lynx (30% retention)**	493	913
TOTAL	4,369 acres	6,143

* As a result of the collaborative effort and recommendations provided by the District Wildlife Biologist, the Proposed Action was reduced by 1,774 acres.

** Adaptive Management units for lynx require that 30 percent of the overstory (forest canopy) is retained.

¹ Silvicultural prescriptions are described in Appendix A of this document.

Table 2: Proposed Road Construction

Proposed Action			
Type of Road	New Construction	Reconstruction Existing	Total Miles*
Specified	0.3 miles	7.8 miles	8.1 miles
Temporary	2.7 miles	1.0 miles	3.7 miles
TOTAL	3.0 miles	8.8 miles	11.8 miles
Initial Proposal			
Type of Road	New Construction	Reconstruction Existing	Total Miles
Specified	10.1 miles	11.8 miles	21.9 miles
Temporary	3.1 miles	1.0 mile	4.1 miles
TOTAL	13.2 miles	12.8 miles	26.0 miles

* As a result of the collaborative effort and recommendations provided by Forest Service resource specialists, total road construction/reconstruction miles were reduced by 14.2.

Note: Forest-wide Direction contained in the Medicine Bow Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan 2003) generally limits the size of openings created by even-aged management (e.g. clearcuts) to 40 acres (Forest Plan page 1-35). Exceptions are granted, however, in areas that have experienced natural catastrophic conditions such as fire, insect or disease attacks, or windstorms. The Spruce Gulch Proposed Action currently proposes a clearcut prescription on 49 units (totaling 1,859 acres), 22 of which exceed the 40 acre maximum size limitation. The largest proposed clearcut area is 236 acres; this area is a combination of three adjacent units. The majority of the other units are between 41 and 80 acres. These larger clearcut units primarily fall within MA 5.15 (Ecological Restoration) which allows created openings as large as 250 acres (Forest Plan page 2-63, Vegetation Guideline #2).

Projects involving units that exceed the 40 acre maximum size limitation typically require a 60-day comment period. The 60 days does not necessarily need to occur at the same time; it may be distributed over several comment periods. In the case of the Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction project, the 60-day comment requirement will be met via this Scoping period and the 45-day comment period that is required for the Environmental Impact Statement.

FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

In addition to Forest Plan Goals and Objectives identified above, the Forest Plan provides guidance at three different geographic scales. The broadest scale, which outlines the most general and basic direction, is applicable to the entire forest (Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines). From there, the direction becomes more focused and applies to Geographic Areas and Management Areas, respectively. Any proposal to implement the Forest Plan, including the Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction proposal, must consider the direction provided at each scale. The following information identifies how the Proposed Action responds to direction provided at the three geographic scales.

Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines

- In the water influence zone (WIZ) next to perennial and intermittent streams, lakes, and wetlands, allow only those actions that maintain or improve long-term stream health and riparian condition. *(Standard, p. 1-28)*
- Conduct actions so that stream patterns, geometry, and habitats are maintained or improved toward robust stream health. *(Standard, p. 1-29)*
- In watersheds containing aquatic, wetland or riparian dependent TES species, allow activities and uses within 300 feet or the top of the inner gorge, (whichever is greater), of perennial and intermittent streams, wetlands and lakes (over ¼ acre) only if onsite analysis shows that long-term hydrologic and riparian function, channel stability, riparian and stream habitat will be maintained or improved. *(Standard, p. 1-28)*
- Manage old forest to retain or achieve at least the minimum percentages of old growth by cover type² by mountain range. If stands meeting the old growth definition do not exist at these percentages, manage additional stands that are closest to meeting old growth criteria as recruitment old growth to meet these desired percentages. *(Standard, p. 1-31)*
- Limit management of stands to actions necessary to maintain or restore old growth composition and structure. *(Standard, p. 1-31)*
- Operations (such as timber harvest and other vegetative treatments) and road and motorized trail construction and management should be conducted to create patch sizes of sufficient area or appropriate spatial pattern to serve the habitat needs of species or communities at risk. *(Guideline, p. 1-31)*
- Identify and map old growth blocks that mimic natural patch size and distribution. Include non-linear, unfragmented blocks (over 300 acres) where available. Old growth in small, scattered stands, larger patches, and streamside stretches shall be maintained to produce a pattern that is well distributed across the landscape by making sure that some old growth is maintained in every Geographic Area. Consider connectivity when identifying scattered stands. *(Guideline, p. 1-31)*
- When managing vegetation, maintain existing, or move towards desired patch size, distribution, abundance and/or edge-to-interior ratios, which are characteristic of natural disturbances (fire, insects, and diseases) representative of the cover types, measured at the Geographic Area scale. *(Guideline, p. 1-32)*
- Use a 40 –acre maximum size for openings created by even-aged management, regardless of forest type, with the following exceptions: Where larger openings are the result of natural catastrophic condition of fire, insect or disease attack, or windthrow. *(Standard, p. 1-35)*
- Timber harvest units will be designed to retain snags and snag recruitments according to Forest Plan Table 1-11. Retained snags and snag recruits are designated as wildlife trees and will be left on site if blown over. *(Standard, p. 1-37)*
- Final timber harvest units will be designed to retain coarse woody debris well distributed in accordance with the ranges specified in the Forest Plan Table 1-12. Unmerchantable trees should be left standing to replace downed wood that is expected to be lost during the site preparation treatment or if the existing material does not meet the desired tonnage. *(Standard, p. 1-38)*
- The design of a silviculture treatment should emulate the pattern and frequency of natural disturbances found in the landscape being treated. *(Guideline, p. 1-39)*
- Allow no loss or degradation of known or historic habitat for the boreal toad, wood frog or northern leopard frog. *(Standard, p. 1-44)*

² Spruce/fir - 25%; Lodgepole - 15%; Ponderosa pine - 25%; Aspen – 20%

- During project planning, if potential habitat occurs in the project area, survey for threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species on the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s species list for the Forest. Provide mitigation of potential adverse effects for species present. *(Standard, p. 1-44)*
- Activities will be managed to avoid disturbance to sensitive species and species of local concern, which would result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of population viability. The protection will vary depending on the species, potential for disturbance, topography, location of important habitat components and other pertinent factors. Special attention will be given during breeding, young rearing, and other times which are critical to survival of both flora and fauna *(Standard, p. 1-44)*
- Unless a broad scale assessment has been completed that substantiates different historical levels of unsuitable habitat, limit disturbance within each LAU as follows: if more than 30% of lynx habitat within an LAU on NFS lands is currently in unsuitable condition, no further reduction of suitable conditions shall occur as a result of vegetation management activities or practices. Wildland Fire Use practices and activities that restore ecological processes are an exception. *(Standard, p. 1-45)*
- Timber management practices, such as timber harvest and salvage sales, shall not change more than 15% of lynx habitat within an LAU to an unsuitable condition within a 10-year period. *(Standard, p. 1-45)*
- Reduce the threat of wildfire to public and private developments by following guidelines in the National Fire Protection Association Publication 299, Protection of Life and Property from Wildfire, and reduce the fuel load to acceptable levels. *(Guideline, p. 1-49)*
- Use integrated pest management techniques, including silviculture treatments, to meet management area objectives. Base treatments activities on achieving multiple use and ecosystem management objectives and reducing risks to adjacent private and public lands. Give priority to areas in which values to be protected exceed cost of protection; for example, areas adjacent to subdivisions, recreation sites, suitable timberlands, or areas of concentrated public use. *(Guideline, p. 1-50)*
- Use vegetation management practices to meet objectives and reduce risk of insects and disease. Give priority to cover types identified as moderate to high risk. *(Guideline, p. 1-50)*
- In project plans, consider existing infestations of insects or disease within the project area. Design activities to minimize risk of spreading infestation and meet multiple use and ecological objectives. *(Guideline, p. 1-50)*

Geographic Area Direction

A geographic area (GA) is a watershed or aggregation of watersheds, 125,000 acres or smaller, in which management is directed toward achieving a specified desired condition. Geographic areas link the Forest Plan to management at a landscape or watershed scale. The Spruce Gulch analysis area includes portions of two (2) Geographic Areas in the Snowy Range.

Table 3: Geographic Area Acres within the Analysis Area

Geographic Area (GA)	Total GA Acres	Analysis Area Acres & % of GA
Lower Douglas Creek	101,910	24,462 (24%)
Platte River	59,955	7,860 (13%)
TOTAL	161,865	*32,322

*Includes private land in total.

The Forest Plan contains the following GA direction that is pertinent to this analysis:

Lower Douglas Creek GA

Desired Condition:

- Lodgepole pine will continue to be the dominant cover type, with increasing amounts of aspen in the lower elevation drainages in the southern and eastern portions. In areas allocated to Management Areas 5.13 and 5.15, a variety of successional stages will be present. (p. 3-71)
- Natural processes and vegetation patterns will be apparent in the area. This area will be dominated by older late successional habitats with occasional increases of early successional habitats. (p. 3-71)

Platte River GA

Desired Condition:

- Lodgepole pine will continue to be the dominant cover type. In areas allocated to Management Areas 5.13 and 5.15, a variety of tree sizes and successional habitats will be present. (p. 3-87)
- Natural processes and vegetation patterns will be apparent in these areas. Forested portions of these areas will be dominated by older late successional habitats with occasional increases of early successional habitats as a result of fire, insects, and disease. (p. 3-87)

Management Area Emphasis

Management emphasis within the analysis area is distributed among several Forest Plan management area prescriptions. The descriptions of each management area prescription include: theme, setting, desired condition, and standards and guidelines. This information can be found in the Forest Plan Chapter 2, pp. 2-1 through 2-80.

Table 2: Management Area Distribution within the Analysis Area

#	Management Area (MA) Prescription	Acres in AA
1.13	Wilderness, Semi-primitive	4,185
1.31	Backcountry Recreation, Year-round Nonmotorized	1,725
5.13	Forest Products	214
5.15	Forest Products, Ecological Maintenance and Restoration	25,658
7.1	Residential/Forest Interface	*
	Private Lands	390
	State Lands	150
	TOTAL	32,322

*The Forest Plan does not include acreage estimates for this MA. Their boundaries are determined at the project level.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

The following preliminary issues and concerns were identified via internal scoping with Forest Service resource specialists and collaboration efforts:

- 1) Beetle spread from NFS lands to adjacent private lands;
- 2) Cumulative impacts of past and proposed treatments;
- 3) Intensity of vegetative treatments and slash disposal adjacent to wildland-urban interface areas;
- 4) Ingress/egress for forest users and property owners; and
- 5) Management of mapped and inventoried old growth stands.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

The Responsible Official for the Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction project is the Laramie District Ranger of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

The Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction Environmental Impact Statement will evaluate site-specific management proposals, consider alternatives to the Proposed Action, and analyze the effects of the activities proposed in the alternatives. It will form the basis for the Responsible Official to determine:

- Whether or not the Proposed Action and alternatives are responsive to the issues, are consistent with Forest Plan direction, meet the purpose and need, and are consistent with other related laws and regulations directing National Forest management activities;
- Whether or not the information in the analysis is sufficient to implement the proposed activities;
- Which actions, if any, to approve; and
- What type of design criteria or monitoring requirements will be necessary for project implementation?

ANALYSIS SCHEDULE

The information below displays the anticipated analysis schedule.

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| • Review of project area by IDT | Summer/Fall 2007 |
| • Collaboration Meetings | Nov/Dec 2007 |
| • Scoping/Public Meetings | January 2008 |
| • Determine Key Issues | February 2008 |
| • Specialist Reports | March 21, 2008 |
| • Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) | April 11, 2008 |
| • End of 45-day Comment Period | May 27, 2008 |
| • Final EIS | June 30, 2008 |
| • End of 30-day Objection Period | July 31, 2008 |
| • End of 30-day Objection Response Period | August 30, 2008 |
| • Record of Decision | September 5, 2008 |

For authorized HFRA projects on National Forest System lands, the standard administrative appeals process required by 36 CFR 215 – “Notice, Comment, and Appeal Procedures for National Forest System Projects and Activities” is replaced by a Predecisional objection process

required by 36 CFR 218 – “Predecisional Administrative Review Process”; the objection process occurs before a final decision is made.

Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) prepared for HFRA projects are subject to a formal 45-day comment period because of separate National Environmental Policy Act requirements. As previously mentioned, an EIS is being prepared for the Spruce Gulch Bark Beetle and Fuels Reduction Project. Consequently, **only those who submit “specific written comments” on the proposed project during the 45-day comment period for the Draft EIS will be eligible to file an objection.** Under this arrangement, an objector will have 30 days following completion of the Final EIS to raise objections to the proposal. The project cannot go forward until all objections have been responded to within a 30-day time frame. Once all objections have been responded to, a Record of Decision for the Final EIS will be published and the project will be allowed to proceed.

While comments in response to this Scoping Document are requested and appreciated, they do not entitle you to participate in the objection process. Only those individuals and organizations who submit comments during the 45-day formal comment period for the Draft EIS may file an objection.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This scoping statement represents an early stage in the analysis process. After receiving your comments, we will identify and analyze the issues raised, finalize the Proposed Action, and if necessary, develop alternatives to the Proposed Action. Current plans are to complete the NEPA analysis and make a decision whether or not to implement the Proposed Action or another alternative during the fall of 2008.

Please respond with comments specific to this proposal by **February 15, 2008**. Written comments should be submitted to the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, Attn: Laramie District Ranger, 2468 Jackson Street, Laramie, Wyoming, 82070. Those people responding to this scoping letter will be included on the mailing list for future information related to this project.

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 object the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 218. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR, Subpart B, Section 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 of confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 10 days.

Appendix A

Description of Bark Beetle Prescriptions:

***CLEARCUT (CC)** - Clearcutting will be applied to stands which have either culminated in mean annual increment of growth; have a high infestation of dwarf mistletoe in association with low to moderate infestation of bark beetle; or a large number of dead and dying trees due to bark beetles (areas where 50% or more of the trees on a per acre basis are dead or dying) and inadequate understory to meet stocking standards. Slash treatments may be by any of the following methods: prescribed burning, lop and scatter, machine pile and burn, machine trampling or roller chopping. Slash treatment is dependent on the density of the residual fuel density, topography, soils, fuels abatement considerations, and available seed source. The lodgepole pine in this area has mix of serotinous and non-serotinous cones; so seed will be dispersed from a mix of seed from slash or from cones that mature and open while on trees internal or external to the clearcut. Should natural seeding result in inadequate stocking, artificial regeneration will be done to bring the sites to minimum stocking standards.

***SHELTERWOOD – PREP CUT (SW-P)**- Under this first step of what is typically a three-step shelterwood, a preparatory or prep cut is made, harvesting approximately 25-40% of the existing overstory. This first entry concentrates on removing trees with insects or diseased and/or poor form, leaving the healthiest trees. Along with improving the health of the stand, the objective of this first entry is to test for and help develop wind firmness in the retained trees, setting the stand up for a future seed cut to promote new regeneration. This treatment will be applied to stands having an existing even-aged stand structure, a low incidence of mountain pine beetle or spruce beetle activity (areas where less than 15% of the trees on a per acre basis are dead or dying) and a low to moderate infestation of dwarf mistletoe. The objective is to open the stand up by removing the trees in the larger diameter classes and thus lower the basal area (BA) per acre and average tree diameter per acre. Most of these stands have a good mix of species and diameter classes and removing the larger diameter trees would leave a residual stand capable of maintaining stocking and stand productivity. Slash is typically lopped and scattered unless fuels abatement needs dictate a more substantial removal.

***SHELTERWOOD - SEED CUT (SW-S)** Under this second step of what is typically a three-step shelterwood, a seed cut is made, harvesting approximately 40-70% of the existing overstory. This second entry concentrates on removing trees with insects or disease and/or poor form opening up the stand further for growing space, leaving the healthiest trees to provide a seed source for new regeneration. This treatment will be applied to stands with a somewhat open overstory and established conifer understory. In most stands this understory is a mix of species averaging 100 to 300 stems per acre and 1' to 6' in height and in some areas up to 20' in height. Engelmann spruce less than 10" dbh, if available, will be favored over other species as seed trees. Lodgepole pine having a moderate to high infection of dwarf mistletoe should be removed. Typically between 40 and 60 trees per acre (60 trees per acre is approximately a 26' x 26' spacing) will be left to provide a seed source and protection to the site and also help maintain a forested appearance. Slash is typically lopped and scattered unless fuels abatement needs dictate a more substantial removal.

***SHELTERWOOD – REMOVAL CUT (OR)** – Typically call an Overstory Removal, this is the final step of what is a two or three-step shelterwood. A removal step will be applied to stands with a uniformly established understory of conifer. The understory averages 200 to 1000 stems per acre and 2' to 30' in height. These stands are usually the result of a past shelterwood

harvests or are naturally occurring stands that simulate shelterwood type treatments. Removing the overstory has the advantages of improving the growth of the residual stand, removing trees susceptible to or infested by mountain pine beetle or spruce beetle, and reducing the spread of dwarf mistletoe. Slash is typically lopped and scattered unless fuels abatement needs dictate a more substantial removal.

***GROUP SELECTION** - Group selection will be applied to stands with a low to moderate beetle hazard rating, a low incidence of mountain pine beetle or spruce beetle activity (areas where less than 15% of the trees on a per acre basis are dead or dying) and a low to moderate infestation of dwarf mistletoe. The objective is to remove clumps of beetle infested trees and clumps of larger diameter trees. Natural regeneration is expected but should natural seeding result in inadequate stocking, artificial regeneration will be done to bring the sites to minimum stocking standards. Slash is typically lopped and scattered but mechanical treatment may be necessary to reduce slash concentrations and provide scarification for seedling establishment within the group cuts. *(Note: It is expected this treatment would be generally inapplicable in the Spruce Gulch Project due to the level of bark beetle in most stands, but may have application on a case-by-case basis in light to moderately infested stands, especially in areas within the lynx corridor.)*

***INDIVIDUAL SELECTION** - A variation of the selection method, individual tree selection will be applied to stands having an existing uneven-aged stand structure, a low incidence of mountain pine beetle or spruce beetle activity (areas where less than 15% of the trees on a per acre basis are dead or dying) and a low to moderate infestation of dwarf mistletoe. The objective is remove beetle infested trees and a large percentage of the trees susceptible to attack by either mountain pine beetle or spruce beetle but also try to meet a desired diameter distribution. This treatment typically allocates more trees to the medium and small diameter classes and fewer trees to the larger diameter classes. Stands with proportionately more large than small diameter trees are most likely to be infested and suffer greater losses. Most of these stands have a good mix of species and diameter classes and removing the larger diameter trees would leave a residual stand capable of maintaining stocking and stand productivity. Slash is typically lopped and scattered. *(Note: It is expected this treatment would be generally inapplicable in the Spruce Gulch Project due to the level of bark beetle in most stands, but may have application on a case-by-case basis in light to moderately infested stands, especially in areas within the lynx corridor.)*

***SANITATION/SALVAGE (S/S)** - This treatment will be applied to stands generally having a mountain pine beetle or spruce beetle incidence where 15% to 50% of the trees on a per acre basis are dead or dying, and generally low to moderate dwarf mistletoe levels. The objective is to open the stand up by removing dead and dying trees and healthy trees in the larger diameter classes. Removing these trees will help lower the basal area (BA) per acre and average tree diameter per acre. Bark beetle activity is at varying levels within these stands and will most likely increase. Most of these stands have a good mix of diameter classes and removing most of the larger diameter trees would leave a residual stand capable of maintaining stocking and stand productivity. Slash is typically lopped and scattered unless fuels abatement needs dictate a more substantial removal.

***SALVAGE (Svlg)** – This treatment includes removing the majority of the merchantable dead and dying timber. This treatment would be applied to stands having 50+% with existing dead and dying overstory, and generally low to moderate dwarf mistletoe levels in the understory. The salvage management action is to reduce fuels, remove potential hazard trees, and/or to create openings for future regeneration. Proposed for areas of forest where the beetles have run their course, an emphasis is made on harvesting merchantable dead lodgepole pine and Engelmann

spruce. These stands have a mix of size classes and removing most of the larger size trees would leave a residual stand capable of maintaining stocking and stand productivity. The residual stand may resemble an overstory removal with a mix of seedling/sapling and pole-sized trees, and have openings that resemble patch clearcuts. Slash is typically lopped and scattered but mechanical treatment may be necessary to reduce slash concentrations and provide scarification for seedling establishment.

***COMMERCIAL THINNING (CT)** - Proposed for immature lodgepole pine stands, under this treatment 40-50% of the existing overstory is thinned to promote a healthier stand and to produce future sawtimber. Normally the largest and most phenotypically desirable trees are retained in the stand, and damaged, diseased, intermediate, and suppressed trees are removed. The basic approach is usually to thin from below, but thinning from above may be necessary in stands with moderate to high losses, due to bark beetles activity within the stand. This treatment will be applied to stands with average diameters less than 7" DBH. Slash is typically lopped and scattered unless fuels abatement needs dictate a more substantial removal.

