

**DECISION MEMO
FOR
RAYNOLDS PASS ASPEN ENHANCEMENT PRESCRIBED BURN**

**USDA Forest Service
Ashton/Island Park Ranger District
Caribou-Targhee National Forest
Fremont County, Idaho**

Decision

It is my decision to prescribe burn approximately 1,180 acres of aspen and mountain brush communities located on the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. The analysis area contains approximately 8600 acres and is roughly bordered by Reynolds Pass on the north, State highway 87 and the Henrys Lake road on the east and the Montana state line on the west. This burn project will be implemented as burning conditions allow starting in Fall of 2006 and conclude by November 2007. The project area has been broken into 3 units as follows (Map 1):

1. The Reynolds unit includes 800 acres. This unit has a legal description of T16N, R42E, and includes portions of Sections 14, 15, 22, 23, 26 and 27.
2. The Upper Staley unit covers 270 acres. This unit has a legal description of T15N, R42E, Section 2 and T16N, R42E, Section 35.
3. The Staley unit covers 465 acres. This unit has a legal description of T15N, R42E, Section 1 and T16N, R42E, Sections 35 and 36.

The project is within the Centennial Mountains Subsection of the Revised Targhee Forest Plan, within Management Prescription 3.2 (Semi-Primitive Motorized). This prescription encourages the use of prescribed natural fire and management ignited fire to maintain fire's ecological role and to enhance habitat. The implementation of the prescribed burn will decrease the conifer encroachment within aspen/mountain brush/tall forb communities. Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics (MIST) must be employed to the maximum extent possible as part of this prescription. MIST is a concept of employing the minimum amount of suppression/support actions needed to effectively achieve fire management protection objectives.

The proposed project will improve the age class distribution and clonal size of aspen. Project implementation will also result in improved age class distribution and occurrence of mountain brush species including snowberry, serviceberry, Rocky Mountain maple, Scouler willow and chokecherry.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The 1997 Targhee Revised Forest Plan (RFP) identifies the following Wildlife Goals that apply to this project:

1. Wildlife diversity is maintained or enhanced by managing for a diverse array of habitats and distribution of plant communities.
2. Provide habitat to support the wildlife and hunting goals of the States of Idaho and Wyoming.

The RFP identifies the following Fire Management Goals that apply to this project:

1. Identify the historic role of fire and restore fire as an ecological process, where appropriate to achieve multiple-use and ecosystem management objectives.
2. Fuel accumulations are reduced and managed within their historic range.

The RFP also identifies the following Vegetation Goals that apply to this project:

1. Maintain and restore healthy, diverse forested and non-forested ecosystems through time, including appropriate components of dead and down woody material.
2. Use vegetation management to achieve a broad array of multiple-use and ecosystem management objectives, including maintenance, improvement and restoration of the following:
 - forest health
 - scenic viewsheds and corridors
 - wildlife habitat effectiveness and quality
 - hazardous fuels reduction
 - biological diversity of plant and animal communities
 - riparian and watershed health and function
 - vegetation structure, composition, and distribution in larger landscapes

The purpose and need of this project is to set back conifer encroachment in important aspen and mountain shrub habitats. The RFP states that aspen comprises 4% of the forested acres, which is less than was historically present. Fire suppression has allowed conifers to take over areas that were previously tall forb communities, mountain brush and aspen. This prescribed fire is intended to kill many of the conifers and stimulate sprouting and regrowth among the aspen and mountain shrubs such as snowberry, serviceberry, Rocky Mountain maple, Scouler willow and chokecherry. It is anticipated the fire will burn in a mosaic pattern within the burn unit depending on fuels and terrain. The benefits are two-fold: 1) increased forage production for mule deer and other ungulates which use this area spring, summer, and fall; and 2) improved ecosystem health and vegetation vigor, which will benefit many wildlife species including forest grouse, neo-tropical migrants and grizzly bear. Ungulates that summer in productive habitats enter the winter in better condition and are more likely to survive the winter and produce healthy young the following year.

This habitat enhancement project is in collaboration with Idaho Department of Fish and Game's Mule Deer Initiative and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Both of these programs encourage aspen enhancement as part of their goals in managing deer and elk habitat.

Resolution of Issues

Review of comments to scoping and those brought forth at both public meetings indicate communication with the public and adjacent landowners immediately preceding and during the prescribed burning could be an issue. Notification will be placed in the local newspaper as far in advance of burning as possible. Our partners, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, have offered to contact adjacent home owners door to door. A list of key residents will be notified by phone so they may pass the word to their neighbors.

Signs will be posted along State Highways 20 and 87 as well as several local county roads to alert travelers and residents of the burn project. State and county emergency agencies will also be notified in both Idaho and Montana.

The burn plan and categorical exclusion will be posted on the Caribou-Targhee web page. We will also use this site for public notification of implementation of the prescribed burn.

Mitigation and Project Design Features

Project design features are as follows:

- Up to 6 miles of control lines may need to be constructed as part of this project. These constructed control lines will be 18 inches to 6 feet in width and will be constructed employing MIST guidelines. All constructed control lines will be rehabilitated after completion of the prescribed burn to prevent erosion and to facilitate natural revegetation.
- No roads would be constructed to implement the project; access to the project would be provided by existing roads and trails or by helicopter.
- Some portions of the units may require some pretreatment of fuels to help carry the prescribed fire through aspen stands to ensure project objectives will be met. Pretreatment of fuels would be in the form of felling individual conifers with chainsaws to create jackpot fuels to facilitate burning.
- No commercial timber harvest would occur as part of this project.
- Late seral conifer stands will be avoided when burning these 3 units. Avoiding these stands will allow for easier control of the prescribed burns.
- The project area was closed to domestic livestock grazing in February 2004 to reduce the possibility of livestock/grizzly bear interactions within the Henrys Lake Bear Management unit. Project implementation will enhance big game and grizzly bear habitat by promoting aspen and mountain brush rejuvenation.
- Monitoring for noxious weeds will continue for at least 5 years following completion of the project. Any weeds found would be mapped and treated to prevent spread.
- Project monitoring will include photo points and stand exam plots established before implementation and repeated at intervals up to ten years post burn.
- Several species of migratory birds nest within the proposed project area. To protect nesting birds the burn plan will specify that prescribed burn activities begin after August 1st. Nest search studies on the Targhee National Forest, within the Island Park area, have found 90 percent of songbird nesting is complete by July (M.Kraska, MSU, pers. Comm.).

Scoping and Public Involvement

A scoping letter was sent to those agencies or individuals who were interested in or may be affected by this project. Fremont County Tax roles were used in an attempt to contact all land owners adjacent to the forest in the project area. Approximately 94 scoping letters were sent. Two public meetings were held at the Island Park Ranger Station to provide information about the project and receive comments. Comments received were incorporated into the design of the project as mitigation. sixteen responses were received, bringing up a variety of issues. These issues were analyzed and responded to by the ID team and are on file at the Island Park Ranger Station (Raynolds Pass Aspen Enhancement Prescribed Burn Analysis File). Most of the issues received from the public include concerns regarding safety of private land and homes near the burn

Reason for Categorically Excluding the Proposed Action

This action is excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental analysis in accordance with Category 6 in FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, section 31.2. Category 6 is, “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.”

The interdisciplinary team decided the level of impacts associated with the project did not warrant an extensive environmental analysis. The required scoping and notice and comment period was completed for the proposed action and no extraordinary circumstances were identified which would require further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. Issues generated through public involvement have been resolved by including specific mitigation measures and disclosure of planned activities. Impacts on threatened, endangered and sensitive species are expected to be well within acceptable levels. There are no impacts which would lead to significant effects on resource conditions. Following are resource conditions considered in determining extraordinary circumstances relating to the proposed action which did not warrant further analysis and documentation.

- a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

The Biological Assessment (BA) and Biological Evaluation (BE) determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances for threatened, endangered or sensitive species. The BA determined this project will have no effect on the Utah Valvata Snail and Gray Wolf and is not likely to adversely affect the Grizzly Bear, Bald Eagle, Canada Lynx. A biological evaluation (BE) analyzing effects of the project on sensitive wildlife species determined this project will have no impact on the Northern Goshawk, Flammulated Owl, Boreal Owl, Great Gray Owl, Trumpeter Swan, Spotted Frog, Common Loon, Harlequin Duck, Spotted Bat, Townsend’s Big-eared Bat, Fisher, Wolverine, Three-toed Woodpecker, Peregrine Falcon, Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Sage Grouse and the Pygmy Rabbit.

b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.

There are no “extraordinary circumstances” that would warrant more in-depth NEPA requirements. The beneficial uses of downstream waterbodies do include domestic uses, but there are no designated municipal watersheds within the project area. The analysis area does contain floodplains and wetlands and the appropriate management direction is in place to maintain and manage those resources to function at desired conditions. The potential effect of the proposed action on domestic beneficial uses, floodplains, and wetlands is minimized through implementation of BMPs (e.g. MIST -minimum impact suppression tactics will be used and trees will be left on site to minimize disturbance). Therefore, no measurable adverse impacts in regards to water quality or water flow (timing, total volume, peak or base flows) are expected within analysis area.

c. Congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.

The project is not in any of these areas.

d. Inventoried roadless areas.

The project area is within the Raynolds Pass inventoried roadless area. A roadless area report is on file in the project analysis file at the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District office. This project will not change the characteristics or size of the roadless area.

e. Research natural areas.

The project area is not in a research natural area.

f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites.

The project area is not in an American Indian religious or cultural site.

g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

A review of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest’s Cultural Resources site and survey atlas and files was conducted in order to determine potential effects on cultural sites from the prescribed burn project on the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District. All known cultural sites will be avoided and protected from project-related activities. Therefore, it was determined that this project will have “no effect” on any known archaeological or historic properties. If any cultural resources are encountered during the course of the project, then the Forest Archaeologist will be notified immediately and all project activities will cease in that area until the Forest Archaeologist takes appropriate action to document and /or mitigate (if necessary) the newly discovered cultural site(s).

Findings Required by other Laws

This analysis has complied with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, The National Forest Management Act, and all other applicable acts.

A biological assessment (BA) analyzing effects of the project on threatened or endangered wildlife species determined this project will have no effect on the Utah Valvata Snail, and Gray Wolf, and is not likely to adversely affect the grizzly bear, bald eagle, Canada Lynx.

A biological evaluation (BE) analyzing effects of the project on sensitive wildlife species determined this project will have no impact on the Northern Goshawk, Flammulated Owl, Boreal Owl, Great Gray Owl, Trumpeter Swan, Spotted Frog, Common Loon, Harlequin Duck, Spotted Bat, Townsend's Big-eared Bat, Fisher Wolverine, Three-toed Woodpecker, Peregrine Falcon, Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sage Grouse, and the Pygmy Rabbit.

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Implementation

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Appeals must be postmarked within 45 days of the publication of this notice in Idaho Falls Post Register. The Appeal Deciding Officer is Larry Timchak, Forest Supervisor. Appeals must be sent to: Appeal Deciding Officer, Intermountain Region USFS, 324 25th Street, Ogden, Utah 84401; or by fax to 801-625-5277; or by email to: appeals-intermtn-regional-office@fs.fed.us. Emailed appeals must be submitted in rich text (rtf) or Word (doc) and must include the project name in the subject line. Appeals may also be hand delivered to the above address, during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the Idaho Falls Post Register, the newspaper of record. The publication date in the Idaho Falls Post Register, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who submitted timely comments or demonstrated interest in the proposed action during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

s/s Adrienne K. Keller
ADRIENNE K. KELLER
District Ranger

July 24, 2006
Date

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