

Land, Water and People

Where do we go from here?

By Paul Hancock

In recent months and years, the forests in Colorado have experienced unprecedented insect and disease outbreaks. Conditions in the forested ecosystems around us are changing. It's not news to me. The only constant we have is change. The question is then, where do we go from here?

A spruce beetle outbreak, southwest of Creede, is affecting tens of thousands of acres of spruce. In response to this and other changes to the landscape, the Forest initiated the Big Moose Vegetation Management Project. This project is by no means a little one, but neither are the changes we are witnessing.

We began a dialogue with the public regarding the situation several months ago. And, recently, we wrapped up the formal scoping process used to solicit the public for their comments and concerns about the proposed action. I would like to thank everyone for the comments they provided. Many people had strong opinions regarding the proposed action. Some showed support while others expressed opposition. Many comments expressed concern about physical and biological resources. Others expressed concerns about the affect to the human environment.

The Forest Service will analyze the comments we have received, develop alternatives to the proposed action, and do an in-depth analysis of the potential effects from implementing the alternatives. The analysis will then be published as a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, after which the public will have another formal opportunity to comment on the project before a decision is made. The decision, which I assure you, has not been made, will consider the potential effects described in the Final Environmental Impact Statement and describe what alternative was chosen and which actions will be implemented.

At this point though, I would like to address a couple of the misconceptions that arose during the scoping process. First, the prescribed burns were not proposed to address the spruce beetle infestation. The prescribed burns are intended to promote aspen regeneration because aspen populations are being overtaken by conifers. Meanwhile, the salvage harvests are proposed in timber management areas to respond to the changed conditions caused by the spruce beetle infestation.

Second, the Forest Service has a very successful record when implementing prescribed burns. The Rio Grande National Forest conducted several successful prescribed burns on hundreds of acres last year under very specific conditions. As a government agency our failures are known, but our successes are not.

Much of what is going to happen with this project is still unknown. Public involvement will continue because without the support from those most affected, there is little chance of successfully addressing the situation.

The Big Moose Vegetation Management Project is more than just cutting trees and burning the landscape. The project focuses on the next forested landscape. The conditions we know today are not what they were ten years ago. They are changing and the question we are dealing with now is where do we go from here?

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