



File Code: 1950

Date: February 5, 2009

Dear Friend of the Ashley National Forest:

I am seeking any additional input you may have on the proposed Pole Mountain Post-Fire Timber Harvest project, an activity proposed for implementation in the Pole Mountain area of the Roosevelt-Duchesne Ranger District. We sent you an original scoping letter for this project in October 2007. The proposal remains essentially the same (see the *Review of Purpose and Need* and *Review of Proposed Action* sections below); however, there are a couple of updates you may wish to be aware of (see *Updates* section below).

Review of Purpose and Need

The Neola North Fire, which burned approximately 20,377 acres on the Ashley National Forest in June and July of 2007, resulted in a number of areas with high concentrations of fire-caused tree mortality. The purpose of this project is to recover the economic value of fire-killed and dying trees on a 225-acre¹ area that burned on Pole Mountain (see attached maps). The trees are mostly lodgepole pine, with some interspersed subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce.

Review of Proposed Action

The proposed action is to harvest those fire-killed and dying trees within the project area that are not needed to maintain or improve post-fire ecological functions. Removal would be accomplished through a small timber sale and would occur in 2009 or 2010. An estimated 3000 CCF² of timber would be available for harvest. The project site is on fairly flat terrain. Up to ½ mile of temporary road may be constructed to facilitate the removal of timber from the area.

A fire-killed tree, as used in this analysis, is defined as any tree that died or is expected to die as a result of the wildland fire. The following criteria apply: 1) 70% or more crown scorch and/or 2) 50% or more basal circumference burned³. Dying trees also include any tree not directly killed by the fire but whose death is forthcoming in the near future because it has been windthrown or successfully attacked by bark beetles.

Updates

1. *Reduced project area.* The original project area was 225 acres. Following specialist field reviews, the project area was reduced and re-shaped to avoid areas of concentrated wet seeps. The proposed project area is now 203 acres. See the attached updated map of the proposed action (map 2).

¹ See *Updates* section. The area of proposed action is now approximately 203 acres.

² CCF = 100 cubic feet. See *Updates* section. With additional mortality, this expected volume could increase, but would not increase substantially due to the deterioration of the economic value of some of the dead timber over time.

³ These criteria vary by tree species; the values cited are specific to the species found in the project area.



2. *Higher level of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation.* The original scoping letter indicated our expectation that this project would be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The project would normally fit into FSH 1909.15_31.2, Category 13: Salvage of dead and/or dying trees not to exceed 250 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. However, following scoping, we decided to complete an EA. The reasons for this are: 1) to more fully analyze any potential cumulative effects and 2) so that we may consider an action alternative which would remove all overlap with a citizen-proposed wilderness area⁴.
3. *Update on temporary roads.* The original scoping letter noted that up to ½ mile of temporary road may be constructed if the need were to arise. Updated details on this subject are as follows. Under the proposed action, approximately ½ mile of road would be constructed (see map 2); under the alternative action approximately ¼ mile of road would be constructed (see map 3). These temporary roads would be closed and rehabilitated following project completion. Also, a number of non-system roads currently exist in the area. Under both action alternatives, approximately 1 ½ miles of these existing roads would be closed and rehabilitated following harvest.
4. *Correction to expected residual basal area.* The original scoping letter noted that we expected the residual basal area to be approximately 40-80 ft² in those areas that experienced low to moderate fire-caused mortality, with somewhat less basal area in those areas that experienced high fire-caused mortality. Following 2007 and 2008 field visits to the project area, in which specialists observed a higher amount of fire-caused mortality than was originally mapped and an elevated amount of mountain pine beetle activity, these projections need to be modified. First, to clarify, these basal area projections refer to live trees only; therefore project activities in which only dead and dying trees would be harvested would have negligible, if any, effect on basal area. The basal area projections merely identify what is expected to remain after the effects of the fire and associated beetle activity. Our updated projections are: 1) approximately 0-10 ft² basal area on the west side of FR 117 (the Elkhorn Loop Road) and 2) 10-40 ft² basal area on the east side of the road. These are estimated averages; it appears that actual basal area will be highly irregular, with some areas having significantly more and some less (with variability being the highest on the east side of the road).
5. *Forest Plan amendment.* The final update is that we anticipate that the project activities would create open areas of greater than 40 acres. Our Forest Plan allows for clearings up to 40 acres in the management areas (f and n) in which the proposed project area lies (Forest Plan, p. IV-35). The plan also allows openings adjacent to older clearings that have reached an average height sufficient to provide hiding cover for the Management Indicator Species (MIS) and other wildlife using the area (Forest Plan, pp. IV-35 and 36). No clearcuts are proposed; however, we expect that the very low residual basal area in some areas coupled with the removal of dead and dying trees would create areas of more than 40 acres that would be open enough to be considered clearings. Also, there are old openings in and adjacent to the project area that still have immature regeneration. We are proposing a non-significant, site-specific Forest Plan amendment to allow for openings greater than 40 acres in this project area in order to harvest trees affected by fire and insect attacks. The amendment would also include a stipulation to allow for harvest adjacent to older clearings that have not yet reached an average height sufficient to

⁴ The overlap area falls within an area proposed by Utah Environmental Congress (UEC), a non-profit group based out of Salt Lake City, Utah, for wilderness consideration. It does not fall within any inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) or currently designated wilderness.

provide hiding cover for the MIS and other wildlife found in the area. At this time, we expect that openings of approximately 125 and 51 acres would be created under the proposed action and that under the alternative action, openings of approximately 38, 26, and 51 acres would be created.

Additional Public Involvement

We are accepting additional public comments on this proposal. Comments will be accepted for 30 days following publication (expected on Tuesday, February 10th) of the updated notice of this proposal in the *Uintah Basin Standard*.

Written comments must be submitted to: John R. Kirkaldie, Roosevelt-Duchesne District Ranger, P.O. Box 981, Duchesne, UT 84021. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 to 4:30, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must contain "Pole Mountain Post-Fire Salvage" in the subject line and must be submitted in Microsoft Word (.doc), Portable Document Format (.pdf), or Rich Text Format (.rtf) to jtullis@fs.fed.us. If you have any questions about the proposal or the updates please contact Jim McRae at 435-781-5123 or Lesley Tullis at 435-781-5137.

Sincerely,

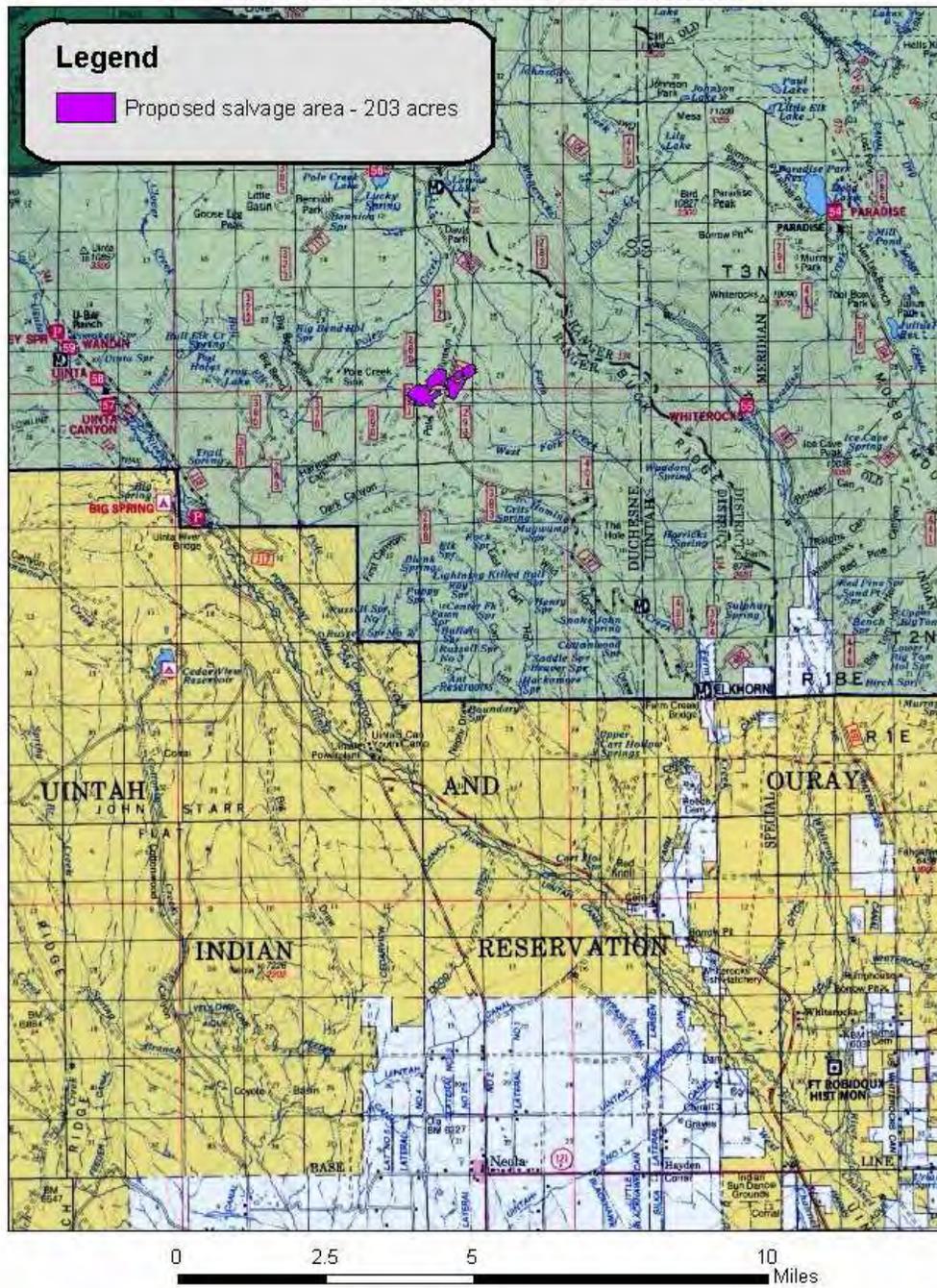
/s/ John R. Kirkaldie
JOHN R. KIRKALDIE
District Ranger

Appendix A - Map 1

Pole Mountain Post-Fire Salvage Project

Vicinity Map

Ashley National Forest, Roosevelt-Duchesne Ranger District



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