United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Intermountain Region

March, 2009

Decision Notice & Finding of No Significant Impact

Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

North Fork Ranger District, Salmon-Challis National Forest

View northwest into the Hughes Creek drainage where it joins with the North Fork of the Salmon River

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Decision and Reasons for the Decision

I have read the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), reviewed the analysis in the Project Planning Record, including documents incorporated by reference, and fully understand the environmental effects disclosed therein. I have also considered the comments submitted during the public scoping for this project.

Decision

It is my decision to select Alternative 2, Proposed Action, which is described in the EA on pages 10-14 (See attached Map). My reasons for the decision are based on the Purpose and Need (EA, pgs. 1-3) identified for the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, which includes the following:

- Need to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic large crown fires in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) that could destroy structures and improvements in Hughes Creek, North Fork corridor and adjoining Gibbonsville community.
- Need to modify fuels and reduce the risk fire behavior to levels consistent with the desired vegetation and fuels conditions, which allow fire crews to quickly and safely suppress fires.
- Need to improve forest health, vigor, and resistance to fire, consistent with the desired vegetation conditions.

Rationale for the Decision

Alternative 2, including all project-specific design standards, provides the best opportunity to accomplish the identified need for action. My decision to implement the Proposed Action is based on: (1) its effectiveness in modifying fuels and fire behavior within the Hughes Creek planning area, a WUI zone, thereby reducing the risk that a wildfire could destroy structures and improvements within Hughes Creek, the North Fork corridor and Gibbonsville communities; (2) Alternative 2 develops forest vegetation that will be healthier and more resilient to fire. Additional factors and consideration include:

- The Healthy Forest Initiative, the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and the National Fire Plan, and Healthy Forest Restoration Act all establish goals for reducing hazardous fuels. Reducing risk to firefighters, communities, municipal watersheds, and forests and rangelands is the goal of these initiatives. The objectives of the project are consistent with these initiatives and provide a sense of urgency for action. The Hughes Creek vicinity is situated in a high occurrence zone on the Salmon-Challis National Forest for lightning caused fires. This area has an elevated risk of uncharacteristic fire behavior due to past fire exclusion, recent long-term drought conditions and expanding insect and disease outbreaks in this part of central Idaho.

- The Lemhi County Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan (CWPP) identifies hazards and vulnerabilities to the North Fork and Gibbonsville areas, federally recognized "at-risk" communities, in need of mitigation within the wildland/urban interface zone. The Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project directly addresses this necessity and safety concern. This project complements and supplements ongoing and recent fuels reduction activities on National Forest lands and private property in the Hughes Creek drainage, and North Fork corridor and Gibbonsville vicinities. Together these projects are a significant portion of the Salmon-Challis National Forest contribution to the CWPP for this portion of Lemhi County.
- Alternative 2 will provide a positive benefit to local economies while addressing a continued decline in forest health and elevated risk of uncharacteristic fire behavior.
- The Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project maintains existing vehicular access (miles of open and closed travel routes) for the public in the project area. The Project also recognizes current and future transportation needs by the addition of 49 miles of the existing 64 miles of unauthorized (non-system) roads in the project area onto the Forest Service road system (Roads Analysis Report). Roads added to Forest Service road system will be classified primarily as Level 1, which means they remain closed and stabilized except for brief periods of administrative or special use.
- Travel access management for the Salmon-Challis National Forest (includes this project area) is currently under analysis and consideration as a separate proposal and process. The decision to be made on travel access management will take precedent over this decision for the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, and may make changes to vehicular access to routes in this area.
- Implementation of Alternative 2 will result in landscape scale changes to habitats for big game and other wildlife. Cover levels for deer and elk will be reduced for the next few decades where fuels reduction treatments occur while forage quantity and quality for these species are increased in these same areas.

Documents Considered in Making the Decision

The following were the primary environmental, analysis and related assessment documents I referenced and considered in my decision:

- Resource Specialist Reports for the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project for the topics of: Soil Resource; Hydrology Resource; Fire/Fuels and Air Quality; Wildlife Resources; Fisheries Resources; Roads Analysis Report; Grazing Assessment; Noxious Weed Resources; Heritage Resources; Recreation Assessment; and Forested Vegetation Resources.
- A Wildlife/Plant Biological Assessment of Endangered, Threatened Species & Biological Evaluation Forest Service Sensitive Species for the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project.
- Fisheries Biological Assessment & Evaluation - Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project.
- Forest Plan Consistency Review related to Old Growth, Biological Evaluations & Surveys, and Detrimental Soil Disturbance.

Alternatives Considered

Alternative 1 (No Action with Wildfire)

This alternative reflects the existing condition without any new management activities occurring, and the occurrence of a plausible event of a landscape scale, stand-replacing wildland fire during summer drought and extreme weather conditions. In other words, all current, routine and ongoing management activities will continue to occur under this alternative, existing management plans will continue to guide management, and a large wildland fire would occur in the project area. Changes in forest structure in the project area have significantly increased the potential for uncharacteristic fire behavior, so this alternative reflects the "effects of failing to implement the project" (HFRA Field Guide, 2004, page 9 of EA).

A comparison of the "No Action with Wildfire" and Alternative 2 can be found in abbreviated form in Table 3 of the EA on pages 15-16. A more detailed disclosure of the impacts of both alternatives and possible consequences of no action is documented in the EA on pages 17-40.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Under the proposed action, a variety of thinning, fuel treatments and associated activities in the project area in coordination with fuel reduction treatments on private lands will reduce fuel loads (see Table 1).

Table 1. Proposed activities within the planning area

Activity	Description
Mechanical Treatments	Harvest activities include commercially thinning from below the canopy of about **3,431 acres** to reduce to a stand density index (SDI) of 80 (40 to 60 square feet basal area (BA) per acre), about ½ of the understory; emphasis on large tree retention; use tractor and/or skyline cable logging; whole tree skidding to facilitate use of tree tops and slash as biomass or for pile burning. No thinning in inventoried roadless area. Precommercial thinning of trees <7" DBH will be conducted in tractor & skyline harvest units following commercial thinning to achieve ladder fuel reductions, and 18 X 18 ft spacing in pockets of healthy saplings to create crown separation. Precommercial thinning with these same specifications will also be conducted on **283 acres** in select units as the only mechanical treatment needed for fuels reduction. All thinning units will receive a follow-up prescribed burning treatment as outlined below. Up to 22.6 miles of fireline will be needed to implement burning in thinning units.
Tractor Units **H6, H8A, H8B, H9, H10, H28, H29, H32, H36, H38, H39, H41, H43, H44, H47, H48, H50, H55, H57, H58, H60, H61, H62, H63, H64, H66, H68, H69, H70, H71, H72, H73, H74, H78**	
Skyline Units **H5, H7, H11, H13, H27, H30, H31, H33, H34, H35A, H35B, H37, H40, H42, H45, H46, H49, H52, H53, H54, H56, H77**	
Tractor/Skyline Units **H4, H51, H65, H67, H75, H76**	
Precommercial Units **H1, H2, H3, H15, H16, H17, H18, H19, H25, H26**	

Prescribed Burning	About **13,261 acres** (includes thinning areas) will be prescribed burned primarily during spring & fall. Fuels treatments will include broad scale, low to moderate intensity underburning in thinning units & surrounding locations (including inventoried roadless area) to reduce concentrations of natural surface fuels & activity generated slash from commercial, precommercial & hand thinning. An additional 15.5 miles of fireline will potentially be needed. Pile burning will occur where hand or machine piles remained after treatment & biomass utilization.
General Underburn Units **B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, B7, B8, B9, B10**	
Roadside and Riparian Units **B11A. B11B. B12A, B12B. B13A. B13B. B14**	Hughes Creek & Ditch Creek road corridors (primary ingress / egress routes), including adjacent riparian zones, will receive fuels reduction treatment within a 400 foot strip on either side of these roads, except where private land or other mechanical treatments are present. Utilize hand felling of ladder fuels, select conifers & brush pocket thinning on **342 acres**, hand piling of slash for biomass use or pile/underburning.
Old Growth Units **OG1, OG2, OG3, OG4, OG5, OG6, OG7, OG8, OG9, OG11** **Old Growth Units with no treatment** **OG13, OG14, OG15, OG16, OG17, OG18, OG19, OG20, OG21, OG22, OG23**	Select hand felling treatments & surface fuel slashing will occur on **784 acres** of old growth (OG) retention stands north of Hughes Creek to reduce ladder fuels & surface fuel concentrations in prep for burning. Underburn with at least two entries to reduce concentrations first, then general broadcast of areas for maintenance or enhancement of OG characteristics. OG stands south of Hughes Creek & other perimeter locations (**735 acres**) not treated. Approx. 5.5 miles of additional fireline will be needed.
Roads	Existing roads totaling **71.1 miles** will be used for access to treatment areas; no new permanent roads will be constructed; after use, roads will be returned to their pre-project condition (open roads will remain open, closed roads will again be closed); approx. **49 miles** of existing unauthorized roads, some to be used for access and all needed for future management, will be added to the Forest Service system; Ditch Creek Road (#60089) and Hughes Creek Road (#60091) will be the principal haul routes; the Ditch Creek Road bridge will be replaced with a twenty foot treated timber structure to accommodate 100-year stream flow levels.
Noxious Weeds	Weeds activities will include standard prevention measures and programmatic treatments accomplished as part of the Forest annual noxious weeds program management. Emphasize pretreatment of areas where access for fuels reduction activities affords entry by vehicle mounted spray equipment. Coordinate fuels reduction activities to compliment existing weed treatments, bio-control releases and special grant-funded control actions.

Project Schedule and Duration: Activities will begin in the summer of 2009 with hand treatment of fuels along main road corridors and private land boundaries. The Ditch Creek Road bridge replacement is anticipated to occur during 2009 following project approval. Tractor and cable logging will last 3 to 5 years beginning in 2009. The prescribed burning phase will be completed in limited annual increments within 10 to15 years, generally implemented following the mechanical and hand treatment phase. Some of the project area will be prescribed burned during the thinning treatment phase if it did not interfere with those activities. Stewardship contracting is one possible avenue for implementing of harvest, thinning treatment and associated project activities. Stewardship contracting provides for trading

goods for services, multi-year contracts for up to 10 years and retaining receipts to apply to needed service work.

Design Features: During the development phase of the project, various design measures were incorporated to address specific resource needs and opportunities, lessen potential impacts and to avoid potential resource damage. Measures include using Best Management Practices, standard timber sale contract provisions, regular operational procedures, and other measures developed through resource specialist input and Interdisciplinary Team interactions. Design features of particular important to this project include:

Mechanical Treatments

- Emphasis on large tree retention. Priority for leave trees will be largest diameter Ponderosa Pine (PP) and largest diameter Douglas-fir (DF), then largest diameter lodgepole pine (LP), insect and disease free, largest crown, trees with tallest height, straightest stem. Favor PP over DF where characteristics are similar, favor DF over LP where characteristics are similar and favor / enhance aspen wherever it occurs. Trees greater than 7.0 inches dbh will be considered commercial size. There will be no harvest in designated old growth retention stands.
- Whole tree skidding in tractor units and yarding of top slash in cable units (some exceptions) during commercial thinning to designated landings to facilitate biomass utilization of slash remaining on landings for both economic opportunity, reduction of material to be burned and subsequent smoke emissions. Delay handpile/slash pile burning and/or underburning until Oct 1 the year following thinning to allow chance for removal/use.
- Retain at least 5 tons/acre of downed woody material to meet Salmon National Forest Coarse Woody Debris (FLRMP pg. IV-17 to18) requirements for site productivity.
- No commercial harvest within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) or Modified PACFISH RHCAs per PACFISH guidelines.
- The normal operating season for commercial thinning will be from July 1 to November 30 (inclusive) to minimize Ips beetle buildup in slash then spread to residual/adjacent stands (Contract Provision RO-CT6.45 Protection from Ins Buildup (11/98)).
- No logging camp to be allowed on National Forest lands, including within the project area.
- Fueling operations/storage will be governed by U.S.F.S Timber Sale Special Contract Provision CT6.344 Prevention of Oil Spills (Idaho Forests)(01/2001).
- Impact by skid trails on thinning units harvested during this project with conventional tractor operations will be limited to less than 10% of the area. Skid trail gradient will be limited to a maximum of 60% on quartzite landtypes and 45% on volcanic, granitic, sedimentary landtypes (FLRMP pg. IV-34). Skid trails rehabilitation and water-bar spacing will use the guidelines in the FLRMP (pg. IV-35). Water-bar skyline corridors in units with erosive soils.
- Fuels reduction work behind closure gates will be allowed in most locations during fall hunting seasons and other times during the operating season where closures are yearlong. Restrictions to

operating season for commercial thinning east of Ditch Creek, and for mechanical thinning and vehicle access to parts of the West Fork of Hughes Creek during the general hunt season will be imposed to further provide for big game security and to avoid interference with elk migration to winter range. Existing closures to public travel throughout the project area will be retained for big game security.

- Snag retention guidelines as specified in the FLRMP (pg. IV-17) and other guides will be met through contractual provisions.
- FLRMP wildlife standards and guides for Management Areas 4A (pg. IV-110 to 112) and 5A (pg. IV-121) will be incorporated in thinning and prescribed burn prescriptions with emphasis on big game security and cover requirements, key big game winter range, unique habitats, ridgetop ecotones, and habitats for special status species and other forest associated wildlife species. Restrict harvest and human disturbance activities within 0.5 mi radius of raptor nests until times when inactive. In the event a goshawk territory is located, appropriate management prescriptions will be used to maintain the nesting habitat characteristics of the stands surrounding nest sites and alternate nest sites (ie, 6 nest sites where each site is 30ac, for a total of 180ac). Recommend retaining 1-2 slash handpiles per acre for habitat diversity in select units.
- Avoid or protect identified heritage sites, rangeland improvements (fences, water developments, cattleguards, and exclosures), special use water pipelines and phone lines, and trailhead facilities and Granite Mountain Lookout.
- If unanticipated heritage resources are discovered during project implementation, all work in that area will cease and the North Zone Archaeologist will be notified within 24 hours to assess the significance of the find and the need for further consultation with SHPO and/or appropriate tribal parties.
- Thinning and prescribed burn activities will be coordinated in the advance of each operating season with private land holders, concerned residents, ID Fish & Game – avoidance of wolf den sites and management activities (trapping); Outfitter/Guides – spring and fall activities; grazing permittee – scheduled pasture use
- For safety of public and project area residents, post appropriate signs to warn of logging activities, traffic and hazards with prescribed burning.

Prescribed Burning

- Approximately 50 to 80% of the surface is expected to be burned. Scattered bunchgrass slopes will be burned to reduce sagebrush and tree encroachment by 40-60%, leaving a mosaic pattern. Timbered areas will be burned with varying degrees of expected mortality in the mature overstory ranging from <25% to <35%.
- Dozer constructed firelines will not be used. Existing roads within and between treatment areas will be used for containment lines as much as possible. Other containment lines as needed may be constructed. These lines may consist of fuel breaks with no traditional fire line construction, or traditional fire line construction approximately 18 inches wide that includes removal of all vegetation

and other fuel down to mineral soil. ATV with small plow attachment or small track mounted excavator less than 9 ft width will be used where terrain and soil surface conditions allowed efficient construction of 18 inch wide containment line. Fireline constructed parallel to water courses will be avoided. Hose lays and wet line are the preferred containment method. If traditional fire line construction is used, Minimum Impact Suppression Techniques will be used. All firelines will be rehabilitated by water-barring and pulling in debris as available.

- Methods of ignition will include aerial ignition using helitorch or Plastic Sphere Dispenser, and hand ignition with drip torches or fusees. Strategies will include strip head fire, backing fire and jackpot burning. Multiple entries will likely occur during the life of the project to meet objectives. Ignition in filter strips will likely occur if the risk of damaging the filter strip values as defined in the FLRMP (pg. IV-57 to 61) is less than allowing a backing fire in the same area. Backing fire will be allowed in filter strips where the risk of damage is low at the recommendation of the Burn Boss. To maintain water quality, no ignition material, such as helitorch gel, drip torch fuel, or plastic spheres will be allowed in stream courses or areas of standing water.
- Hand piles along Hughes Creek and Ditch Creek road corridors and slash piles in skyline units will be available for biomass use until October 1 the year following thinning. Prescribed burning of these units and/or piles will occur after this period.
- Aviation management-helicopter use will be managed from the North Fork Fire Station Helipad, Trail Gulch trailhead along Highway 93 corridor or the Salmon Helibase.
- Idaho/Montana Airshed Group operational plan will guide smoke management.
- Prescribed burn plans and water source use will follow mitigation measures stated in the Programmatic Biological Assessment for Fire Suppression and Prescribed Natural Fire Activities in the Upper Salmon River Sub-basin (USDA Forest Service, 2002).
- Protect / avoid recent releases sites of insects for biological control of noxious weeds.
- Avoid burning sensitive plant species during spring flowering period in limited locations where known to occur.
- Retain at least 5 tons/acre of downed woody material to meet Salmon National Forest Coarse Woody Debris (FLRMP pg. IV-17 to18) requirements for site productivity.
- Access will be compliant with the Salmon National Forest Travel Management Plan (1988) and future revisions. In other words, vehicles will stay on designated travel routes.
- Coordinate activities with companion treatments that may occur on private lands. Provide notification of prescribed burning activities to local newspapers, radio stations, fire departments, sheriff's department, permittees, outfitter-guides and concerned residents.

Roads

- Ditch Creek Road bridge installation will follow mitigation measures stated in the June 9, 2005 Programmatic Biological Assessment for Stream Crossing Structure Replacement and Removal Activities Affecting ESA-Listed Species. The treated timber bridge structure will meet HS20-44

traffic loading, designed to pass 100-year flood flow and bank full heights between abutments without constriction. The design vehicle for this single lane bridge is a log truck

- Pre-haul maintenance will be conducted to restore the road to a suitable condition for the proposed activity and use objectives for the road. Work may include opening of closed roads, brushing and limbing encroaching vegetation, restoration or replacement of damaged running surface, and maintenance of the drainage system, including ditches, rubber water deflectors (including replacement with culverts), drain dips and template crowns or cross slopes. Slash from clearing of encroaching vegetation will be scattered to avoid adverse effects from burning.
- To minimize the potential effect of actions related to road maintenance, use, reopening, and closure during the project, the following protection measures for heritage resources must be followed. All ground disturbing activities such as vegetation removal, scarification, grading, and berming will be carried out entirely within the existing road footprint. Where vegetation removal in the roadbed is required to allow access, ground disturbance will be minimized by hand felling conifer regeneration and shrubs, and allowing only high blading. Sediment material for road closure berms must be taken from the existing roadbed or a pre-designated area and have no effect on known historic properties. All vehicles must remain on the road at all times. If any staging or storage areas must be established outside the existing roadbed, these areas will be situated within existing heritage inventory areas and the action must be determined through consultation with the North Zone Archaeologist to have no effect on known historic properties. Depending on the context of these locations and the scale of the proposed work, an on-site archaeologist may also be required to monitor the work.
- Magnesium chloride applications will be applied annually as needed during haul period to the Hughes Creek road from Hwy 93 up to Salzer road junction, and on the Ditch Creek road up to the Granite turnoff for dust abatement around private land, facilitate maintenance and reduce need for continuous water applications. Water rights will be obtained by the Forest before any water drafting for dust abatement occurs. Magnesium chloride applications will follow the standard operating procedures as identified in the May 24, 2002 Roads Programmatic BA (USDA Forest Service, 2002b) and the August 7, 2008 Monitoring Report for Salmon-Challis National Forest Dust Abatement Operations (USDA Forest Service, 2008b).
- Travel routes to be used during prescribed burning will be the same road system used for access for mechanical thinning. No additional routes will be developed or opened.
- Post-activity maintenance will be done to return the road to the pre-haul condition and the established road objectives. The intent is to close roads that were to only be opened for timber hauling and associated fuels reduction activities and to correct any problems that result from the use of the road by the commercial user (i.e. ruts, wheel depressions, damaged structures etc.). Level 1 roads remaining on the Forest Service system will receive the following treatments upon completion of activities: Compaction of the road surface will be relieved and a seed bed prepared through either ripping or scarifying the road surface depending on the level of compaction.
- Natural slope drainage will be restored. Culverts will be cleaned or removed if replaced with driveable dips, and the road surface will be outsloped where feasible. The road surface will be

revegetated using a native seed mix. Roads that are currently closed will be closed again after treatment; entrance will be gated, fenced or humped as appropriate.

- All current gates will remain in place and in their respective closure status as per the Forest Travel Plan. Contractor(s) will be responsible for opening and locking gates as passage is necessary. The same applies to prescribed burning activities. Gates or other road access control features will be utilized for temporary restriction of road use on routes that were previously closed, especially during hunting season.

Noxious Weeds

- Utilize USDA Forest Service Guide to Noxious Week Prevention Practices for all fuels reduction and project associated activities, for instance: To prevent the spread and establishment of noxious weeds equipment will be cleaned before being used off road. Cleaning activities include power-washing of the undercarriage and tires of vehicles such that they are free of dirt and/or caked mud that may contain weed seeds. Cleaning must occur off National Forest lands. A visual inspection will be scheduled and completed by knowledgeable Forest personnel at a designated site prior to the proposed use and entry into the project area [Contract Provision BT6.35 – Equipment Cleaning (06/06)].

Monitoring: Information gathered before, during and after implementation of activities is used to determine the effectiveness of the project's design and associated design features. This establishes a feedback mechanism so management can develop and employ an adaptive learning curve. Monitoring is done at recurring intervals as a basis for Forest Plan implementation. Project effectiveness monitoring is done by routine of sampling specific projects at specified time intervals. The activities associated with this proposed action will include the following additional monitoring:

- **Down Woody Debris:** During sale administration and follow-up prescribed underburning the amount of debris left in the mechanical treatment units needs to meet recommended minimum levels. Accomplishment of this activity will be by sale administration, fuels, or soils personnel.
- **Northern Goshawk:** Goshawk surveys for nesting activity and/or post-fledging habitat use will be accomplished during unit layout and administration of thinning and other fuels reduction activities. Recommended avoidance or buffer provisions will be applied when occupancy is found. Timber, fuels and wildlife personnel will accomplish this monitoring.
- **Soil Disturbance:** Post logging activity monitoring will be conducted to assure that detrimental soil disturbance in thinning areas does not exceed the Region 4 Soil Quality Handbook guideline of 15% (R4 FSH 2509.18, 1995 superseded January 7, 2003). Tractor landings will be ripped if monitoring results indicate detrimental soil disturbance in excess of the 15% threshold. Soils personnel will accomplish this monitoring.

- **Old Growth:** Established protocols to assess stand composition, decadence, downed woody debris, and presence of old growth dependent wildlife species will be completed to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatments
- **CO_2 and Smoke Emissions:** Smoke dispersion will be monitored on burn days. If dispersion becomes unfavorable or impacting to local residents, the burn boss may terminate burning at his/her discretion.
- **Heritage Resources:** Monitor effectiveness of avoidance/protection of resources during prescribed burning. Periodic reports provided to SHPO.
- **Noxious Weeds:** Normal protocols for the North Zone Weed Management program of establishing permanent monitoring transects will be implemented to assess the efficacy of weed control treatments and track vegetative recovery and trend.

Public Involvement

This proposal has been listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions since April 1, 2007. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping which began May 10, 2007. Collaborative discussions and information exchanges regarding the project occurred with the Lemhi County Forest Restoration Group between August 2006 and October 2007. This group consists of representatives from local government, the rural fire district, economic development, environmental and conservation groups, contractors, user groups, local nonprofit organizations, concerned community members, landowners and other diverse interests. The collaborative group held six meetings, four conference phone calls and four site tours of the project area. A public meeting requesting recommendations toward development of the proposed action was held at the North Fork fire hall on May 23, 2007. The Lemhi County Forest Restoration Group reached consensus on the purpose and need, priorities and activities/opportunities associated with the proposed action. Formal agreement by the collaborative group conveyed by memo to the Forest Supervisor (March 2007) represented acknowledgement of the Forest Service proposed action as appropriate implementation of the Lemhi County Wildfire Prevention Plan.

The Forest Service read scoping comments and remarks from the collaborative discussions and public meetings to clarify and ensure public concerns would be accurately and adequately addressed in refinement of the proposed action and the environmental analysis. Examples of how these comments and inputs were incorporated into project features in design include:

- Forest Plan designated Old growth stands were prescribed for underburn treatment to maintain and enhance their wildlife habitat values.

- Whole tree yarding and slash piling was greatly expanded to include most harvest and thinning units to facilitate biomass utilization and potentially reduce smoke and emissions from fuels reduction activities.
- Replacement of a road bridge on the Ditch Creek road was included in project activities to facilitate fuels reduction activities on National Forest Lands and private lands in the Ditch Creek area.
- Fuels reduction treatments along the Hughes Creek riparian zone were included to address concerns about safety of ingress/egress routes for firefighters and publics as well as stream area health and protection.
- Proactive approach to integrated management of noxious weeds based on knowledge that fuels reduction treatments promote invasion, spread and density increase of these species.

Government to Government Relations

A letter introducing the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was sent to Rebecca Miles, Chairman, Nez Perce Tribe, and Alonzo Coby, Chairman, Shoshone Bannock Tribes on May 23, 2007. Kevin Brackney, Water Resources Division of the Nez Perce Tribe and Yvette Tuell, Environmental Program Manager for the Shoshone Bannock Tribes also received the same letter introducing the project.

Findings Required by Other Laws

National Environmental Policy Act: The EA and Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact document are in compliance with NEPA and the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) for Implementing NEPA.

Clean Water Act, Executive Order 11990 (wetlands) and 11988 (floodplains): This decision is consistent with the Clean Water Act and amendments. There are no anticipated impacts to wetlands and floodplains from project implementation. Application of design criteria for soil and water protection (EA Appendix A, pages 45-49) and provisions of the Idaho Forest Practices Act are expected to achieve compliance with the Idaho Water Quality Standards and Wastewater Treatment Requirements. Beneficial uses will be maintained in the Hughes Creek subwatershed (project area) (pages 30-31 of EA).

Executive Order 12898, "Environmental Justice": This decision was assessed to determine whether it will disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. No minority or low-income populations were identified during public involvement activities. The decision will not amend or preclude any existing private or treaty rights in the project area.

National Historic Preservation Act: The project area has been surveyed for heritage resources. Based on designed criteria and avoidance mitigation and consultation concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Office, no effects to National Register eligible or listed heritage resources will occur (see Item 8 of the attached FONSI for more detail on this finding)

Clean Air Act: Prescribed burning activities are designed to comply with provisions of the Montana/Idaho State Airshed Group Operating Guide to minimize the chances for air quality parameters to exceed regulatory limits defined in the Clean Air Act (pages 21-22 and 47 of the EA; pages 22-25 of Fire/Fuels Specialist Report).

Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Executive Order 13443 "Facilitation of Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation": Project treatment activities are anticipated to promote habitat conditions that will favor neotropical migratory and resident birds. Although hunting opportunity may be enhanced in the short term as a result of thinning activities, the maintenance of existing travel closures, especially during hunting season, and fire prescriptions anticipated to maintain hiding cover values, will likely provide maintenance of habitat conditions suitable for big game and long-term future hunting opportunities (page 25 of Wildlife Specialist Report).

Endangered Species Act (ESA): This decision is consistent with the Endangered Species Act. A Fisheries Biological Assessment and Evaluation, and Wildlife and Plant Biological Assessment of Endangered, Threatened Species and Biological Evaluation Forest Service Sensitive Species for the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project were completed on February 9, 2009. Determinations for these Biological Assessments and Evaluations are outline in Item 9 of the attached FONSI. Under Joint Counterpart ESA Section 7 Consultation Regulations these determinations did not require concurrence from US Fish & Wildlife Service and NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service.

National Forest Management Act: The National Forest Management Act and accompanying regulations require several evaluations and specific findings be documented at the project level**:**

Forest Management Indicator Species (MIS): Consistent with regulations at 36 CFR 219.19, Alternative 2 was evaluated for potential impacts (direct, indirect and cumulative) to habitats for pileated woodpecker, Columbia spotted frog, and bull trout, Management Indicator Species known to occur in the project area. This evaluation, as documented in the Environmental Consequences section of the EA (pages 24-25 & 27), determined that viable populations of MIS will be maintained in the project area (page 24 of the Wildlife Specialist Report; page 17 of the Fisheries Specialist Report). This determination is consistent with forest-wide trends for populations and habitat conditions for these MIS.

Forest Plan Consistency: The decision to implement Alternative 2 with changes is consistent with the Salmon National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, its goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines as outlined in the EA on pages 3, 9 & 45-49. The project objectives parallel management area direction for Management Prescriptions 3A, 4A & 5A which is prescribed for the project area. This consistency also includes the Forest Travel Plan, PACFISH Amendment (Interim Strategies for Managing Anadromous Fish-producing Watersheds in Eastern Oregon, Washington and Idaho and portions of California), Old Growth, Biological Evaluations and Surveys, and Detrimental Soil Disturbance.

Idaho Roadless Rule (2008): A portion of the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project area is located in the Allan Mountain #946 Idaho Roadless Area (IRA). Approximately 200 acres of Roadless Area classified as WUI with Backcounty/Restoration management theme is scheduled for fuels reduction treatment by prescribed underburning. No timber cutting, sale, and removal nor road construction, reconstruction or maintenance is planned in the IRA. This is consistent with the permissions and prohibitions governing the type of activities that can occur in IRA's as specified in the final rule (36 CFR Part 294).

Appeal and Implementation

This project was subject to the objection process prior to this decision according to 36 CFR Part 218 Subpart A and is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. (218.3). In accordance with 36 CFR 218, Subpart A, I intend to implement this decision immediately after it is executed.

The EA, Decision Notice/FONSI, and supporting documents within the Project Planning Record are available for inspection during regular business hours at the North Fork Ranger District Office, North Fork, ID.

Contact Person

For further information on this decision, contact Ken Rodgers, Team Leader, Salmon-Challis National Forest, Challis-Yankee Fork Ranger District; HC 63, Box 1669, Hwy 93; Challis, ID 83226; phone - (208) 879-4154.

Hughes Creek

Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

Treatment Areas

Final Map - March 05, 2009

Legend

- Structures-Hughes Creek Area
- Burn Unit Boundaries
- Section Lines-Hughes Creek Area
- U.S Highway 93
- Project Boundary
- System Roads
- Unclassified Roads
- Major Streams
- Streams
- Private Ownership
- No Treatment-Oldgrowth Areas
- Proposed Treatment-Oldgrowth Areas

Harvest Units

ACTVITY

- Precommercial
- Skyline
- Skyline and Tractor
- Tractor

Burn Units

Type

- General Underburn
- Roadside and Riparian
- Hughes Creek Watershed

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Environmental Assessment, and the entirety of the Project Planning Record, I have determined that the actions associated with Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, 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:

Context

The project area is set in a forest environment in the Hughes Creek subwatershed of the North Fork Ranger District where about ten residences are located on approximately 950 acres of private land along drainage bottom corridors. Besides these residences, land uses are primarily limited to recreation, fuelwood gathering, domestic livestock grazing use, and past timber harvest and placer mining activities. Expectations are the project will be implemented over a ten to fifteen-year period with mechanical fuels reduction operations occurring during months (July to November) of each year when roads are dry and accessible. Prescribed burning activities will be conducted during periods when burn objectives can be achieved (primarily spring and fall). Local and Idaho residents and some nonresidents who choose to hunt or otherwise recreate in the area will be most affected. The context of this proposal is minimal, with direct implications only for an area of approximately 16,000 acres. The Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction project will achieve planned activities within the project area for the foreseeable future.

Intensity

1. Beneficial and adverse impacts of this decision are addressed in the Environmental Consequences section of the EA, pages 17-40. No significant impacts were identified. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. No adverse effects could be considered significant even if considered separately from any beneficial effects.

2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because the fuel treatments are designed to increase the efficiency of fire suppression efforts and reduce risks to firefighters, the public (Hughes Creek, North Fork corridor, and Gibbonsville), facilities, structures, water quality, and natural resources in and around the WUI. Community safety will be improved because fuel reduction zones will allow direct suppression by firefighters, which increases the ability of firefighters to keep fire from reaching the communities along the North Fork corridor and Gibbonsville (EA pages 17-20).

3. The Hughes Creek project area does not include any ecologically critical areas or other unique characteristics. The Allan Mountain Research Natural Area is located partially within the Hughes Creek subwatershed, but more than two miles distant from any fuels reduction activities. Therefore, the proposed action is non-significant because no unique characteristics will be impacted.

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 (EA pages 6-7, pages 17-40 and Appendix B pages 50-53).

5. Based on experiences during past similar activities on the Salmon-Challis National Forest, the effects on the human environment are well understood. The Environmental Consequences section of the EA discloses the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of Alternative 2. Those effects do not indicate uncertain, unique or unknown risks, nor do documentation in resource specialist reports and Biological Assessments/Evaluations contained in the project record. Monitoring of past activities and projects has confirmed the predicted effects analysis.

6. The Hughes Creek Fuels Reduction Project represents a site-specific project that does not set precedence for future actions or present a decision in principle about future considerations. Any proposed future project must be evaluated on its own merits and effects. These activities are in accordance with general and specific management area guidelines and direction in the Forest Plan, and the best available science we have to manage fuels and fire behavior.

7. Analysis conducted by resource specialists and disclosure of those analyses in this EA support the finding that this proposal will not cause significant cumulative effects on biological, physical, or socio-economic resources, even when considered in relation to other actions (EA pages 17-40).

8. The project area has been surveyed for heritage resources. Based on design features and avoidance (Appendix A, pages 45-49, and Appendix C, 124 pages, of EA) and consultation concurrence on September 25, 2008 from the State Historic Preservation Office, no adverse effects to National Register eligible or listed heritage resources will occur.

9. A Fisheries Biological Assessment and Biological Evaluation for the Hughes Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project was completed on February 9, 2009 and determined No Effect to Snake River sockeye salmon; May Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect for bull trout, Snake River spring/summer chinook salmon and steelhead trout; May Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect for designated critical habitat for Snake River spring/summer chinook salmon and steelhead trout; May Effect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect for essential fish habitat for Snake River spring/summer chinook salmon; a May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but will Not Contribute to a Trend Towards Listing or Cause a Loss of Viability to the Population or Species

determination was made for Westslope cutthroat trout, a sensitive species (also page 27-28 of EA).

A Wildlife/Plant Biological Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, and a Biological Evaluation for Sensitive Species were prepared on February 9, 2005 and determined: No Effect for Gray wolf (also page 24 of EA); a No Impact determination was made for five species of sensitive plants and six species of sensitive wildlife; a May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but will Not Cause a Loss of Viability to the Population or Species determination was made for two species of sensitive plants and nine other species of sensitive wildlife and (also page 24 of EA).

10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. The EA has been completed pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, and the CFR parts 215 and 218. This action complies with the National Fire Plan, HFRA, and the Salmon National Forest FLRMP. Alternative 2 is designed to meet Forest program goals (FLRMP, pages IV-1 to IV-3), follow Forest-wide direction along with standards and guidelines (FLRMP, pages IV-4 to IV-82), and Management Area direction for Management Prescriptions 3A, 4A & 5A (FLRMP, pages IV-107 to IV-128). Alternative 2 was also reviewed and found to be consistent with the Forest Plan related to Old Growth, Biological Evaluations & Surveys, and Detrimental Soil Disturbance (February 25, 2009 document).

Responsible Official and Signature

3/5/09

WILLIAM A. WOOD
Forest Supervisor
Salmon-Challis National Forest

DATE