



Decision Notice / Finding of No Significant Impact

North Washoe Valley Wildfire Risk Reduction and Ecosystem Enhancement Project

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

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DECISION AND REASONS FOR THE DECISION

Purpose and Need

The purposes of this initiative are to reduce the threat of wildfire and improve ecosystem conditions in the North Washoe Valley area of Washoe County, Nevada. The scenario of greatest concern is the one that played out during the adjacent Little Valley Fire: multiple lightning strikes and fires along the Sierra Front with thinly spread initial attack resources. This project would enable the forest to avoid a catastrophic fire in all but the most extreme conditions.

The proposal is needed in the North Washoe Valley area due to heavy fuel loading adjacent to the urban interface and due to the encroachment of conifers into riparian/aspen vegetation types. The environmental assessment (EA) that was prepared documents the analysis of environmental impacts from the proposed and no action alternatives.

Decision

Based upon my review, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action generally as described in the EA. Minor adjustments were made in the treatment unit boundaries based on better on-the-ground information. In addition, follow-up surveys have been completed for goshawks and Sierra Valley ivesia. The surveys revealed neither of these species. Therefore, measures related to these species have not been carried forward from the EA. Furthermore, the location of the Bowers Tie road has been adjusted to avoid overlap of the Ophir Creek Trail. These adjustments fall within the scope of the analysis in the EA.

The main action to be implemented is to reduce fuel loading within the 5,600-acre project area. Within this area, treatment units totaling 2,500 acres have been identified for fuels reduction (EA appendix tables and maps attached). These units are strategically placed on the landscape to create a pattern of treatment areas across the landscape that will interrupt fire spread in the event of wildfire. Stands selected for treatment include those with high conifer density; pockets of insect and disease mortality; condition class 3 (high departure from historical fire regime); close proximity to homes, private lands and parks; slope, with emphasis on the relatively few areas of flatter ground; and close proximity to existing or historical road networks.

All new or reconstructed roads will be rehabilitated or gated for administrative use only.

The selected action consists of ground-based thinning; helicopter thinning; brush removal; riparian treatment; landings, temporary roads, and skid trails; and permanent roads. These components are described in more detail below.

Ground-Based Thinning

Stands identified for ground-based thinning are primarily in condition class 3. Thinning will be limited to trees less than 30 inches in diameter. The 30-inch limit was fully analyzed in the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment and found to be appropriate for fuels treatments. Limitations that are more restrictive were found to be ineffective in terms of reducing wildfire risk.

This treatment will remove smaller understory trees that are most susceptible to wildfire, and leave the dominant, tallest trees that are less susceptible to fire. Residual overstory trees will be irregularly spaced across the landscape. Small groups of typically 3-6 closely spaced overstory trees will be left to retain structural diversity. Slash will be treated through a combination of prescribed burning, chipping, and lopping and scattering based on site-specific conditions, including distance from structures,



slope, and access. Within those thinned areas, canopy cover will be reduced to forty percent, with an average spacing between crowns of fifteen to thirty feet. This treatment will occur on 1,500 acres.

Ground based equipment will be utilized, with whole tree yarding applied wherever feasible to reduce fuel loadings. Surface fuel mechanical treatments will primarily entail machine piling, but may include mastication, or chipping and removing treated fuels. Hand treatments will consist of hand thinning and bucking (cutting) surface and small ladder fuels.

Prescribed fire will be used in most stands to either burn machine piles or broadcast burn surface fuels. All prescribed fire will be implemented under a specific Burn Plan developed in accordance with requirements found at:

http://www.blm.gov/utah/egbcc/trng_pub.htm.

Pile burning involves placing cut trees and brush into piles and burning them when weather conditions are safe. Pile burning was done during the winter of 2003/2004 in the Lakeview area where it helped firefighters save homes during the Waterfall Fire of 2004.

Broadcast burning units will first be mechanically treated to remove ladder fuels. Fire lines will then be constructed, and unit boundaries “plumbed” with fire hoses, prior to ignition under appropriate weather conditions.

The largest trees on the site will be left. The target average basal area is about 80 square feet per acre. Basal areas down to 60 square feet per acre will be located along the National Forest boundary adjacent to County Parks, residential neighborhoods and private lands, as well as along fire access roads and along linear features such as ridge tops that serve as prime areas for stopping or slowing the spread of fire.

Trees with a diameter of eight inches and larger (at breast height) will be removed for saw

timber. Stems three inches and larger will be designated as biomass and removed if market conditions allow. The basic method of tree removal will be whole tree yarding. Tops, limbs, and biomass will be processed at the landing. Saw timber will be removed in log form. Both logs and biomass will be removed by truck.

Winter thinning operations will be managed to limit affects on critical deer winter range by controlling the number of units thinned simultaneously. Summer thinning operations will be managed to limit affects on adjacent County Parks by avoiding operations on major summer holidays and events, such as the Fourth of July.

. In areas with side slopes between 30% and 55%, ground based operations will be designated on a unit by unit basis only after soil stability, soil rock content and the location of the steep slope in relation to the remaining portions of the treatment unit have been determined to be appropriate by the Forest Service.

The Comstock era logging transportation system will be used in combination with downhill skidding in most of the project area. When the roads are at or near the bottom of the unit, landings will be constructed adjacent to the existing roads.

Skid roads will occupy less than 12% of the thinning acreage. When the roads are located above steep areas, skyline logging will be designated. Skyline parameters include spans up to 800 feet when tail holds, person lines, and payload analysis determines that the leading end of the logs can be suspended during inhaul. Approximately 100 to 200 acres may be designated for skyline yarding within the proposed treatment units.

Helicopter Thinning

400 acres of high priority treatment areas on steep ground with inadequate road access will be designated for helicopter treatment. Ladder fuels will be piled mechanically if the unit is



mechanically felled. Hand piling and/or underburning will be used to treat biomass fuels in helicopter treatment areas.

Brush removal

400 acres of surface fuels and concentrations of understory ladder fuels will be treated in high risk (condition class 3) sagebrush, bitterbrush, and mountain mahogany stands. Tracked machines or rubber-tired machines equipped with a cutting head will chip/shred the vegetation. Where the ground is too steep for equipment, work will be accomplished by hand crews.

Riparian Treatment

Riparian treatments will mechanically remove conifer trees to reduce the potential for undesirable high intensity fire and reduce the expansion of conifers into aspen stands. This treatment will occur on 100 acres.

Thinning prescriptions will incorporate site-specific riparian management objectives for streams, meadows, lakes, or fens.

Implementation will be restricted, as follows:

Ground disturbance will be minimized within swales.

No construction and use of landings in riparian areas will occur.

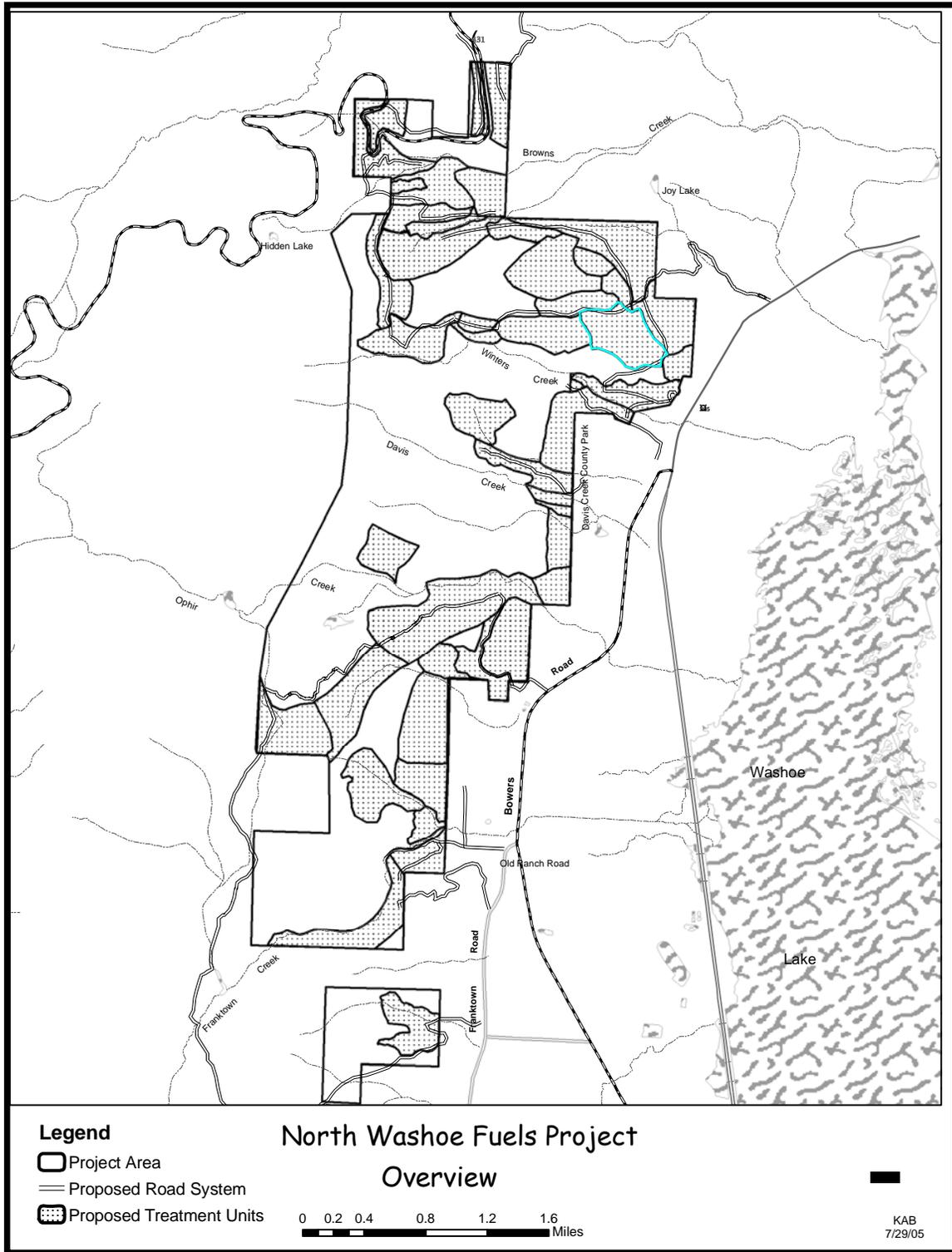
Use of mechanized equipment within the riparian areas will be prohibited on slopes greater than 15 percent.

Landings, Temporary Roads, and Skid trails

Temporary roads, skid trails, and landings will occupy approximately 120 acres. They will be located to minimize the removal of large trees. Landings will be located within treatment areas.

Permanent Roads

The project will include the use of 15.5 miles of roads. Light maintenance only will be needed on three miles. 9.5 miles of existing roads will be reconstructed. Three miles of new roads will be constructed. Following completion of the project, all of these roads will be rehabilitated or gated for administrative use only, primarily for firefighting and law enforcement purposes. Exceptions apply to roads 040 and 041, which are currently open to public use and will remain open to public use. Removal of trees and snags may be necessary during road construction/reconstruction. This could include up to 25 trees over 30" diameter. More than 99.5 % of the trees over 30" diameter would be retained.





Watershed Protection

Soil Quality Standards and appropriate Best Management Practices that protect water quality and soils will be implemented for the entire project.

Landings and temporary roads utilized during operations will include reasonable and appropriate topsoil storage management for use in landing and temporary road restoration.

Seeding will be used to revegetate any areas where natural revegetation does not occur.

Wildlife / Plant Protection

New populations of Washoe tall rockcress were found in the project area during surveys conducted in 2004. Prior to commencing ground disturbing activities additional plant surveys will be conducted and individuals/aggregations of Washoe tall rockcress will be flagged to avoid disturbance. Surveys will be conducted during the appropriate time (June and July) for proper identification of the plants. Treatments and roads will be designed to protect the plants.

To minimize the risk of introducing and spreading noxious weeds into the project area, the appropriate prevention and control measures listed in the Forest Service Manual, Chapter 2081.2, Sections 2 and 10 will be implemented. Additionally, all burn pile sites will be seeded with the appropriate weed-free seed mix after burning.

As a general guideline, three of the largest snags per acre will be retained, where available.

To minimize impacts to the highest density of nesting songbirds during the critical nesting season, work in aspen and riparian areas will be limited to August 15 through March 15.

Air Quality Protection

Prescribed fires are subject to permitting by the Washoe County Air Quality Management Division. For each prescribed fire, the Forest Service will have contingency plans to reduce smoke emissions. The Carson Ranger District will work with other Ranger Districts, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Washoe County Air Quality Management Division to ensure that multiple burns would not exceed air quality standards.

Monitoring

The proposed action includes establishing a collaborative, multiparty monitoring, evaluation, and accountability process. The process will be used to assess the positive or negative ecological and social effects of the proposal. This monitoring will be done on a unit-by-unit basis to ensure that the project is carried out as proposed and that needed adjustments in the timing, intensity, and types of treatments are made in an open, cooperative manner.

Diverse stakeholders, including interest groups and neighborhood homeowners will be included in the monitoring and evaluation process. Multiparty monitoring will be subject to available funding and the ability of stakeholders to contribute funds or in-kind services.

Maintenance of Treated Areas / Roads

The proposed action includes maintaining treated areas over time. For example, areas requiring treatment to move from Condition Class 3 to Condition Class 1 will require periodic treatments. The estimated maintenance schedule includes periodic broadcast or underburning every five to ten years. The maintenance workload will be fully considered when assessing the ability to implement this decision.



Additional details on the proposed action can be found in the Environmental Assessment, which is available on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/htnf/projects>.

Decision Rationale

I am selecting the proposed action because:

1. I find that this project is consistent with the Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment.
2. This decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act of 1976, and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003.
3. Internal issues were considered during the development of the Proposed Action and were attenuated through a combination of project design and the integrated design features. Scoping comments were analyzed to identify both issues and project alternatives that should be considered. Issues were used to frame the analysis in the EA. No alternatives to consider in detail were identified from the scoping comments.
4. The selected Proposed Action meets the purpose and need by reducing the risk of stand-replacing wildfire and improving ecosystem conditions, as analyzed in the EA. Brush removal and thinning of smaller trees will reduce ladder fuels, fuel loading, and canopy cover (to 40%). The remaining stand of larger, more fire resistant trees will be less susceptible to crown fire. Over the last three to four decades, much of the forested Sierra Front has been converted to brushfields by large and intense stand-replacing wildfires. The area selected for treatment is one of the largest remaining forested areas on the Eastern Sierra Front. In addition, aspen

and riparian ecosystems along Browns, Winters, Davis, Ophir, and Franktown Creeks have been adversely affected by encroachment of conifers and will also benefit through removal of conifers.

5. The selected Proposed Action will also increase fire suppression crew safety, and help protect homes along Franktown and Bowers Roads, and Joy Lake and Galena Forest Estates. Similar treatments during the winter of 2003/2004 in the Lakeview area helped firefighters save homes during the Waterfall Fire of 2004.
6. This alternative will not increase motorized recreational use.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered the no action alternative. A comparison of the alternatives can be found in the EA.

No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, current management would continue. There would be no new brush or tree thinning in the area and no roads would be maintained, reconstructed, or newly constructed.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions from October 2003 through July 2005. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping from July 25, 2004 to August 23, 2004. Additional public involvement included the following: public open house (August 11, 2004 at the Pleasant Valley Elementary School); presentations to the West Washoe Valley Citizens Advisory Board; numerous discussions



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and field visits with Washoe County Parks and Recreation Department, Nevada Division of Forestry, University of Nevada, the West Washoe Association, Galena Forest Estates Homeowners Association, Joy Lake Homeowners Association, Sierra Club, Nevada Department of Transportation and many individuals with land or homes adjacent to the project.

Most of the comments received indicated strong support for the project. The need to reduce fuel loading in the area was widely recognized and supported. Concerns related to the project included the need for and impact of the road system, logging traffic safety and noise, the potential for prescribed fire escape, air quality, scenery, and long-term public access to the road system. These comments were used to develop the issues analyzed in the EA.

This project was subject to the Pre-Decisional Administrative Review Process for Hazardous Fuels Reduction Projects authorized under the HFRA of 2003, as required by 36 CFR 218. This was initiated with a legal notice in the Reno Gazette Journal on October 15, 2004. The EA was mailed to interested parties and posted on the Humboldt-Toiyabe web site along with information on how to file an objection to the project. No objections were filed.

This decision is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.12 (i)). Implementation may begin immediately.



FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because the project would reduce the risk of health and safety problems from wildfire and would carefully manage traffic and air quality concerns (EA Environmental Consequences – Fire/Fuels, Air Quality, Traffic).
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. Its most unique characteristic is that it is one of the few remaining areas along the Sierra Front that has not been burned over. This project would help protect that character by reducing the risk of wildfire (EA Purpose and Need, Environmental Consequences Fire / Fuels).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project. Public involvement revealed no legitimate scientific controversy over the environmental impacts of the project. The effects analysis was based on current, peer reviewed scientific studies and analysis (EA Public Involvement, Environmental Consequences, and References).
5. The Forest Service has considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. The action would reduce the risk of wildfire (EA Environmental Consequences – Fire/Fuels).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because it is part of a long term collaborative strategy to protect property and resources along the Sierra Front. That strategy was previously initiated through the Whites and Thomas Canyons fuels projects (EA Environmental Consequences – Fire / Fuels).
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant. While there is some concern regarding the short term cumulative effects to mule deer habitat, over the long term, the project would protect mule deer habitat from wildfire and improve riparian/aspen habitat (EA Environmental Consequences – Wildlife and Plants).
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the activities implementing the proposed action will be designed to avoid impacting the historic archaeological resources identified in the project area. Over the long term the project will protect these resources by reducing the threat of wildfire (EA Environmental Consequences – Heritage Resources). The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because the only ones known to exist in the area are historic and they would not be significantly effected as noted above.



- 9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because none exist in the area (EA Environmental Consequences – Wildlife and Plants).
- 10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (EA – Proposed Action, Environmental Consequences – Air Quality). The action is consistent with the Toiyabe Land and Resource Management Plan (See EA Purpose and Need).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to reduce wildfire risk and enhance ecosystems is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives (EA Purpose and Need). The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for watershed protection and riparian conservation objectives (EA Proposed Action).

Implementation Date

The project may be implemented immediately following this decision.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Administrative review opportunities were provided from October 15, 2004 to November 15, 2004. No objections were filed during this period. Pursuant to 35 CFR 218, no appeals are provided.

Contact

For copies of the Environmental Assessment, or additional information concerning this decision please visit the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest web site at

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/htnf/projects/>

or contact Project Manager David Loomis, Carson Ranger District, 1536 S. Carson St., Carson City, NV 89703 775-884-8132.

/S/ Edward Monnig

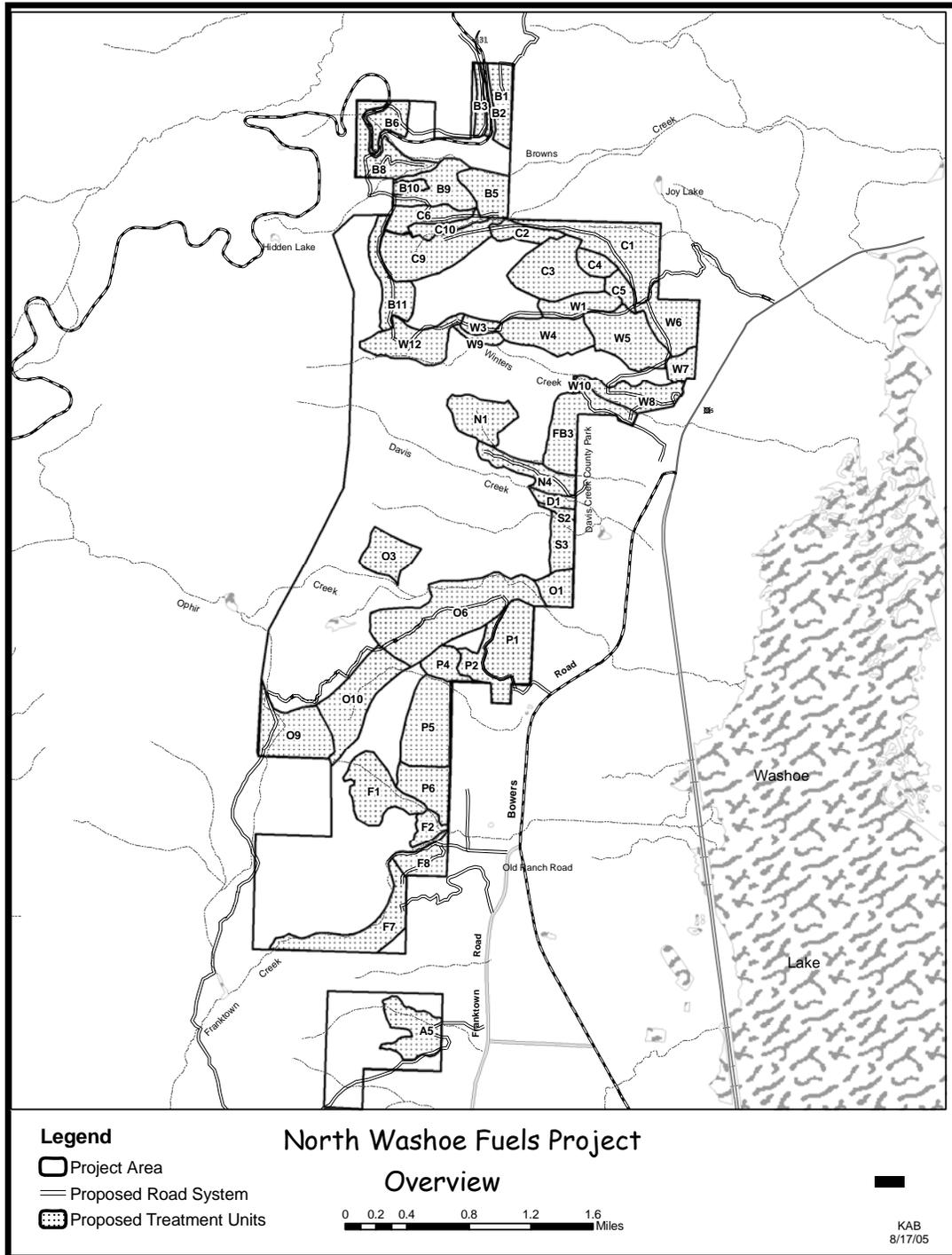
Edward C. Monnig
Acting Forest Supervisor

08/22/2005

Date



APPENDIX





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Treatment by unit

Unit	Acres	Treatment	Basal Area	
			Before	After
A5	64	Whole Tree Tractor, Perimeter Machine Pile, Underburn	206	60 to 100
B1	42	Whole Tree Tractor, Machine Pile	217	60 to 100
B2	8	Whole Tree Tractor, Machine and Hand Pile	217	60 to 100
B3	17	Log Length Helicopter, Hand Pile	217	60 to 100
B5	48	Whole Tree Tractor, Hand Pile	235	60 to 100
B6	31	Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	40	40
B8	65	Whole Tree Tractor, Hand Pile, Mastication	201	100
B9	66	Whole Tree Tractor, Perimeter Machine Pile, Underburn	210	60 to 100
B10	10	Thinning, Hand Pile	31	18
B11	56	Brushfield with Mastication	na	Na
C1	123	Whole Tree Tractor, Perimeter Machine Pile, Underburn	197	60 to 100
C2	28	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	260	60 to 100
C3	104	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	204	60 to 100
C4	21	Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	40	40
C5	20	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	197	60 to 100
C6	40	Understory Brushfield with Thinning, Machine Pile	48	48
C9	108	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn, Aspen Release	225	60 to 100
C10	22	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn, Aspen Release	260	88
D1	14	Whole Tree Tractor, Perimeter Hand Pile, Underburn	120	60 to 100
F1	81	Log Length Helicopter, Underburn	236	60 to 100
F2	21	Log Length Helicopter, Perimeter Hand Pile, Underburn	160	60 to 100
F7	90	Log Length Helicopter, Machine and Hand Pile, Underburn	211	60 to 100
F8	40	Whole Tree Tractor, Perimeter Machine and Hand Pile, Underburn	215	60 to 100
FB3	86	Understory Brushfield with Thinning, Machine, Hand Pile, Mastication	60	60
N1	60	Log Length Helicopter, Underburn	203	60 to 100
N4	49	Log Length Tractor and Skyline, Perimeter Hand Pile, Mastication, Underburn	180	60 to 100
O1	30	Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	40	40
O3	49	Log Length Helicopter, Underburn	200	60 to 100



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O6	206	Whole Tree Tractor, Log Length Skyline, Underburn	225	60 to 100
O9	95	Whole Tree Tractor, Perimeter Machine and Hand Pile, Underburn	180	60 to 100
O10	106	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	220	60 to 100
P1	82	Whole Tree Tractor, Log Length Skyline, Perimeter Machine and Hand Pile, Underburn	223	60 to 100
P2	42	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	245	60 to 100
P4	30	Understory Brushfield with Thinning, Perimeter Hand Pile	60	60
P5	102	Log Length Helicopter, Perimeter Hand Pile, Underburn	193	60 to 100
P6	54	Understory Brushfield with Thinning, Perimeter Hand Pile	60	60
S2	7	Understory Brushfield with Mastication, Machine and Hand Pile	60	60
S3	34	Whole Tree Tractor, Machine and Hand Pile	180	60 to 100
W1	41	Understory Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	60	60
W3	14	Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	40	40
W4	72	Whole Tree Tractor, Log Length Skyline, Underburn	211	60 to 100
W5	92	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	197	60 to 100
W6	70	Whole Tree Tractor, Log Length Skyline, Perimeter Machine and Hand Pile, Underburn	197	60 to 100
W7	21	Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	20	20
W8	57	Brushfield with Thinning, Mastication	30	30
W9	11	Log Length Helicopter, Underburn	180	60 to 100
W10	6	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	180	60 to 100
W12	74	Whole Tree Tractor, Underburn	148	60 to 100