

**DECISION MEMO**  
USDA Forest Service

**Billies Mountain Mechanical Fuels Reduction**  
Uinta National Forest  
Spanish Fork Ranger District

**I. DECISION**

**A. Description of Decision**

My decision is to proceed with the Billies Mountain Mechanical Fuels Reduction project in coordination with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Rocky Mountain Power and the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development. The treatments will take place in Utah County, Utah T9S R4E sections 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28 SLM. Total treatment area is not expected to exceed 1000 acres within a 2,260 acre area. A masticator, chainsaws, and /or chipper pulled with pickup truck will be used to create openings in the oak brush in a mosaic pattern. Implementation will most likely occur in 2008, depending on the availability of funds, personnel, equipment and materials.

Treatments include (see attached map):

- 1) Lop and scatter about 90 acres of juniper (*Juniperus osteosperma* & *scopulorum*) whips.
- 2) Masticate about 880 acres of juniper, oak (*Quercus gambellii*) & maple (*Acer grandidentatum*) creating opening of 2 to 30 acres (most openings being 5-15 acres) of oak & maple.
- 3) Rip and reseed about 6.5 miles (approximately 8 acres) of user created non system roads with a native mix approved by the District Ranger.
- 4) Rebuild fences around two springs (let down fence with 4 strand barbed wire, with a height of no more than 42 inches, unless otherwise approved by District Ranger).
- 5) Rebuild fence around wildlife guzzler (Post and Rail, with a height of no more than 42 inches unless otherwise approved by District Ranger).
- 6) Repair/replace wildlife guzzler.
- 7) Install temporary closure gate at entrance of Billies Mountain, closure to be in place from approximately December 1- April 30 dependent on soil and road conditions.
- 8) Install gate for administrative use only for powerline access.
- 9) Install rock/natural barriers at the beginning of user created roads.

## **Purpose of the Decision**

The primary purpose of this project is to improve oak/maple age class/structural diversity and improve plant vigor. By doing so, wildlife habitat is improved. Even age and structural classes of oak/maple provide a lower quantity and quality of forage for big game, small mammals and birds and could lead to a decrease in species diversity. Habitat is not at its proper functioning condition. Additionally, winter range is threatened in Utah due to increased housing/commercial development. Maintaining the remaining winter range in good condition is important now and will become increasingly more important as development continues.

Additionally, user created roads introduces additional disruptions to wildlife, promote soil erosion, decrease suitable habitat, and decrease availability of forage. The wildlife guzzler currently in the unit is in disrepair and does not provide the quantity of water that it has the potential to provide. Fences around the springs are in disrepair. Repairing these items and closing user-created roads will improve conditions for wildlife.

An additional purpose of this project is to reduce hazardous fuels in the Billies Mountain Area. Hazardous fuels have been building up over the years on Forest System Lands due to past and current cultural practices and climatic conditions. The oak/maple community in the Billies mountain area is dominated by late seral to decadent oak and maple. This treatment would help to increase age class diversity and structural diversity of the oak and maple and reduce the intensity of a wildfire were an ignition to occur.

The Landscape Natural Fire Regime Group is III- infrequent, mixed & surface (less than 75% of the dominant overstory vegetation replaced). The Fire Regime Condition Class is 2- Moderate. Fire regimes have been moderately altered from their natural (historical) range. Risk of losing key ecosystem components is moderate. Fire frequencies have departed from natural frequencies by one or more return intervals (either increased or decreased). This has resulted in moderate changes to one or more of the following: fire size, intensity and severity, and landscape patterns. Vegetation and fuel attributes have been moderately altered from their natural (historical) range. There is potential for wildland urban interface issues as homes are located within one mile of the proposed project area. If a severe wildfire occurred in the area, it could affect transmission of electricity to a large portion of Utah's population, because some of the high capacity transmission lines run through this area.

## II. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are 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 31.11, 31.12 or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect.

### A. Category of Exclusion

This project fits within the FSH 1909.15 31.2 category 6: Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56). Examples include but are not limited to:

- a. Girdling trees to create snags.
- b. Thinning or brush control to improve growth or to reduce fire hazard including the opening of an existing road to a dense timber stand.
- c. Prescribed burning to control understory hardwoods in stands of southern pine.
- d. Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor.

This project clearly improves wildlife habitat by improving plant vigor, and reduces fire hazard were an ignition to occur. No herbicides will be used and no road construction will occur.

### B. Extraordinary Circumstances

FSH 1909.15, Section 30.3 lists the following as ‘extraordinary circumstances’

1. 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 Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered or result in adverse modification to such species’ designated critical habitat.

As required by NEPA, potential effects of this decision on listed species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation (File Record). No effects are expected to occur to listed species or their habitats.

2. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds

*Floodplains:* Executive Order 11988 requires federal agencies to avoid adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains.

There are no floodplains within the project area. However, there will be a 50 foot treatment buffer on both sides of stream corridor where it intersects the project area. State of Utah Best Management Practices and Forest Plan Standards will be utilized. It has been determined that the project will not adversely affect these flood plains (Hydrology report in file record).

*Wetlands:* Executive Order 11990 requires federal agencies to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands.

There are no wetlands within the project area (Hydrology report in file record).

*Municipal Watersheds:* This project is not located within a municipal watershed (Hydrology report in file record).

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas:

This project is not located in or near Wilderness or within a Wilderness study area or National Recreation Area.

4. Inventoried roadless areas: This project is not located within any inventory roadless area.

5. Research Natural Areas: This project is not located within any proposed, candidate or designated Research Natural Area.

6. Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:

Two sites were identified in the project area, and they will be avoided during project implementation. There are no known traditional plant gathering locations within the area (Project Record).

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.

### **III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING**

An interdisciplinary team (IDT) of Forest Service specialists reviewed this project. Input from this team was incorporated in the design of the proposed action and the specialist reports are contained in the project file. Scoping and formal notice and comment periods were held concurrently. A request for comments was published in the *Provo Daily Herald* on September 26, 2007 and an amended request was published on November 1, 2007; scoping letters were mailed to interested parties and the project was listed in the Fall 2007 Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions. Two letters of comment were received for this project. Based upon comments received, the project was amended and rescoped to provide for appeal rights. Between scoping and my decision the category was changed from category 10 to category 6. Public comments substantiated this change (see comment letters on file).

### **IV. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO THEIR LAWS AND REGULATIONS**

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below:

National Forest Management Act – This Act requires all projects and activities are consistent with the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This project and decision are consistent with the current Uinta National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

Endangered Species Act – See Section II, Item B1 of this document.

National Historic Preservation Act – See Section II, Item B6 of this document.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act – See Section II, Item B6 of this document.

National Environmental Policy Act – This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The documentation of this decision supports compliance with this Act.

My decision is consistent with the 2003 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Uinta National Forest; specifically:

**FW-Goal-2:** Biologically diverse, sustainable ecosystems maintain or enhance habitats for native flora and fauna, forest and rangeland health, watershed health, and water quality.

**Sub-goal-2-1:** The fuel management aspect of the fire management program is emphasized through application of hazard reduction activities.

**Sub-goal-2-8:** 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.

**Sub-goal-2-4:** Priorities to protect property and natural/cultural resources are determined based on relative values to be protected, fire management costs, and risks to human (including firefighter) safety.

**FW-Goal-8** Forest infrastructure, including facilities and transportation systems, is safe and responsive to public needs and desires; has minimal adverse effects on ecological processes and ecosystem health, diversity, and productivity; and is in balance with needed management actions.

## V. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OF APPEAL

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Appeals must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of the publication of this notice in the Provo Daily Herald. Appeals must be sent to: Appeal Deciding Officer, Intermountain Region USFS, 324 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Ogden, Utah 84401; or by fax to 801-625-5277; or by email to: [appeals-intermtn-regional-office@fs.fed.us](mailto:appeals-intermtn-regional-office@fs.fed.us). Emailed appeals must be submitted in rich text (rtf) or Word (doc) and must include the project name in the subject line. Appeals may also be hand delivered to the above address, during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

**VI. IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

Implementation of this project may begin no sooner than 5 days following the 45 day appeal period after publication of the notice of the decision.

**VII. CONTACT PERSON**

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Lans Stavast (801) 342-5151.

**VII. SIGNATURE AND DATE**

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement of environmental assessment, as it is within one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 section 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the planning record.

*/s/ Douglas H. Jones*  
DOUGLAS H. JONES  
District Ranger  
Spanish Fork Ranger District

January 7, 2008