
DECISION MEMO

Tibble Fork/Silver Lake Recreation Residence Hazardous Fuels Reduction

USDA – Forest Service
Uinta National Forest
Pleasant Grove Ranger District
Utah County, Utah

BACKGROUND

The Tibble Fork/Silver Lake Recreation Residence Hazardous Fuels Reduction project is designed to address hazardous fuel conditions in the area surrounding the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Recreation Residence tracts. The project area is located about 7 miles east of the mouth of American Fork Canyon, in Sections 6, 7, 8, 18 and 19 Township 4 South, Range 3 East, Salt Lake Base Meridian. These recreation residences are located on National Forest System lands and are under special-use permit with the Uinta National Forest.

The Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract is dominated by conifer and aspen vegetation. 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 haven't burned for nearly 150 years. This isn't outside of the natural fire interval for the aspen/conifer vegetation. However, the understory vegetation is outside of natural conditions, primarily due to fire suppression.

Vegetation in the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract is characterized by aspen with interspersed conifer, oak brush and maple vegetation. In some places the vegetation is so dense it is nearly impossible to walk through. Historically, oak brush stands burned naturally every 35-60 years. Based on fire history data for oak brush along the Wasatch Front, these stands haven't burned in the last 100 years or more. It is estimated that two to three natural fire intervals have been missed in oak brush, primarily due to fire suppression. As a result, oak brush has grown thick, old, and 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. Aspen and conifer vegetation has a longer fire return interval.

The topographic lay of the land surrounding the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract is characterized as a steep V-shaped canyon, with the residences located at the lower to mid-slope area. Thick conifer occupies the north-facing slope around and above the residences. The south-facing slope is characterized by aspen, oak/maple and shrub species, with scattered conifer. Canyons act much like a chimney flu, and funnel heat, smoke and fire toward the top. Fires can move through such areas quickly.

The Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract is situated along the top of an intermediate hill that lies east, south-east of the Silver Lake Flat Reservoir. The topography is considerably less steep than the areas surrounding Tibble Fork. However, because it is located at the top of a hill slope, fire could run toward and through the area rapidly.

The roadway between Tibble Fork Reservoir and the Silver Lake Flat Reservoir switchbacks up the southwest-facing slope from the Granite Flat Campground, gaining about 800-1,000 feet of elevation in less than a mile. If fire were to be ignited at the bottom of the slope, fire would run uphill at a rapid rate, posing a safety hazard to people trying to exit the area and firefighters trying to access the area.

Topography, combined with the continuous fuel arrangement that exists, creates a potential threat to recreation residences and anyone who might be in the area if a fire were ignited by lightning or people. Fire control would be very difficult under severe fire conditions. Given the past several years of drought, this could well be the situation if a fire were ignited in this area.

The project area was defined by identifying a 150-foot-wide buffer on either side of the roads within or adjacent to each recreation residence tract. The total area defined by this 150-foot-wide buffer is 76 acres (38 acres at the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract and 38 acres at the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract). Along many sections of roads within and adjacent to the recreation residence tract, fuels would not be treated because of steep slopes or lack of hazardous fuels. Thus, only a portion of the 76 acres would actually be treated.

DECISION

It is my decision to reduce accumulations of hazardous fuels around the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Recreation Residence tracts using the following activities:

1. Thinning of aspen, conifer and associated understory vegetation in the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract, and aspen, oak and maple vegetation within the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract to spacing of about 8-10 feet. This will be accomplished mechanically for a distance of 150 feet from the edge of the roadways (where slope allows) by removing brush and trees less than six inches diameter breast height (DBH), along with branches up to a height of six feet on larger trees. Trees larger than six inches DBH may be removed only if they are dead, dying, or a hazard to work crews or the public.
2. Chipping cut vegetation and distributing the chips back onto the ground to provide organic material for soil protection and enhancement.

The project will also include the following mitigation and conservation measures, as well as other applicable Uinta National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan standards and guidelines:

1. Begin project implementation no earlier than June 1 at the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence area and no earlier than June 15 at the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence area. At least one complete bird survey will be conducted within the project area prior to project implementation. Conservation measures will be taken to reduce the probability of negative project effects on breeding activity or breeding habitat of any Utah Partners in Flight priority species (Parrish et

- al. 2002:page 52) detected within the project area (see Wildlife Biologist Report and Biological Evaluation for discussion of conservation measures in the project file).
2. Limit the number of passes with wheeled machinery for accessing the treatment area to reduce damage to existing vegetation and minimize soil compaction.
 3. Conduct no treatment/thinning activity on woody riparian species within buffer or identified Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas.
 4. Keep equipment on the road or in turn-outs during the fuels treatment.
 5. Place staging activities and material/equipment storage well away from streams.

Because understory vegetation, such as oak brush, grows back relatively quickly, my decision includes authorization to conduct a follow-up mechanical thinning treatment within five years of completion of the initial treatment. Only a similar mechanical thinning of small-diameter woody vegetation within the project area boundaries is authorized for follow-up treatment unless further analysis is completed.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A letter describing the proposed project and requesting comment was mailed to about 145 potential interests, including the recreation resident permit holders, on August 12, 2004. In addition, a request for comments on the proposed action was published in the *Provo Daily Herald* on August 19, 2004. An announcement of this project was also published in the Summer 2004, Autumn 2004, Winter 2004 editions of the *Schedule of Proposed Actions*.

In response to the solicitation and outreach, six comment letters were received. Issues identified during development of the proposed action and from public responses to scoping are addressed in the following section:

Fire history information indicates that the conifer stands and other vegetation in and around the area haven't burned for nearly 150 years. This isn't outside of the natural fire interval for the aspen/conifer vegetation. The understory vegetation is outside of natural conditions, primarily due to fire suppression. Should prescribed fire be used to re-introduce fire back into the area?

The build-up of vegetation and the location of the treatment near structures make the use of prescribed fire risky. Mechanical treatment is a reasonable and relatively low-risk approach to reducing the vegetation build-up.

We would like the project to extend to the 150-200 feet beyond the border of the Summer Home Tract and not stop at the 150-300 feet beyond the roadways. Thinning as far as possible is more prudent for property protection. A blanket trimming to a distance of 150-300 feet from the edge of roadways may leave some property untreated.

In the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract, the land beyond the border of the permitted area is too steep for machinery and too steep to safely use chainsaws. We had originally proposed a fuel break around the summer homes, but after inspecting it in the field we had to adjust our treatment based on topography. In the Silver Lake Recreation Residence tract, there are some areas that are too steep as well. Also, the vegetation is very different from the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract and not as prone to high-intensity fires. We feel the proposed treatment is adequate at this time, but other options may be explored in the future.

We notice that the preliminary alternatives include the no action alternative and a prescribed fire only alternative. It may help to develop an additional alternative that involves some of the mechanical vegetation treatments outlined in the proposed action with: (1) use of the fire wise principles and, (2) a limited prescribed fire treatment to follow the mechanical treatments.

This alternative would involve some vegetation treatments outlined in the proposed action with use of Firewise principles and a limited prescribed fire treatment to follow the mechanical treatments. This alternative was dismissed from consideration because of impacts on air quality and potential impacts to soil stability and water quality; as well as, additional risks associated with use of fire so close to structures. All alternatives, including no-action, use Firewise approaches to structure protection in the two recreation residence tracts.

Research indicates that structure losses in these vegetation types can be most effectively reduced by focusing on (1) reducing structure ignitability and (2) reducing fuels in the immediate surroundings (30-60 meters).

Recreation residents are responsible for maintaining fire breaks and reducing fuel loads on their lots. Residents sponsor work days in cooperation with the Forest Service and local fire managers who advise and assist them with this work. The recreation residences are also subject to yearly Forest Service inspections. Fire hazards are identified, and the residents are notified of needed actions.

Activities should avoid, to the extent possible, sensitive wildlife periods and areas. In particular, the environmental analysis should evaluate and minimize impacts to migratory bird habitat.

To reduce potential negative effects to migratory birds and other wildlife species, project implementation will begin no earlier than June 1 at the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract and no earlier than June 15 at the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract. At least one complete bird survey will be conducted within the project area prior to project implementation. Conservation measures will be taken to reduce the probability of negative project effects on breeding activity or breeding habitat of any Utah Partners in Flight priority species (Parrish et al. 2002:page 52) detected within the project area (see Wildlife Biologist Report and Biological Evaluation, project file).

Federal agencies have specific additional responsibilities under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The following species are from an updated list of threatened, endangered, or candidate species that may occur within Utah County: Deseret Milkvetch (T); Ute Ladies'-tresses (T); Bald Eagle (T); Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo (C); Canada Lynx (T). How would the project affect goshawk, three-toed woodpecker and other sensitive species and management indicator species?

The potential effects of the proposed action on species or critical habitat listed under the Endangered Species Act were reviewed and documented by a botanist, fisheries biologist, and wildlife biologist from the Uinta National Forest (Biological Assessment, project file). It was determined that the proposed action would have "No Effect" on the following species classified under the Endangered Species Act or their critical habitat: Ute ladies'-tresses (Threatened), Deseret milkvetch (Threatened), clay phacelia (Endangered), Utah valvata snail (Endangered), June sucker (Endangered), bald eagle (Threatened), and yellow-billed cuckoo (Candidate). The determination was "May Affect – Not Likely to Adversely Affect" (NLAA) for Canada lynx (Threatened).

Potential effects also were reviewed and documented for Forest Service sensitive species (separate plant, fish, and wildlife specialist reports; project file). It was determined that the proposed action would have “No Impact” on the following species classified as sensitive by the Intermountain Region of the Forest Service: Barneby woody aster, dainty moonwort, slender moonwort, rockcress draba, Wasatch jamesia, Garrett bladderpod, Bonneville cutthroat trout, Colorado River cutthroat trout, Columbia spotted frog, peregrine falcon, greater sage-grouse, and fisher. It was determined that the proposed action “May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but Will Not Likely Contribute to a Trend Towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species” for the following species: northern goshawk, flammulated owl, American three-toed woodpecker, spotted bat, and Townsend’s big-eared bat.

Effects to management indicator species have also been evaluated and are documented in the project file. Four of the five management indicator species are also sensitive species. American beaver is the only management indicator species that is not also a sensitive species. The proposed action would not affect beavers because there is no suitable beaver habitat within the project area.

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

The Tibble Fork/Silver Lake Recreation Residence Hazardous Fuels Reduction project is consistent with the 2003 Uinta National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (2003 Forest Plan). The project area lies within the American Fork Management Area as identified in the Forest Plan. The management prescriptions for the project area are 8.4 – Recreation Residences within the actual tracts, and 4.4 Dispersed Recreation surrounding the recreation residence tracts. The project area is overlain with management prescription 7.0 - Wildland Urban Interface (Forest Plan, page 5-132). The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum designation for the area is Roded Modified (Forest Plan, page 5-23) and the Visual Quality Objective is Retention (Forest Plan, page 5-24).

The 2003 Forest Plan states the following that is applicable to this project:

- Soil, air, and water resources provide for watershed health, public health and safety, long-term soil productivity, and ecosystem sustainability, and meet applicable laws and regulations. (FW-Goal 1 pg 2-1)
- Biologically diverse, sustainable ecosystems maintain or enhance habitats for native flora and fauna, forest and rangeland health, and watershed health. (FW-Goal-2, pg 2-1)
- Scenic quality and desired landscape character are maintained and/or enhanced. (FW-Goal-5, pg 2-1)
- Diverse and suitable recreational opportunities are provided responsive to public demand while maintaining ecosystem health and contributing to social and economic sustainability. (FW-Goal-6, pg 2-1)

- Forest Service activities, including those permitted by the Forest Service, maintain or enhance the long-term productivity and physical, chemical, and biological processes and functions of the soil. (FW-Sub-Goal 1-1, pg 2-2)
- Sufficient vegetation and litter are left on site to prevent soil movement and maintain soil productivity. (FW-Sub-Goal 1-3, pg 2-2)
- 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)
- 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)
- 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)

There are no floodplains or wetlands within the project area, and none of these areas will be impacted. The project is consistent with the Clean Water Act.

No adverse impacts on birds are anticipated, and this decision is consistent with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. To reduce potential negative effects to migratory birds and other wildlife species, project implementation will begin no earlier than June 1 at the Tibble Fork Recreation Residence tract and no earlier than June 15 at the Silver Lake Flat Recreation Residence tract. At least one complete bird survey will be conducted within the project area prior to project implementation. Conservation measures will be taken to reduce the probability of negative project effects on breeding activity or breeding habitat of any Utah Partners in Flight priority species (Parrish et al. 2002:page 52) detected within the project area (see Wildlife Biologist Report and Biological Evaluation, project file).

Cultural resource inventories of the areas of potential effect for the project were completed in September 2004. No sites of any kind were found that would be affected by this project. As a result, no historic properties (national register eligible sites) will be affected by the proposed fuel reduction project (See project file). The decision is consistent with the National Historic Preservation Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

In accordance with Executive Order 12898, this action will not result in any disproportionate impact to minority or low-income populations.

Implementation of this proposal is consistent with other Federal, State, and local laws for the protection of the environment.

CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THIS PROJECT

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are listed within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in significant individual or cumulative environmental effects.

The proposed action conforms with the Healthy Forest Initiative and fits within the Forest Service Chief's categories of actions that require a project or case file and a decision memo. That category is as follows (Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 31.2, No. 10):

10) Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres.

Hazardous fuel reduction activities using this category are limited to areas:

- 1) In the wildland-urban interface; or
- 2) Condition Classes 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III, outside the wildland-urban interface;
- 3) Shall be identified through a collaborative framework as described in "A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plans";
- 4) Shall be conducted consistent with agency and Departmental procedures and applicable land and resource management plans;
- 5) Shall not be conducted in wilderness areas or impair the suitability of wilderness study areas for preservation as wilderness; and
- 6) Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or construction of new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure; and may include the sale of vegetative material if the primary purpose of the activity is hazardous fuels reduction.

This project occurs in wildland-urban interface; was identified and approved by the Northern Utah Interagency Fuels Committee; is consistent with agency and Departmental procedures, and the Uinta National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan; is not in a wilderness nor will it impair the suitability of a wilderness study area for preservation as wilderness; and will not use herbicides or pesticides or construct new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure.

Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 30.3 lists the following as "extraordinary circumstances":

- a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species – The potential effects of the proposed action on species or critical habitat listed under the Endangered Species Act were reviewed and documented by a botanist, fisheries biologist, and wildlife biologist from the Uinta National Forest (Biological Assessment, project file). It was determined that the proposed action would have "No Effect" on the following species classified

under the Endangered Species Act or their critical habitat: Ute ladies'-tresses (Threatened), Deseret milkvetch (Threatened), clay phacelia (Endangered), Utah valvata snail (Endangered), June sucker (Endangered), bald eagle (Threatened), and yellow-billed cuckoo (Candidate). The determination was "*May Affect – Not Likely to Adversely Affect*" (NLAA) for Canada lynx (Threatened).

Potential effects also were reviewed and documented for Forest Service sensitive species (separate plant, fish, and wildlife specialist reports; project file). It was determined that the proposed action would have "*No Impact*" on the following species classified as sensitive by the Intermountain Region of the Forest Service: Barneby woody aster, dainty moonwort, slender moonwort, rockcress draba, Wasatch jamesia, Garrett bladderpod, Bonneville cutthroat trout, Colorado River cutthroat trout, Columbia spotted frog, peregrine falcon, greater sage-grouse, and fisher. It was determined that the proposed action "*May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but Will Not Likely Contribute to a Trend Towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species*" for the following species: northern goshawk, flammulated owl, American three-toed woodpecker, spotted bat, and Townsend's big-eared bat.

- b. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – The Forest Service has determined that this project will not adversely affect floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds. The project area does not include any floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds. (See project file.)
- c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – The project area does not reside in, and the project will not have any direct, indirect or cumulative impacts on, wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.
- d. Inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) – The project area does not reside in, nor will the project have any direct, indirect or cumulative impacts on, any inventoried roadless areas.
- e. Research natural areas – The project area does not reside in, and the project will not have any direct, indirect or cumulative impacts on any research natural areas.
- f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – Heritage resource inventories of the areas of potential effects for both the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Recreation Residence Hazardous Fuel Reduction project were completed in September 2004. No sites of any kind were found that will be affected by this project. As a result, no American Indians religious or cultural sites will be affected by the proposed fuel reduction project (See project file).
- g. Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas -- Heritage resource inventories of the areas of potential effects for both the Tibble Fork and Silver Lake Recreation Residence Hazardous Fuel Reduction project were completed in September 2004. No sites of any kind were found that will be affected by this project. As a result, no historic properties (national register eligible sites) will be affected by the proposed fuel reduction project (See project file).

For projects that are categorically excluded, there is no need to repeat a detailed analysis of effects to all resources. In promulgating the categories, the Forest Service has concluded that projects that fit

those categories do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Thus, once the analysis establishes that this project has no extraordinary circumstances and fits into a category, the responsible official can reach the conclusion that there will be no significant effects to the environment without further analysis.

The proposed action will be of limited context and intensity and capable of producing little or no significant environmental effects (**40 CFR 1508.4**) individually or cumulatively on the quality of the human environment; is within a category listed in FSH 1909.15; and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f), this decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

CONTACT PERSON

For further information about this decision or project, please contact Marcy DeMillion, Natural Resource Staff, Pleasant Grove District, at 390 North 100 East, Pleasant Grove, Utah 84062, or by phone at (801) 785-3563.

/s/ Pamela J. Gardner

March 24, 2005

Pamela J. Gardner
District Ranger
Pleasant Grove Ranger District

Date

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