



File Code: 1950

Date: January 26, 2006

Dear Friend of the Ashley National Forest:

The Vernal Ranger District is seeking your input on a proposal to implement mechanical and prescribed fire treatments to reduce fuel loadings and help reintroduce the historic fire regimes in the east end of the Vernal Ranger District. The treatments are planned in the Potholes Creek and Davenport Draw areas on Forest Service administered lands.

Three projects are proposed:

The Davenport Draw Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project is designed to reduce fire risk to private land and improvements located in the Davenport Draw area.

The Limber Flag Sanitation Harvest and Thinning Project will use mechanical treatments to remove inferior, damaged, stressed, overstocked and diseased trees in the East Fork of the Pothole Creek area.

The Potholes Prescribed Fire Project will treat vegetation in the Potholes watershed which encompasses the upper portions of Potholes Creek.

This letter and attached map will provide you with information on the background of the project, the purpose and need, the proposed action, the nature of decision to be made, documentation, as well as a request for your comments.

The Vernal Ranger District will be hosting an "Open House" in Vernal, Utah at the Ashley National Forest Supervisors Office, 355 N. Vernal Avenue, February 9, 2006, Thursday evening from 4:30 pm to 7:30 pm. The Open House will be held in the Interagency Fire Center conference room behind the Supervisor's Office. Resource professionals will be on hand to answer questions you might have and further explain specifics about the project as described below. More detailed maps and background information on analysis used to develop the project proposal will be available for your review. A comment form will be provided for any written comments on the project proposal you wish to leave. We encourage your attendance at the Open House all comments received at the Open House will be used in the public scoping process as explained at the end of this letter. Thank you.

### Location

The Potholes Creek and Davenport Draw areas of the Vernal Ranger District are located on the eastern crest of the Uinta Mountains at an elevation of approximately 9,000 feet. The legal description of the project areas are:



Davenport Draw Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

Salt Lake Sixth Principal Meridian, Township 1 North, Range 23 East, portions of sections 3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,15,17,18,19,20,30,31.

Uintah Meridian, Township 1 South, Range 23 East, portions of sections 6 & 7.

The Limber Flag Sanitation Harvest and Thinning Project

Uintah Meridian, Township 1 South, Range 22 East portions of sections 1, 11, 12.

The Potholes Prescribed Fire Project

Salt Lake Sixth Principal Meridian, Township 1 North, Range 23 East, All or portions of sections 26,27,34,35.

Uintah Meridian, Township 1 South, Range 22 East all or portions of sections 1,2,3,10,11,12,13,14,15.

The projects areas are located approximately twenty four miles northeast of Vernal, Utah and can be reached by traveling north on Highway 191 then east on the Diamond Mountain Road (Forest Road #048). Forest Roads #10255 and #10256 are located north of the Diamond Mountain Road and access the Potholes Creek area. The area is characterized by vegetated steep side slopes and narrow canyon bottoms.

**Background**

Due to the exclusion of fire, some Douglas fir, lodgepole and aspen on the east side of the Vernal Ranger District have fuel loadings and densities that predispose the stands to excessive damage from large fires including insect and disease activity . Additionally these fires may threaten private in-holdings along Davenport Draw, power lines to the west and a recreation yurt located on the slopes of Limber Flag Peak within the project area. The exclusion of natural fire over nearly a century on the east end of the Vernal Ranger District, however well intentioned, created conditions that were favorable to an epidemic of mountain pine beetle in the 1980s. Additionally the encroachment of conifers into aspen communities and into sage/grassland communities continues to diminish the quality of wildlife winter range and grazing forage in the area.

More recently, signs of increased bark beetle insect and disease activity have been identified in the project area.

The Potholes watershed (see attached project map) has previously been identified as a priority watershed on the forest for treatments where the need to reduce hazardous fuel loadings and reduce susceptibility to bark beetle infestation have been identified. Private land and improvements located east of the project site are listed as a Northeast Utah Community at Risk “Diamond Mountain Residential Area”.

In the 1970s mechanical treatment in the lodgepole pine and Douglas fir occurred in the upper end of Potholes Canyon.

### **Purpose and Need for Action**

The purpose and need is to reduce fuel loadings and help reintroduce the historic fire regimes in the project area. Currently the Ashley National Forest Fire Management Plan identifies the project area in a high risk zone where appropriate management suppression is usually aggressive suppression actions. Actions to treat fuel loadings are needed to help reduce the fire risk in the area and permit the management of natural fire ignitions to achieve resource benefits and save costly fire suppression expenditures. The aspen component in the project area is being crowded out and overtopped by mixed conifer species and is in need of fire to reduce competition and stimulate sprouting.

The Forest Rapid Assessment process identified additional objectives for this watershed including the need to protect adjacent Davenport Draw private lands, reduce damage from continuing insect disease activity and improve wildlife foraging habitat. Wildlife species currently at risk in the project area from catastrophic fire and vegetation encroachment into open areas include: Goshawk, Sage Grouse, Deer, Elk, raptors and Three Toed Woodpeckers.

There is a need to help protect improvements in and adjacent to the project location, this includes the Davenport Draw private lands and range improvements such as water developments, corrals and fences from wildfire and planned prescribed fire. Additionally there is a need to reduce fire risk in the vicinity of the Limber Flag recreational yurt located within the project area.

The upper drainage area of Potholes Canyon is experiencing increased insect and disease infestation, there is a need to promote diversity in age class, improve the likelihood of larger diameter tree development, reduce fire intensity and improve stand health to reduce insect and disease risk in affected stands.

### **Proposed Action**

The proposed action involves three projects as described below. Stewardship contracting is proposed to help provide revenue to improve wildlife habitat in and adjacent to the project area and assist in the funding of fuel reduction activities. Stewardship contracting would be used to allow the value of forest products to be exchanged for the service of wildlife habitat improvement and reducing fuels. Proposed stewardship projects include seeding, water developments, thinning understory vegetation, piling slash with follow up burning and reducing conifer encroachment in meadow areas.

### **Davenport Draw Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project.**

Mechanical treatments would be utilized to reduce hazards to the private lands and improvements located on the west portion of Davenport Draw adjacent to the forest boundary. Fuels would be treated with the use of chainsaws by hand labor. Merchantable treated material would be available as small products such as firewood, poles, etc., where access is available. A combination of hand piling and lopping and scattering would be used to dispose of slash. Follow up burning of slash would occur where fuel loadings exceed 10 tons per acre after thinning treatments are completed. Fuels treatments would increase canopy base height by limbing larger trees from the ground up to approximately eight feet. Smaller trees up to approximately 6 inches in diameter would be thinned. The treatments would occur approximately 300 feet out from private land to act as a shaded fuel break. Approximately 820 acres are proposed for treatment see attached project map.

### **Limber Flag Sanitation Harvest and Thinning Project.**

Mechanical treatments would be used to control bark beetle infestation by removing inferior, damaged, stressed, overstocked and diseased trees, reducing trees per acre and reducing crown density. Approximately 250 acres are proposed for pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, or sanitation harvest. It is estimated that approximately 70% of the stands are live conifers showing signs of insect and disease infestation. Tree species are primarily lodgepole pine but with sub-alpine fir and Douglas fir interspersed. The actual composition and percentage of live and dead will vary by individual stands. The sound dead over 8 inches dbh of all species will be removed. The residual stand will be protected from avoidable logging damage. The residual stand will be un-even aged with two or more canopy layers, since seedling and sapling regeneration currently exists under the stands proposed for treatment. A silvicultural prescription will be completed prior to treatment detailing cutting and thinning actions. The proposed sale is not in a roadless area, but is adjacent to one.

Skidding will be done by rubber tired skidders or tractors. Harvested areas will be confined to slopes less than 35%. Permanently wet areas large enough to map will be avoided in the harvesting operations.

It is anticipated the harvesting contracts will be for two to three years, with the normal operating season between June 15 and November 1.

In sale areas existing dead and down materials would be treated to help reduce ground fuels to approximately ten tons per acre. Treatment would be through removal of merchantable material, lopping and scattering, slash piling and prescribed fire. Stewardship contracting is being proposed to help assist in funding fuel reduction activities

Monitoring would include regeneration surveys after harvesting (3<sup>rd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> years) and noxious weed control (initial control and follow-up maintenance).

Skid trails would be water barred. Slash may be placed back on the skid trails on a site- specific basis.

### **Potholes Prescribed Fire Project.**

Prescribed fire would be used to treat approximately 5,951 acres; six burn areas have been identified. Ignition methods would be a combination of aerial and hand methods. Helicopters would be used with PSD and/or Helitorch ignition devices. Hand ignition would include the use of flares and drip torches. Additionally chain saws would be used to create fuel breaks to protect grazing and recreational improvements, plus provide fuel breaks for prescribed fire unit boundaries as needed.

Fire intensity and spread would be controlled through the use of backing fires, fuel moisture and wind monitoring to avoid large stand replacement fire, however torching and fire runs on steeper slopes would occur. Fire ignition would be limited to within the 5,951 acre project area. Some fire spread could occur outside the project area but would be controlled to remain within the analysis area boundary. See attached project map. The earliest that this proposed action would occur would be in the fall of 2006.

### **Decision Framework**

The responsible official will determine the appropriate mitigation measures to employ in protecting resources in the immediate project area. Whether or not to implement the proposed treatments as described, or make adjustments to the proposal based on information provided during the scoping period and results of evaluation and analysis.

I will make separate decisions for each of the three proposed treatment projects. The decisions will be based on the extent and type of treatments proposed and on the degree to which treatments will achieve the purpose and need and address key issues that may be identified.

### **Documentation**

In examining the authorities in Chapter 30 - Categorical Exclusion from Documentation, 1909.15 and in talking with member of the IDT team I feel the potential to use the following 31.2 - Categories of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo Are Required are valid

I expect the two projects listed below to be categorically excluded from documentation in an EIS or EA pending a determination that there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. I believe the Davenport Draw Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project that is designed to reduce fire risk to private land and improvements located in the Davenport Draw (cutting and thinning of the shaded fuel break not to exceed 1000 acres) fits within FSH 1909.15, 31.2, Category 10.

***“Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres.”*** For the Limber Flag Sanitation Harvest and Thinning Project that will use mechanical treatments to remove inferior, damaged, or diseased trees in the East Fork of the Pothole Creek area I propose using Category 14. ***“Commercial and non-Commercial sanitation harvest of trees to control insects or disease not to exceed 250 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction, including removal of infested/infected trees and adjacent live uninfested/uninfected trees as determined necessary to control the spread of insects or disease.”***

I am proposing to use authorities under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), passed in December of 2003 to analyze the Potholes Prescribed Fire Project. Title One of HFRA focuses on expedited hazardous fuel treatment for lands at risk of wildfire and insect and disease epidemics.

### **Request For Comments**

The public is invited to offer substantive comment at this time. We are running our scoping and comment period concurrently. Under new regulations effective June 4, 2003, a comment period can be at the Responsible Official's discretion. The comment period ends 30 days after the publication of the Legal Notice in the *Vernal Express*. Substantive comments are those within the scope of, are specific to, and have a direct relationship to the proposed actions, and include supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision. Each

individual or representative from each organization submitting substantive comments must either sign the comments or otherwise verify identity. Comments received in response to this notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project.

This comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. It is being provided pursuant to the July 2 and September 16, 2005, orders issued by the U. S. District Court for the Eastern District of California in Case No. CIV F-03-6386JKS. Those who provide timely and substantive comments will be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

Comments should include the information required pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3), as published in the federal register on March 22, 2005. Send your written comments to: Scott Steinberg, District Ranger, Vernal Ranger District, 355 North Vernal Avenue, Utah 84078. Comments may also be hand delivered to the above address during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday-Friday, excluding federal holidays. Hand delivered comments must be time and date stamped at the district office by close of business on the 30<sup>th</sup> calendar day following publication of the legal notice. Electronic comments should be sent to [comments-intermtn-ashley@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-intermtn-ashley@fs.fed.us). It would be most useful for the forest to receive your electronic comments in ms word (\*.doc) or rich text format (\*.rtf). Those using electronic means may submit a scanned signature. Otherwise another means of verifying the identity of the individual or organizational representative may be necessary for electronically submitted comments or comments received by phone. This is pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3)(b).

For additional information on this project, contact Scott Steinberg at 435-781-5154 or Bill Hayes at 435-781-5181.

Thank you for your continuing interest and participation in the management of the Ashley National Forest.

Sincerely,

*/s/Scott Steinberg*  
SCOTT STEINBERG  
District Ranger