



File Code: 1950/5100

Date: December 2, 2004

Dear Forest Interest:

The Pleasant Grove Ranger District, Uinta National Forest, has refined a project proposal to address hazardous fuels conditions along the Alpine Scenic Highway (SR 92), from the National Forest System boundary above the Sundance Resort to the South Fork Guard Station located in American Fork Canyon. In May 2003, scoping was initiated for a project proposal covering an area from above Sundance northwest to Timpooneke Campground. After further consideration, the area from Timpooneke Campground to the South Fork Guard Station have been included in the project proposal to further address hazardous fuels conditions.

The refined project area is generally located between points about four miles north of Provo Canyon and four miles east of the mouth of American Fork Canyon. The project would continue onto the National Forest the treatment of hazardous fuels completed by the private landowners in the Sundance area. The legal description is Section 24, Township 4 South, Range 2 East; Sections 6, 7, 8, 18 and 19, 20, 28, 29, 30, 32, and 33 Township 4 South, Range 3 East; Section 4, Township 5 South, Range 3 East, Salt Lake Base Meridian.

A more detailed description of the purpose and need for this project and specific actions being proposed follows. We are seeking public comment regarding this refined project proposal. Your input will help direct and define issues, alternatives considered, and the analysis of environmental effects associated with this proposal. To be most helpful, comments should identify specific issues and concerns with the proposed action. Valid issues and concerns are not factored or weighted by numbers of people or organizations submitting them. This process and decision is not based on popular vote, but by the soundness of the analysis and the information that it incorporates. However, all comments will be addressed. Comments received from the previous solicitation have helped define issues associated with this project proposal.

This project may be categorically excluded from an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement (FSH 1909. 15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2, Category 10).

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

Specific treatment activities associated with this project include the following:

1. Mechanical thinning of aspen, oak, oak/maple, conifer and associated understory vegetation on either side of the highway. Vegetation would be thinned for a distance of 150-300 feet from the edge of the roadways (where slope allows). Brush and trees at or



below six inches diameter breast height (DBH) would be removed along with branches up to a height of 6 feet on larger trees. Trees larger than 6 inches DBH may be removed only if they are dead, dying, or a hazard to work crews or the public. These trees would be cut, bucked into small pieces, and left on site.

2. Cut vegetation would be chipped and distributed onto the ground to provide organic material for soil protection to minimize erosion potentials. No sale of any removed materials would take place.

BACKGROUND

The Alpine Scenic Highway twists its way through oak and oak/maple vegetation in the lower elevations. As the road gains elevation, vegetation transitions to aspen, conifer and associated understory vegetation.

Historically, oakbrush stands burned naturally every 35-60 years. Based on fire history data for oakbrush along the Wasatch Front, these stands have not burned in the last 100 years or more. It is estimated that two to three natural fire intervals have been missed in the oakbrush vegetation, primarily due to fire suppression. As a result, oakbrush has grown thick, old, and now provides a nearly continuous pathway for fire to travel. Stands with these characteristics can burn fast and with great intensity. Understory herbaceous vegetation associated with the aspen and conifer vegetation is fairly continuous and would provide a ready fuel source if a fire were to be ignited in these stands.

Interspersed oak, maple and understory shrub and grass vegetation provides a continuous layer of fuel from the forest floor to the overstory tree canopy. Fire history information indicates that the conifer stands and other vegetation in and around the area at the higher elevations have not burned for nearly 150 years. This is not outside of the natural fire interval for the aspen/conifer vegetation. However, the understory vegetation is outside natural conditions, primarily due to fire suppression.

The topographic lay of the land through which the Alpine Scenic Highway passes is characterized as a steep V-shaped canyon. Canyons act much like a chimney by funneling heat, smoke and fire toward the top. Fires can move through such areas very quickly. The road above the Sundance Resort switch-backs several times before it tops out northwest of the intersection with the Cascade Scenic Drive (FSR 114). In a distance of about 2 air miles, nearly 3 miles of road gains 1,800 feet in elevation. If a fire were to ignite anywhere in the lower section of the canyon, there is the potential for fire to run up the canyon.

Many human-caused fires start along roadsides from a variety of sources including discarded cigarettes, absence of spark arrestors on ATVs, or loose metal from vehicles dragging on the pavement causing sparks. Employees, residents, and visitors at or near the Sundance Resort would have two routes available for evacuating the area in the event of a large fire incident, either south toward Provo Canyon or northwest toward American Fork. In a worst-case scenario, fire would run uphill at a rapid rate, posing a safety hazard to forest users and residents trying to leave the area and firefighters trying to access the area.

Management at the Sundance Resort completed a similar hazardous fuel reduction treatment on their lands along Alpine Scenic Highway. However, to fully facilitate the safe evacuation of the public and safe ingress of fire fighting personnel in the event of a large wildfire, work needs to be done on Uinta National Forest land as well.

IMPACTS BEING ADDRESSED

Fire suppression over the last 100 years has resulted in vegetation conditions that are outside of what would be considered “natural” if fire had been left to act as a natural process in the ecosystem. Thick, old stands of oakbrush and oak/maple, and aspen/conifer with thick understory vegetation can burn at intensities that make fire control difficult. These vegetation conditions exist along the Alpine Scenic Highway. The area is identified as being a wildland/urban interface at risk should fire occur at times when fire danger is high and the possibility of control is low. People living in and visiting these areas would be at risk. The fuel arrangement surrounding the roadways are such that if a fire were to burn through the area, the ability to exit the canyon going north would be hazardous and could result in potential injury or loss of life. Firefighters trying to access the area could face the same situation.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of this proposed action is to reduce the hazardous fuels conditions adjacent to the Alpine Scenic Highway (SR 92).

1. Improve safety for the public trying to leave the area in case of a fire.
2. Improve safety for firefighters responding to an incident in this area.
3. Alter fuel characteristics (arrangement and density) to keep fire intensities low enough to improve opportunities for fire control.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Issues initially identified during development of the proposed action and from the previous scoping process include:

1. Effects on potential habitats for threatened, endangered or sensitive plant and wildlife species and/or migratory birds.
2. Effects on scenic quality along Alpine Scenic Highway.
3. Effects on Mill Canyon Peak and Mount Timpanogos Roadless Areas.
4. Effects on public safety.
5. Effects on recreation visitors traveling on the scenic highway.
6. Effects on riparian areas.
7. Effects on Wild and Scenic River eligibility (South Fork American Fork River).

CONSISTENCY WITH LAW, FOREST SERVICE POLICY AND DIRECTION, AND THE UINTA NATIONAL FOREST LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

This proposed project is consistent with the following:

1. National Fire Plan – a long-term investment that will help protect communities and natural resources, and most importantly, the lives of firefighters and the public.

2. Healthy Forests Initiative - This initiative is to improve the health of our nation's forests and rangelands by expediting high-priority fuel-reduction and forest restoration projects in National Forests and Grasslands. The primary goal of these projects is to reduce the fire danger and return our forests and grasslands to a healthier state.
3. Addresses one of the USDA Forest Service Chief's Four Threats - Fuels and Fires - The absence of periodic, low-intensity surface burning in fire-dependent ecosystems has resulted in forest characterized by dense, overstocked stands that result in forest health problems and uncharacteristically severe, large-scale wildfires. The changes in vegetative structure, species composition, and accumulated fuels have predisposed extensive high-intensity wildfires that threaten nearby communities, watershed values, and key ecological components.
4. The 2003 Uinta Forest Plan states:
 - a. "The fuel management aspect of the fire management program is emphasized through application of hazard reduction activities." (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-1, pg 2-5)
 - b. "Fire is managed in an economically efficient manner, based on resource values and risks to human life and property." (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-2, pg. 2-5)
 - c. "Fire is reintroduced as an ecosystem function to move landscapes toward desired conditions." (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-3, pg. 2-5)
 - d. "Ecosystem resilience is maintained by providing for a full range of seral stages and age classes (by cover type) that achieve a mosaic of habitat conditions and diversity to meet a variety of desired resource management objectives. Recruitment and sustainability of some early seral species and vegetation communities in the landscape are necessary to maintain ecosystem resilience to perturbations." (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-8, pg 2-6)
 - e. "Management actions maintain ecosystem health and encourage conditions that are within the historic range of variation. Management actions remain within the variability of size, intensity, and frequency of native disturbance regimes." (2003 Forest Plan, Sub-goal-2-10, pg 2-6)

ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

The following alternative has been developed to address the identified issues, and will be considered in detail as part of the analysis.

- No Action Alternative - Forest Service direction for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) states that a no-action alternative should be considered in detail in each environmental analysis (FSH 1909.15). Under this alternative, no fuels treatment activities would be initiated in the identified project area. Issues identified with this alternative include: not meeting the purpose and need for fuels treatment.

HOW CAN YOU BE INVOLVED?

Send substantive comments relative to this proposal to the Responsible Official for this project, Pam Gardner, Pleasant Grove District Ranger, 390 N 100 E, Pleasant Grove, UT 84062; phone

801-342-5241; or you may hand deliver your comments during normal business hours from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Email comments may be sent to comments-intermtn-uinta-pleasantgrove@fs.fed.us. The opportunity to comment ends 30 days following the date of publication of the notice for this project in the *Provo Daily Herald*. Your comments need to be as specific as possible and contain the following:

1. Your name, address, and (if possible) telephone number;
2. Title of the document(s) on which comment is being submitted; and
3. Specific facts or comments along with supporting reasons that the person believes the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.

SCHEDULE FOR COMPLETION OF ANALYSIS

Scoping and public review and comment on the proposed action will begin with publication of notice of the project in the *Provo Daily Herald* and end 30 days later. A Decision Memo is tentatively scheduled to be completed and appropriate decisions made in the winter of 2004/2005.

Thank you for your interest in management of the Uinta National Forest. If you have questions regarding this proposal, please contact Riva Duncan, Fuels Specialist, at the Uinta National Forest Supervisor's Office, 88 West 100 North, Provo, UT, (801) 342-5100.

Sincerely,

/s/ Pamela J. Gardner
PAMELA J. GARDNER
Pleasant Grove District Ranger