

**Scoping Notice and Opportunity to Comment
For
Raynolds Pass Aspen Enhancement Prescribed Burn Project**

**U.S.D.A. Forest Service
Caribou-Targhee National Forest
Ashton/Island Park Ranger District
Fremont County, Idaho**

Proposed Action

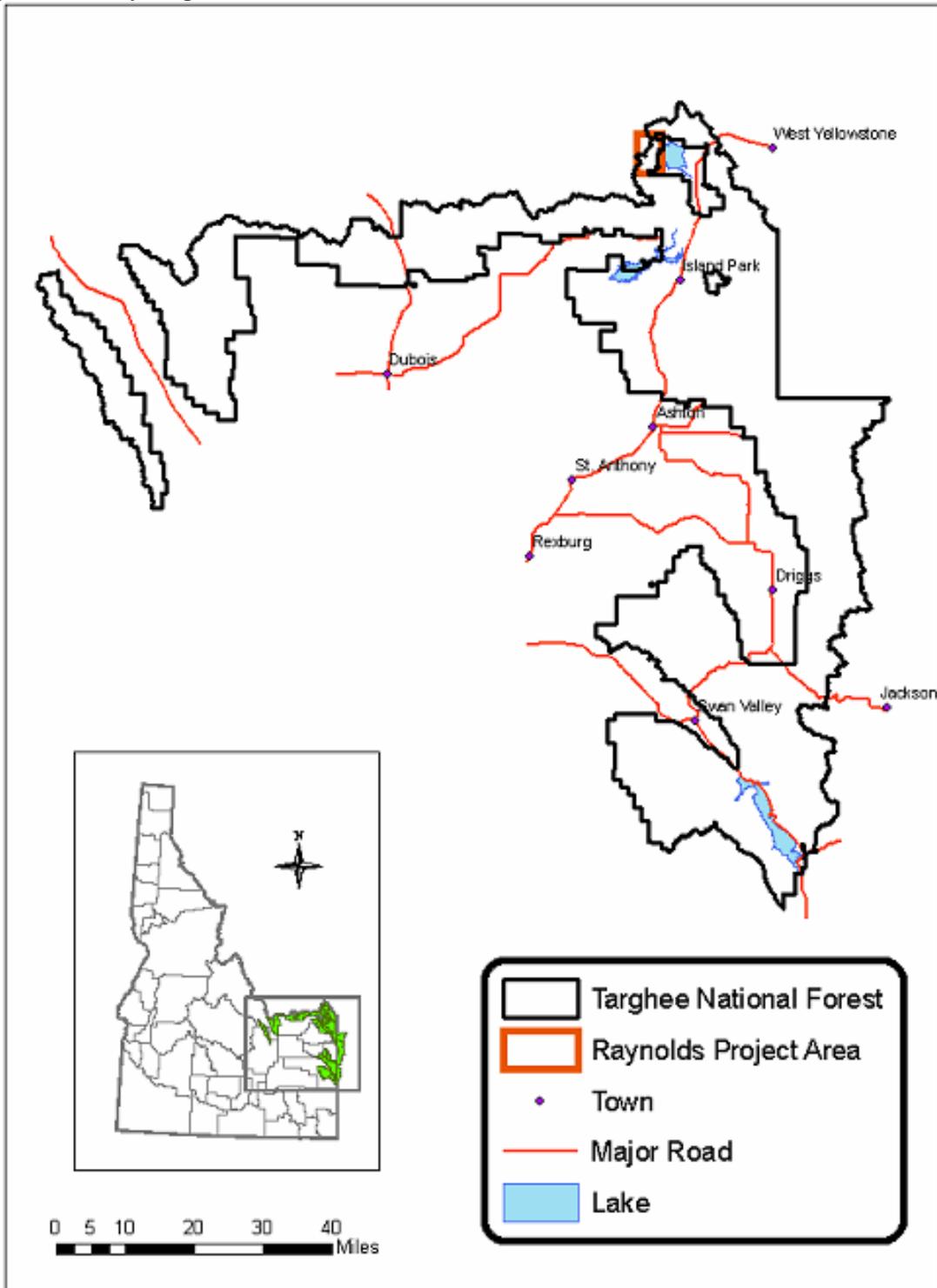
The Ashton/Island Park Ranger District, in collaboration with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, proposes to burn approximately 1535 acres between the Kelly Creek and Raynolds Pass area of the Henrys Lake Mountains (Map 1). This burn project will be implemented as burning conditions allow starting in June of 2006 and conclude by November 2007. The project area has been broken into 3 units as follows (Map 2):

1. The Raynolds 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.

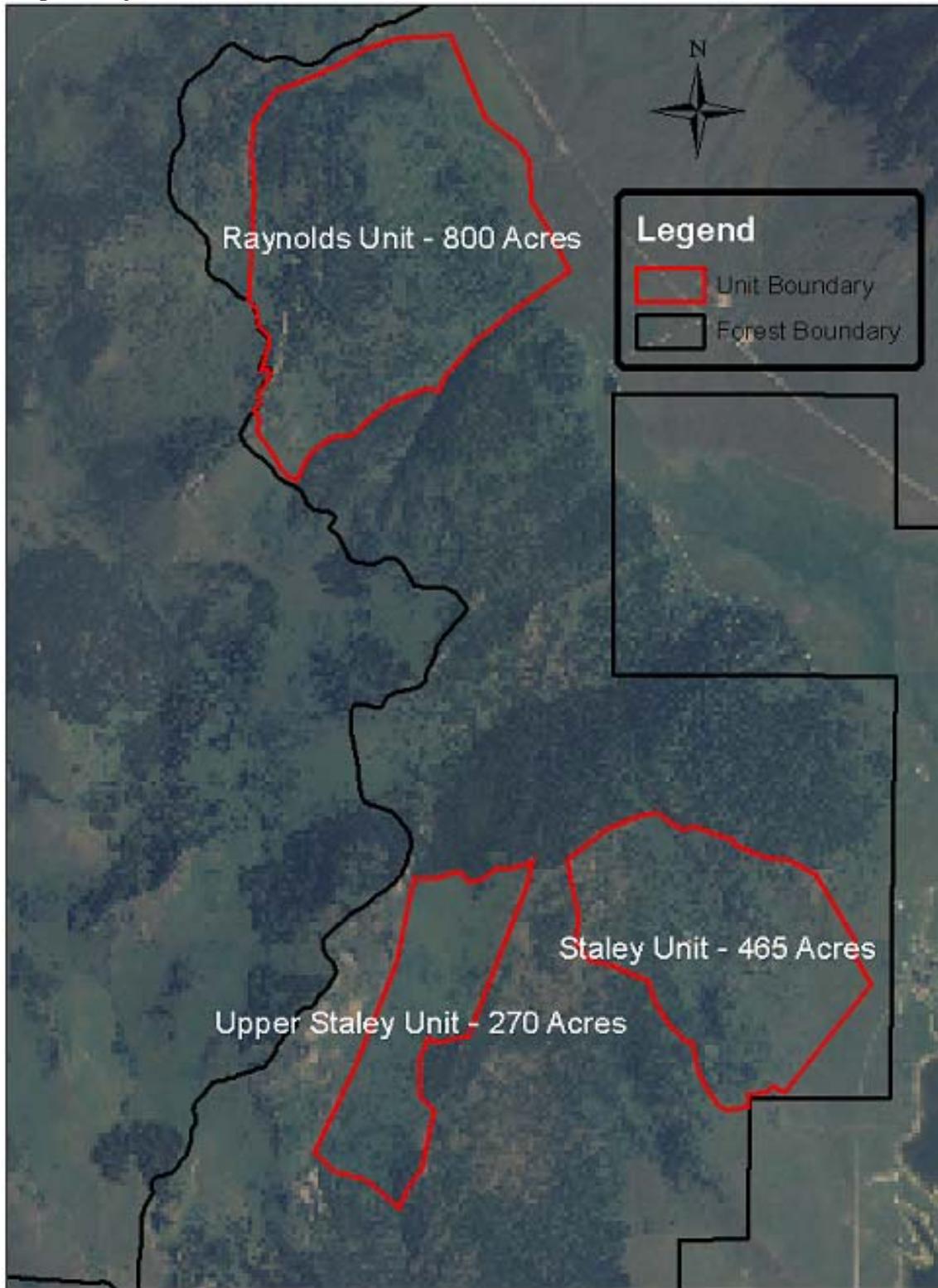
The project is within the Centennial Mountains Subsection of the Revised Targhee Forest Plan, within Management Prescription 3.2 (Semi-Primitive Motorized). This prescription encourages the use of prescribed natural fire and management ignited fire to maintain fire's ecological role and to enhance habitat. The implementation of the proposed project would 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 would improve the age class distribution and clonal size of aspen. Project implementation would also result in improved age class distribution and occurrence of mountain brush species including snowberry, serviceberry, Rocky Mountain maple, Scouler willow and chokecherry.

Map 1: Vicinity map



Map 2: Project area



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 3 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.

Additional information regarding this action can be obtained from: Bryan Aber, Island Park Ranger Station, 3726 Hwy 20, Island Park, ID 83429, 208-558-7301.

Purpose and Need

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 rangeland, tall forb communities and aspen. The proposed 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 anticipated 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 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.

Decision Framework and Responsible Official

The Ashton/Island Park District Ranger will be the deciding official for this analysis. The decision to be made is whether to implement the proposed action as described above, or defer any action at this time.

The Forest Service, Caribou-Targhee National Forest, Ashton/Island Park Ranger District, has made a preliminary assessment that this proposal falls within a category of actions listed in the Forest Service NEPA Handbook (FSH) that are excluded from

documentation in an Environmental assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would preclude use of the category. This proposed action meets the criteria of FSH 1909.15, Chapter 31.2 Category 6, 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. A document called a Decision Memo will be prepared. The Decision Memo will document our findings related to the environmental effects and also our decision regarding this project.

Opportunity to Comment

We are combining our scoping effort required by FSH 1909.15 and the Notice and Comment requirement by 36 CFR 215 with this letter. Prior to July 7, 2005, the use of Category 6 would not have been subject to notice, comment and appeal. As a result of the court decision of the Earth Island Institute lawsuit, Category 6 is now subject to notice, comment and appeal.

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 clarification order issued October 19, 2005 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.

How Public Comments Can Be Submitted

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the Idaho Falls Post Register. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. You should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Written comments must be submitted to: Raynolds Pass Aspen Enhancement Project, Bryan Aber, Island Park Ranger Station, 3726 Hwy 20, Island Park, ID 83429. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am – 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone 208-558-7301 or in person; or at an official agency function (i.e. public meeting) that is designated to elicit public comments. Comments may also be faxed to 208-558-7812. Electronic comments must be submitted in rich text format (.rtf) or Word (.doc) to comments-intermtn-caribou-targhee-ashton-islandpark@fs.fed.us. Comments must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6. Only those who submit timely and substantive comments will be eligible to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR 215. Each individual or representative from each organization, submitting substantive comments must either sign the comments or otherwise verify identity in order to attain appeal eligibility.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, would be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and would be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously would be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments would not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Parts 215 or 217.

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References

Revised Forest Plan: 1997. Targhee National Forest. USDA Forest Service