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SCOPING INFORMATION

LOWRY HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION AND ECOSYSTEM ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

ELY RANGER DISTRICT

WHITE PINE COUNTY, NEVADA

COMMENTS WELCOME

The Ely Ranger District is re-initiating the analysis of the Lowry Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project on National Forest System lands (NFS) within White Pine County, Nevada. The District is currently evaluating various fuels reduction treatments within the wildland urban interface (WUI) associated with residential subdivisions and surrounding NFS lands located south of Ely, Nevada at the eastern base of Ward Mountain. Treatments to reduce wildfire risk in this area are identified as a high priority in the White Pine County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. A combination of thinning and prescribed fire treatments are being evaluated for implementation to reduce the risk of wildland fire within the WUI, create an area of defensible space to increase public and fire fighter safety and facilitate the restoration of key grass and shrub communities. Full implementation of the project would occur over the next five years.

The Forest Service welcomes your comments. Please send them in by October 17, 2008.

Project History

The Forest Service issued the original Notice of Proposed Action for this project in August of 2007. Comments received were considered in restructuring the analysis process. These comments suggested that the categorical exclusion process originally proposed by the Forest

Service was not appropriate. Based on these comments and a recent legal decision from the Ninth Circuit, the Forest Service has decided to prepare an environmental assessment under the authority of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. This includes providing additional opportunity for public comment on the proposed action. Public comment on the proposed action was re-initiated with the public meeting in Ely on September 9, 2008. Comments submitted at the meeting were supportive of the project and its benefits for wildlife habitat and fuels reduction.

Location

The Project Area includes about 4,500 acres located on the east slope of Ward Mountain in Townships 16 North, Range 63 East, Sections 28, 32, 33; Township 15 North, Range 63 East, Sections 2-4, 9-11, 14-15, 21-23, 26-27; about five miles south of Ely, Nevada. (See attached map). Elevations range from 6,900 ft to 8,400 ft.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this proposal is to reduce potential wildfire severity and overall wildfire risk to private residences and property, increase public and firefighter safety by creating defensible space within the Lowry wildland urban interface area and facilitate restoration of key grass and shrub communities. This need for action is the result of increased pinyon and juniper density and associated fuel loadings that have created in an increased risk of wildfire impacts to urban interface areas and long-term ecosystem integrity.

Increased pinyon-juniper densities and associated fuel loadings have created a moderate-high risk of losing key ecosystem components, such as native understory grass and shrubs, due to high severity fires. Restoration of these key grass and shrub ecosystem components is needed because pinyon-juniper expansion has increased vegetative competition for light, water, and nutrients. As a result, coverage of shrubs, grasses and other herbaceous species has declined, reducing critical habitat components for many wildlife species, including mule deer and sage grouse.

THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service proposes to reduce levels of pinyon and juniper expansion and associated fuel loads from Lowry Canyon to Sawmill Canyon on the east side of Ward Mountain. This proposed action includes two treatment types – mechanical treatment and prescribed fire.

Mechanical Treatment

Pinyon and juniper stands located on gentler topography (less than 30 percent slope), along existing roads and in sagebrush communities where pinyon and junipers are encroaching are proposed for mechanical treatment followed by prescribed burning to reduce fuels and promote native fire adapted grass and shrub species. Post-treatment tree spacing would be based on reducing the threat of a crown fire and encouraging the growth of key understory grass and shrub vegetation.

In urban interface areas, tree spacing would be greater in order to further reduce risk of a crown fire and provide for defensible space for fire fighters and the public. Potential equipment employed as part of mechanical treatments may include chainsaws, three wheeled shears, low impact skidders, and a portable chipper. Impacts to soil would be minimized by utilizing low soil impact equipment, and limiting equipment to gentler slopes during periods of dry or frozen snow covered soils.

Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire alone is proposed for steeper (greater than 30 percent slope) and less accessible areas (such as along drainage bottoms) to reduce pinyon and juniper levels and promote understory grass and shrub species. Topographical features and areas of naturally sparse vegetation will be used for control lines as feasible to minimize the need for constructed firelines and associated soil disturbance

Implementation of prescribed fire treatments within the project will vary based on topography, (slope, aspect), and vegetation types. Both aerial (heli-torch) and manual (drip torches) ignition methods would be used. The target areas for the prescribed burning include the bottoms of the drainages, slopes over 30%, and Phase I and II pinyon/juniper stands. These areas are more sensitive to surface disturbance associated with use of mechanical equipment and the Phase I and II pinyon/juniper stands have understory vegetation conditions that are expected to respond well to fire. Most southerly facing slopes are not proposed for treatment due to the lack of understory vegetation.

Prescribed burn patches would occur in a mosaic pattern in with openings ranging from 10-250 acres. Unburned areas would provide a seed source for vegetation re-establishment and provide habitat for wildlife. Some openings greater than 250 acres may be created where needed to reduce wildfire risks and create larger areas of grass and shrub communities.

Prescribed fire would be implemented during weather and fuel conditions conducive for the safe application of fire and achieving desired post-fire vegetation response. In addition, firefighting resources, including engines, would be present to ensure full containment of the prescribed fire within the project area.

Other factors

The project does not include road or trail development. The proposed action excludes fire ignition in areas used for pine nut collection by American Indians. On-going consultation with tribes will occur throughout the planning and implementation of this project to ensure tribal concerns are addressed. The project area does not include any Wilderness or roadless areas or Wild Horse Management Areas. No changes in livestock grazing are proposed.

Preliminary Issues

Based on public comment and consultation and interdisciplinary analysis the following issues and preliminary assessment of effects were identified:

- Effects on wildfire risk to ecosystems and communities in the Lowry area. Mechanical thinning and prescribed fire would reduce the risk of wildfire to these ecosystems and to the urban interface community in the Ward Mountain area.
- Firefighter and public safety. Reduced fuel loading and creation of openings would provide safer areas for firefighters to suppress wildfires and enhance public safety.
- Changes to vegetative communities. The project would create a diverse mosaic of vegetation communities of various age classes within the project area. Pinyon-juniper woodland coverage would decline, while sagebrush/grass and mountain brush communities would be restored. The prescribed burning and mechanical treatments may affect individual rare plants and potential rare plant habitat. Project design and specific mitigation measures are intended to limit the impact to these species.
- Short and long-term impacts and benefits to wildlife habitat. Some temporary displacement of individuals and limited loss of some habitat would likely occur during project implementation in the short term. Low-severity fire would produce favorable post fire conditions for natural shrub and herbaceous re-establishment. Increased vegetative diversity resulting from the burn would improve big game habitat over the long term. The potential for adverse long-term effects to wildlife habitat from stand replacing wildfires would be reduced.
- Impacts to watershed conditions The proposed action would remove vegetation cover in portions of the area, resulting in a short term increased risk of soil erosion. The mosaic nature of the treatments would minimize the risk by providing areas to filter potential surface erosion.. Due to the limited amount of potential disturbance, the short-term nature of the project, and the use of best management practices the amount of increased soil disturbance and erosion is expected to be minor. Over the long term, the risk of adverse effects to watershed conditions from intense wildfires would be reduced.
- Potential for spread of noxious weeds and invasive species. The district weed inventory shows limited occurrences of noxious weeds within and adjacent to the project area. Field surveys also show that populations of cheatgrass were observed within the project area and in areas leading to the project area. Mitigation, including project vehicle washing, would limit the potential for noxious weeds and invasive species transport during project implementation. Post-burn monitoring would identify treatment needs. The potential for adverse long-term effects to noxious weeds and invasive species from high severity wildfires would be reduced
- Potential for effects on heritage resources Cultural Resource surveys have been conducted in the project area. A number of sites, both historic and prehistoric, were identified. The historic sites are wood features that would be protected by avoiding ignition in and around the sites. Prehistoric sites, will be avoided during mechanical treatments and generally avoided with fire by not allowing direct ignition within known sites. It is expected that there will be no adverse effects to any cultural resource site from this project, and over the short to long term risk to the wood features at historic sites would be reduced.

COMMENT PROCESS

Written comments should be sent to District Ranger, Ely Ranger District: 825 Avenue E, Ely, NV 89301, or fax: (775) 289-2132. Electronic comments should be submitted to comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-ely@fs.fed.us. Office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments or wishing to provide oral comments are 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. The telephone number is (775) 289-3031

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project, available for public inspection, and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act. This hazardous fuel reduction project is being prepared under the provisions of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. It is subject to the 36 CFR Part 218, Subpart A Predecisional Administrative Review Process.

Individuals and organizations who have submitted specific written comments related to the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project during scoping or other public involvement opportunities may file an objection following completion of the environmental assessment during the predecisional administrative review process.

For further information, contact Carol Carlock Ely Ranger District Fuels Specialist at 775-289-3031.

Lowry Hazardous Fuels Reduction