

1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1. Introduction

This Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared to address the potential environmental effects of the Herring Park Management Project. The information in this EA will be used in making the decision regarding course of action to treat beetle infestation in the project area and reduce the potential for high intensity wildfires. The analysis in this EA complies with provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, and the National Forest Management Act (NFMA).

1.2. Description Of The Project

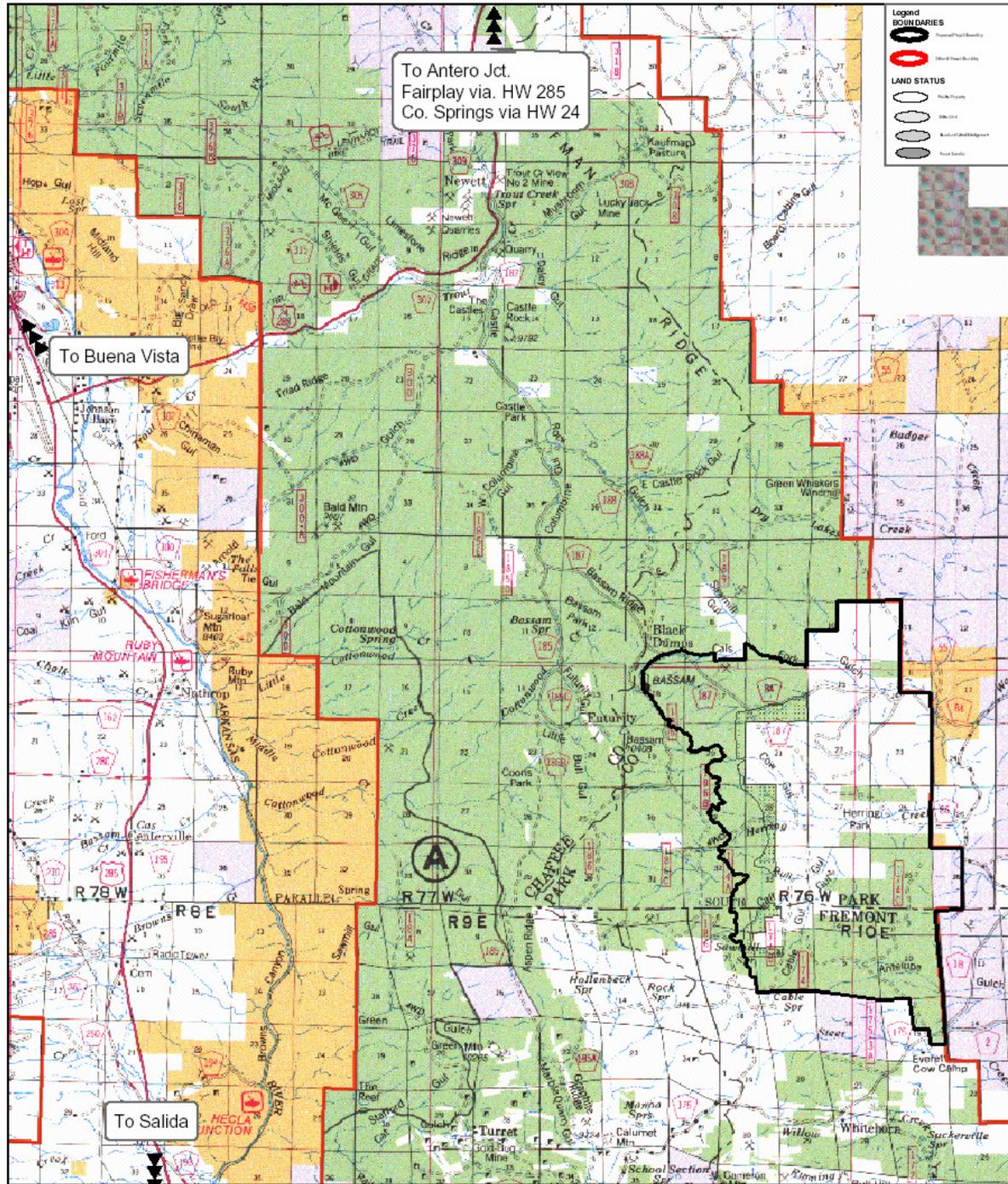
In accordance with the U.S. Forest Service's National Fire Plan of 2001 and the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the San Isabel and San Isabel National Forests (USFS 1984), the U.S. Forest Service's Salida Ranger District (USFS) plans to implement treatments to reduce spread of Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB) within a 13,494-acre analysis area within the San Isabel National Forest in Park County, Colorado.

Herring Park is comprised of several ownerships: federal land administered by the Forest Service (7,174 acres), state land (324 acres) and private land (5,969 acres) with a total acreage of 13,467 acres within the analysis area. The analysis area is located 8 miles southeast of Buena Vista and 10 miles south of Trout Creek Pass. Specifically, the Herring Park Analysis Area is located within all or parts of Township 15S, Range 76W; Township 51N, Range 9E; and Township 51N, Range 10E. The analysis area boundary is bordered to the north by Cals Fork Gulch, the eastern border is San Isabel National Forest boundary, the southern boundary is a ridge between Antelope Gulch and Steer Creek, and the western boundary is along Forest Service road 186. (See Figure 1.2.1).

Treatments would occur on approximately 3,081 acres (project area) within the analysis area and would include a combination of commercial and non-commercial means, as well as salvage operations, to reduce the spread of MPB and other pathogens, and reduce the potential for crown or high intensity fires. Prescribed fire would also be used to reduce fuel loadings throughout the project area; an additional 2,705 acres of montane grasslands will be burned with prescribed fire to stimulate forage production for wildlife and livestock. The actual area burned would be about 5,786 acres; this includes portions of the 3,081 acres proposed for vegetative treatment. In addition, the scope of the proposed action would include temporary road construction and reconstruction, temporary fire line construction, slash treatment, design criteria, and monitoring deemed necessary to reflect different ways of responding to the relevant issues. Proposed treatments are described in more detail in Chapter 2 – Proposed Action and Alternatives.

1.3. Purpose And Need

A MPB epidemic expanded into ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa* var. *scopulorum*) stands in the Herring Park analysis area in 2003. Prolonged drought in the area likely contributed to the expanding beetle population. Notable increases in MPB-caused mortality began in 2005 and populations are developing within the analysis area. Recent photo's surveys were conducted in 2005-2006 and the infestation in the analysis area is shown in Figure 1.3.1 and 1.3.2.



HERRING PARK PROJECT

Vicinity Map

3 1.5 0 3 Miles

1:480,507



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Figure 1.2.1

Impacts of large scale insect or disease infestations increase the potential for high intensity fires. While one of the primary purposes of the Herring Park Management Project is to reduce the spread of the MPB by removing infected trees and creating stand conditions that are less susceptible to this infestation, the proposed treatment will have other benefits. These include creating stands that are more resilient to disease as well as reducing forest canopy densities and ladder and ground fuels, including those caused by MPB mortality. The elimination of vegetative overcrowding through this treatment will also promote, enhance and expand aspen regeneration to improve wildlife habitat. The removal of small diameter material could help meet the Nation's Energy resource needs. The project seeks to address the following conditions and concerns in the analysis area that pose a variety of risks both to federal lands and to surrounding private property and communities:

- In overcrowded conditions, competition for limited nutrients weakens the vegetation, making the forests extremely vulnerable to disease and epidemic outbreaks of MPB and other invasive insects, pathogens, plants and pests. These impacts could spread to private lands, decreasing their aesthetics and property values.
- The existing fuel loading, combined with the effects of insect and disease outbreaks, create a potential for high intensity crown fires, jeopardizing public lands, private development, citizens, and firefighters. This is especially true where private property and structures are adjacent to National Forest lands. Suppression costs can be extremely high under these conditions.
- In the event of wildfires in the project area, more intense burning conditions resulting from dense forest conditions could reduce or eliminate potential habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.
- The potential increased intensity of wildfires in dense vegetation could create more extensive resource damage in the watershed, increasing the risk of higher levels of erosion and flooding, as well as increased levels of sediment flowing into the watershed and water supply.
- There is the opportunity to reduce the number unclassified roads within the project area.

1.4. Scope Of The Decision (Decision To Be Made)

The scope of actions to be addressed in this analysis is limited to site specific mechanical and prescribed fire treatments in the Herring Park analysis area of the Salida Ranger District in the San Isabel National Forest. The EA is tiered to the Forest Plan (USFS 1984a) as amended, and the Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision for the Forest Plan (USFS 1984b). It does not reanalyze the Management Area allocations already specified in the Forest Plan, nor does it re-examine federal regulations or USFS policy regarding insect and disease treatment on National Forest System lands.

The EA is not the decision document for the project. The Salida District Ranger is the responsible official who will decide which, if any management actions for this project will be implemented.

The decision will include all management requirements including design criteria and monitoring actions that will occur in association with the selected alternative. The decision of whether or not to implement the proposed action will be documented in the Decision Notice.

The District Ranger will also determine whether or not an EIS is required based on the significance of environmental effects (40 CFR 1509.9). If no significant effects are expected, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be issued by the District Ranger and the plan will be implemented.



Figure 1.3.1 Ponderosa pine killed by the Mountain Pine Beetles near Sawmill Springs. (June 2005)



Figure 1.3.2 Ponderosa pine killed by Mountain Pine Beetles at Bull Gulch looking south towards Calf Gulch. (October 2005)