

- DECISION MEMO -
DAVIS COUNTY FUEL REDUCTION PROJECT
Davis County, Utah
Salt Lake Ranger District,
Wasatch-Cache National Forest

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the build-up of high levels of fuels in forest and shrub lands has been highlighted across the western United States, as wildfires have burned acreages much greater than they did historically. Nearly a hundred years of fire suppression has resulted in fuel accumulations that often far exceed what would have occurred under more natural conditions. Historically, these "fire dependent" ecosystems developed in response to fairly regular, lower intensity wildfires that kept the fuel build-up in check. In current times this accumulation of both dead and down material and overly dense live vegetation, together with a long-term drought and residential development into fire-prone areas, has created a dangerous situation. Wildfires that burn today do so at higher intensities, are more difficult and costly to control, and more often threaten residences and communities. In addition, these more intense fires have the potential to cause fundamental changes to ecosystems because they burn hotter and over larger areas.

The build-up of forest fuels has been recognized by the Chief of the Forest Service as one of the four major threats facing the sustainability of public lands managed by the agency. Streamlining environmental review processes to approve fuel reduction projects in a more timely matter was the subject of the Healthy Forests Initiative, developed by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior in 2002. In 2003, Congress passed the Healthy Forests Restoration Act which encouraged expeditious hazardous fuel treatments on public lands at risk of wildfire and the involvement of State and local governments and citizens in wildland fire planning.

On a local scene, the 2003 fire season demonstrated that fuel accumulations are a serious problem along the flank of the Wasatch Front in Davis County. In all, 5 separate wildfires burned nearly 2,900 acres in the area from Centerville to Fruit Heights. Experienced fire suppression staff found themselves surprised at the rate at which these fires spread and how difficult they were to control. In several instances, the loss of homes was narrowly averted. While the 2003 wildfires did reduce fuels where they burned, substantial hillside areas immediately east of the communities of Farmington and Centerville support dense, mature and sometimes decadent mixed stands of Gambel oak and bigtooth maple that could present threats to residential areas. The project described in this Decision Memo is designed to address the area between these communities (hereafter referred to as the Project Area), recognizing that similar conditions exist elsewhere along the Wasatch Front in Davis County. This area was selected because its location between two of the 2003 wildfires provides favorable control boundaries to conduct treatments and because of a desire within these two wildland-urban interface communities to address the fuels and wildfire issue. A map showing the location of the project area is included as Exhibit A with this Decision Memo.

DAVIS COUNTY PROPOSAL

This Decision Memo also addresses a proposal submitted to the Forest Service by Davis County Department of Public Works in October of 2003. It called for "upgrading and widening" of 7.4 miles of road that extends along the Wasatch front in Davis County, from Farmington to Centerville and generally lies within the corridor of the Weber Basin Aqueduct. This proposal had two main objectives: 1) minimizing the risk of wildfire spread from National Forest System (NFS) lands onto private lands and residential areas; and 2) improving access for fire suppression vehicles and personnel and for local non-fire emergency incidents (i.e., injuries, search and rescue, etc.).

The fuel reduction and vegetation clearing components of the County's proposal are addressed in preceding sections of this Decision Memo. The proposed road work is covered below.

Road Status

The road included in the Davis County proposal roughly parallels the National Forest boundary and has segments on both Federal public land and private land. Locally, the road is sometimes referred to as the "Firebreak Road." Most of the Firebreak Road (4.9 miles) is located on private lands over which the Forest Service has no jurisdiction. Of the 2.5 miles that are located on NFS lands, approximately 2.2 miles are part of the Forest's formal transportation system as Forest Road 80236. This road is classified as a Maintenance Level 2 facility, which means that it is suitable for high clearance vehicles, such as trucks and four wheel drive vehicles, and that passenger car traffic is discouraged. Level 2 roads generally see only limited maintenance and the condition of this road has deteriorated considerably over the years; in several cases the road is no longer passable by larger 4-wheel drive vehicles. Weber Basin Water Conservancy District holds an easement, issued by the Forest Service, for use of the land occupied by the road and the buried water pipeline, where these are located on NFS land.

The 4.9 miles of the road that are located on non-Federal land cross a variety of ownerships, primarily private land, and use of the land for the road and aqueduct by the Conservancy District is generally covered by other easements and agreements with the owners. The road is not recognized as a County Road.

Approved Road Work

The Forest Service will cooperate with Davis County and the Weber Basin Water Conservancy District to provide improvements and maintenance for 2.2 miles of Forest Road 80236 as shown in Exhibit B. This will include grading, providing improved drainage, limited widening, and application of aggregate surface in some areas. Once completed, Forest Road 80236 would essentially be managed a Maintenance Level 3 facility, which means that it would be single lane road, suitable for use at low speeds and have some surfacing. As such, it could be passable by passenger cars, but this use would not be encouraged. This will allow for passage of light and medium size fire engines (Type 4, 5, 6) and emergency vehicles. It will be the responsibility of Davis County to secure easements or agreements with the various private landowners this road crosses. It

will be important for all parties to work together to address some of the concerns that surfaced during public scoping and the environmental analysis. These included the potential for the road improvements to: 1) encourage more vehicular traffic and cross-country travel by ATVs and related impacts to soils, vegetation, and wildlife; 2) create more conflicts involving motorized vs. non-motorized users of the road; 3) accelerate the spread of noxious weeds; and 4) encourage residential development. Under Forest Service environmental review policies, this road work may be occur without more extensive environmental analysis and approval (FSH 1509.15, Sec. 31.1(b)(4)). Segments located on private land may be subject review by local government before they occur.

Improvements on one segment of road included in the County's proposal is not approved because it would not be consistent with the Forest Plan and because it could conflict with meeting the objectives of the future Bonneville Shoreline Trail. This segment includes about 0.3 mile of mostly existing road located between Steed and Davis Creeks that is not a part of the Forest's transportation system, and is thus termed an "unclassified" road. Through the Salt Lake Ranger District's 1992 and 1997 Travel Management Plans, this and other non-designated routes are administratively closed to public motorized travel. In addition, the southern extension of this segment terminates just north of Davis Creek at private land over which the Forest Service has no easement or right-of-way. The Forest Plan allocates this area to a 3.1W management area prescription, which emphasizes protection and improvement of watershed conditions. Among the requirements associated with the 3.1W prescription is a standard that prohibits "road construction". Authorizing work on this section of unclassified road would constitute road construction and would be inconsistent with the Forest Plan. Finally, a locked gate will be maintained immediately south of Steed Creek to prevent unauthorized public motorized use of the unclassified road.

Between Davis and Steed Creeks, only a very narrow corridor of suitable NFS land exists for the Bonneville Shoreline Trail (BST), lying between a tract scheduled for residential development on the west and steep mountain side slopes to the east. Through intergovernmental agreements and the original establishing legislation, the BST was conceived to provide non-motorized recreation opportunities and this intent was carried into the Forest Plan. Use of the trail by emergency vehicles and for utility company access can be acceptable. It is important that remaining undeveloped land be managed so that a non-motorized corridor remains for the BST.

Though the Davis-Steed segment is not approved in this Decision Memo, many of the objectives can still be met. The approval allows for the narrow crossing at Steed Canyon on Forest Road 80236 to be improved. In addition, the vegetation clearing approved later in this document may occur along this segment of unclassified road, enabling the fuel break to be created in this area. Finally, the bench where this road is located is relatively flat and could be accessed from Steed Creek and driven by vehicles in the event of an emergency. The status of this section of road may be reexamined at some point in the future when the Forest Service's motorized travel management plan is revised for the Davis County area, or when designation of a route for the Bonneville Shoreline Trail (BST) is formally under review.

FOREST SERVICE FUEL TREATMENT PROPOSAL

Project Details

The project proposal presented for public comment in December 2003 involved reducing wildfire fuels on NFS land east of the communities of Farmington and Centerville using multiple techniques. Specifically, the proposed project included:

- ◆ A combination of prescribed burning and mechanical removal of brush, staged over several seasons, on about 1,734 acres within the Steed and Davis Creek drainages.
- ◆ Installation of approximately 15,000 feet of temporary fire line associated with the prescribed burning.
- ◆ Maintaining approximately a 20 to 30 foot wide strip feet of cleared vegetation along either side Forest Road 80236 between Farmington Canyon and Centerville.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose and need for this project has three primary components which are discussed below.

1. Reduce hazardous fuels loads on NFS lands near the communities of Farmington and Centerville to help protect residential areas from wildfire.

The need for this project was illustrated by the Farmington and Centerville wildfires during the summer of 2003, both of which threatened residences in these communities. Hazardous fuel loads observed in these mixed Gamble oak/bigtooth maple shrub communities in the project area average 25 to 35 tons per acre and canopy heights in many places range from 20 to 30 feet. Prescribed burning would reduce the older, decadent shrub stands by consuming dead wood and leaf litter accumulations and kill the above ground portions of 30 to 40 percent of the Gambel oak in patches scattered over the treatment areas. The optimum outcome would be to break up the thick continuous stands of brush to produce more of a mosaic pattern of uneven-aged brush and some open grassy areas. This would reduce the fuel height, resulting in a vegetation structure and mosaic that will help to control the spread of future wildfires.

Reducing fuel loads on these NFS lands will help to lower intensities when future wildfires do occur and reduce the potential for their spread into adjacent residential areas. In addition, the creation of fuel breaks along the NFS - private land boundary will help to provide additional assurance that evening down slope winds are less likely to "push" a wildfire into developed areas.

2. Improve the ecologic health of Gambel oak/bigtooth maple vegetation in the Davis and Steed Creek drainages.

Fire suppression activities throughout much of the last century have interrupted the natural fire regime and most of this vegetation type across the Wasatch Front consists of older, less healthy age classes of shrubs. A measure used by the Forest Service to assess the degree to which natural conditions have been affected by fire suppression and other factors is called *fire regime condition class* and its results correlate directly to how vegetation species composition, stand age, structure, and landscape patterns have been affected. On NFS lands adjacent to Farmington and Centerville, wildfires historically burned the same area on cycles ranging from 35 to 100 years. Thus, fire suppression has meant that many areas have missed one or more burn cycles over the succeeding decades. The obvious exception to this characterization is the areas that burned during the 2003 season. This means that this watershed falls into a moderate (class 2) fire regime condition class and that it also is at moderate risk of losing key ecosystem components in the event of wildfires.

Although the Farmington and Centerville wildfires have provided some younger age class patches, (which also function as potential control areas for the proposed prescribed burn), additional young shrub stands are needed in order to bring this landscape into proper functioning conditions for ecological processes. In addition, the prescribed fire treatments would increase forage for wildlife, particularly for deer; increase opportunities for wildlife viewing; draw deer use out of residential areas and onto the National Forest; and potentially increase hunting opportunities. Prescribed burning is also likely to increase plant species diversity.

3. Modify fuel patterns in the area to help provide for more effective, timely, and safe fire suppression efforts for future wildfires.

Large, contiguous areas of overly dense Gambel oak/bigtooth maple vegetation along the Wasatch Front in Davis County present serious difficulties in controlling wildfires. Depending on wind and a variety of other factors, this vegetation pattern can allow fires to move from one drainage to another relatively easily. The lack of natural fuel breaks and steep side slopes severely limits the capability to insert ground-based suppression resources in mid-slope positions safely. These limitations force more reliance on air tanker and helicopter resources, which add considerable cost to fire suppression efforts. In addition, aerial retardant drops have limited effectiveness in areas of high, dense shrub vegetation where wildfires can creep under retardant lines and spread. Though treated areas may burn in subsequent years, fuel heights and overall fuel loads would be reduced which will aid in achieving containment and control. Finally, clearing vegetation along the road side of Forest Road 80236 and completing maintenance on this route should help to prevent wildfire spread in the area and facilitate more timely access by suppression crews and engines.

Other Options Considered

A variety of other options for reducing wildfire threats were considered during the environmental review process. These are discussed below, along with an explanation of why they were not selected.

1. Livestock grazing

In the early 1900s, livestock grazing was common in this area. At the current time no livestock grazing occurs within the project area. Sheep and cattle prefer grass and herbaceous vegetation and generally do not consume woody shrubs. Thus, grazing using these animals would do little to address the build-up of fuels. In recent years, research in Utah suggests that concentrated, closely managed grazing with domestic goats may be effective in reducing shrub densities and the wildfire hazard. A recommendation that this be used surfaced during public scoping. This is an approach that should be considered in the future in selected areas and could be authorized following a subsequent detailed environmental review.

2. Mechanical thinning and removal across the treatment units

Steep slopes and rough, rocky soils make mechanical thinning on a large scale quite difficult and costly. Most areas are not suitable for mechanized equipment and would have to be done by hand crews using chainsaws.

3. Hand thinning in selected areas to remove dead and down woody shrub material

During scoping it was suggested that thinning should be conducted only in the immediate area surrounding homes and that larger scale fuel treatments were unnecessary. Similarly, it was recommended that pockets of dead and down material could be removed from the project area by hand, or placed in piles and burned. Hand thinning and removal is an important technique to help establish prescribed fire control lines in areas near private property and along the Fire Break Road, but is an impractical approach at a larger scale. Further, selected removal in the manner suggested would not have addressed the ecologic needs across the broader project area in terms of restoring vigor and diversity to plant communities because larger scale mechanical thinning or burning stimulates sprouting of new stems, opens the open the shrub canopy to the sun, and returns nutrients to the soil. Finally, hand thinning in selected areas would not substantially provide for safer and more effective suppression of future wildfires over project area.

4. No Action

Fire dependent ecosystems, such as this one, will burn at some point and many of these stands of oakbrush have probably missed multiple cycles of burning because of suppression. Records indicate fairly regular lightning-caused ignitions and that increasing levels of recreational activity along the foothills has resulted in more cases of human-caused wildfires. If no action is taken, future wildfires will be increasingly difficult and costly to contain, will burn at higher severities and over greater areas than they would have historically, will have greater potential for damaging soils and creating runoff related problems, and will have a higher probability of permanently altering vegetative conditions because of their higher severities. Finally, taking no action will also mean that

it will be increasingly difficult to protect residential areas from wildfires near the project area.

Forest Plan Consistency

This project is consistent with, and advances the goals and objectives of, the Revised Forest Land and Resource Management Plan for the Wasatch-Cache National Forest (2003). In particular, the Revised Forest Plan notes:

- ◆ Reduce hazardous fuels (prescribed fire, silvicultural and mechanical treatments) with emphasis on interface communities (wildland/urban) and increase proactive participation of communities at risk. (Subgoal 4d, page 4-21)
- ◆ Treat approximately 2,000 wildland urban interfaces acres annually for a 10-year total of 20,000 acres. (Objective 4.a, page 4-31)
- ◆ Fuel loads, especially in oakbrush, across the urban interface in Box Elder, Weber, and Davis Counties will be reduced and broken up to protect life and property. Access will be provided for fire protection. (page 4-142)
- ◆ Maintain an age class distribution of in the Gambel oak cover type, of about about 10-20% in the grass/forb stage, 20-40% in the early seral stage, 20-40% in the mid seral stage, and 20-40% in the late seral stage, across a landscape scale. (page 4-41)

The project area is located entirely within a 3.1W management area prescription, which emphasizes maintaining or improving watershed conditions. The proposed vegetation treatments are consistent with applicable standards and guidelines for 3.1W areas.

DECISION AND RATIONALE

The analysis conducted for this project presents a persuasive case that there is a need to reduce fuels and rejuvenate vegetative across the project area. However, my decision is to proceed with implementation of portions of the project described above, but to defer most aspects of the prescribed burning treatments until a further review has been completed of the relationship between fire and the potential for mudflows. This spring's mudflows in the Compton Bench area highlighted the sensitive nature of some slopes in the Davis County foothills. I recognize that important differences exist between a wildfire and a prescribed burn. Most importantly, a prescribed fire treatment would be conducted under controlled conditions and at a time of the year that should reduce the potential for impacting vegetative cover and soils to the extent that mudflows are likely. In addition, experts concluded that April's intense rainstorm could have triggered a mudflow even if a wildfire had not burned through the area the previous summer. Yet, this issue merits closer examination before prescribed burning is conducted in Davis/Steed Creek drainages.

My decision includes the following components and conditions:

1. Mechanically thin and remove brush on up to about 100 acres within the project area and along the NFS - private land boundary. This work would be done primarily by hand crews using chain saws. In some cases the brush would be lopped and scattered, chipped, or other situations the material would be hand-piled and burned during periods of low fire danger. This will help to some degree to reduce the intensity and rate of spread if a wildfire occurs in the area. It should also help to reduce the potential for a wildfire to spread from NFS lands to private property to the west, and vice versa. However, in the event of a more intense wildfire moving down slope towards private property, this clearing may not provide a sufficient margin of safety to place suppression personnel along the Forest boundary. Likewise, this limited mechanical thinning will not significantly help to rejuvenate vegetation across the project area.

2. Clear fuels on about 16 acres (2.2 miles) along Forest Road 80236 (Exhibit B) where it crosses NFS lands and maintain this area over the long term as a fuel break. This work may be done by either the Forest Service or Davis County through agreement.

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION AND EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES SUMMARY

1. Categorical Exclusion

A project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement if it falls within one of the defined categories and if no extraordinary circumstances are present (FSH 1909.15, Ch. 30.3). It is the degree of the potential effect on specific resources which determines whether extraordinary circumstances are present (FSH 1909.15-2004-1). In this case, the applicable category is:

"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."

This project conforms with other requirements pertaining to this category. Specifically, this project: 1) is located within a wildland-urban interface area; 2) is in Fire Regime Condition Class 2 and Fire Regime Group III; 3) has been developed using a community-based, collaborative approach; 4) is consistent with applicable Forest Service and USDA procedures and the 2003 Wasatch-Cache National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan; 5) will not be conducted in a wilderness area or affect wilderness study areas; and 6) does not involve the use of herbicides, pesticides, or the construction of new roads or other infrastructure.

2. Extraordinary Circumstances Summary

Below is the list of extraordinary circumstances that must be considered and a brief discussion of how this project relates to these considerations. This analysis was conducted assuming that the project would be conducted as originally proposed. In that it has been scaled back considerably in this Decision Memo, the conclusions documented below represent a conservative assessment of the project's environmental consequences.

Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. A Biological Assessment and Biological Evaluation were completed by Forest Service biologists for this project. Determinations for pertinent wildlife species are noted below:

Bald eagle - *may affect not likely to adversely affect*

Northern goshawk - *may impact individuals or habitat, but not likely to trend toward Federal listing or cause loss of viability*

Finally, primarily because of the absence of suitable habitat, it was determined that there would be *no effect* on any Federally listed plant species, and *no impact* to any Forest Service sensitive species.

Flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds. The watersheds in the project area are municipal watersheds for communities in Davis County. No adverse effects are expected to occur to wetlands, floodplains, or municipal watersheds.

Congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness study areas or National Recreation Areas. No Congressionally designated areas are located in the area, or would be affected.

Inventoried roadless areas. The project is located within the 10,900-acre Farmington inventoried roadless area, but it will not have adverse effects on roadless values. Activities such as reduction of hazardous fuels and restoration of essential wildlife habitat are allowed to occur in roadless areas.

Research Natural Areas (RNAs). The project area is not located within any RNA and would not affect the Morris Creek RNA, located about 1.5 miles to the north in Farmington Canyon.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. This project will comply with the terms of the National Historic Preservation Act, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act; and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. In addition, the Forest Service consulted with potentially affected Tribes during scoping.

Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. Surveys were completed for these sites and areas and a "no properties affected" determination was made.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act). As noted above, this decision complies with the goals, standards, and guidelines of the Forest Plan, and other provisions of the National Forest Management Act.

Endangered Species Act. In association with the environmental review for this project, a Biological Assessment was completed. The determinations for Federally listed species is noted above.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Based on suitable habitat considerations for 43 species that might occur in the project area, it was determined that this project would be unlikely to affect migratory birds.

Clean Water Act. Compliance with this Act has been provided for through project design and implementation of watershed best management practices.

Clean Air Act. The analysis indicates that, though there may be some short term lingering smoke during and immediately after the treatments in adjacent communities, this can be minimized by closely following standards in the Utah Smoke Management Program. The analysis for the original proposal also concludes that no Class I airsheds would be adversely affected and emissions modeling indicates that there should be no violations of Federal particulate matter standards (PM 10 and PM 2.5). As noted previously, this assessment was developed for the original project proposal, which involved prescribed burning of over about 1,734 acres. The limited brush pile burning approved in this Decision Memo will have greatly reduced impacts to air quality than described in this section. The Burn Plan that will be prepared will further address conformance with the Clean Air Act.

Healthy Forest Restoration Act. This project would reduce hazardous fuels conditions that have moderate to high departure from the natural fire regimes in an urban interface area. As such, this project would further the goals of this Act.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND COLLABORATION

Informal discussions began between the Forest Service and local government officials about the need to address the wildfire hazard in this area while the 2003 wildfires were still in progress. More formally, a collaborative process to develop a proposal was initiated on November 25, 2003 when Forest Service staff presented a conceptual plan to representatives from Layton City, Bountiful City, Kaysville City, Farmington City and Davis County Fire Departments.

A scoping document which detailed the project proposal was mailed to citizens and organizations and Federal, State and local governments and groups on December 16, 2003 and was posted to the Wasatch-Cache National Forest web site. The scoping letter indicated that public comments were due on January 23, 2004, however any comments received while the analysis was in progress have been considered.

On January 16, 2004, the Forest Service, Davis County, Centerville City, and Farmington City officials, jointly issued a news release announcing three public meetings in Davis County to present the fuel reduction and firebreak road improvement proposals. These meetings were held in Centerville on January 20 and in Farmington on January 21 and 22. There was time allotted during each meeting for representatives from the Forest Service to present proposals for both the fuels reduction prescribed burning and firebreak

road improvement. In each session, time was provided for a brief presentation and question and answer period for City and County officials and staff and citizens. In all, approximately 80 people attended the three meetings. Records from the various meetings are included in the project file, as well as other information related to public involvement and the scoping process. This project was also discussed at an Emergency Awareness Fair held in Farmington on March 20, 2004. Finally, follow-up phone calls and a meeting took place between Forest Service staff and the Farmington Trails Committee to discuss ways to conduct the prescribed burning, while providing some protection for trails and popular dispersed recreation sites in the project area.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE(S)

This decision may be implemented immediately and much of it is expected to be completed during the summer and fall of 2004. Burning of hand-piled fuels would occur only after a Burn Plan has been completed and at an appropriate time of the season. Any future decision to conduct prescribed burning will be documented in a subsequent Decision Memo.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to an administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215 .12(f).

CONTACTS

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Al Soucie, Project Manager, (801-733-2688) or Loren Kroenke, District Ranger, (801-733-2675) during normal working hours (week days, 8am to 4:30pm) at the Salt Lake Ranger District office (6944 So. 3000 E., Salt Lake City, Utah 84121). E-mail: (asoucie@fs.fed.us) or (lkroenke@fs.fed.us)

/s/ Loren M. Kroenke
LOREN M. KROENKE
District Ranger

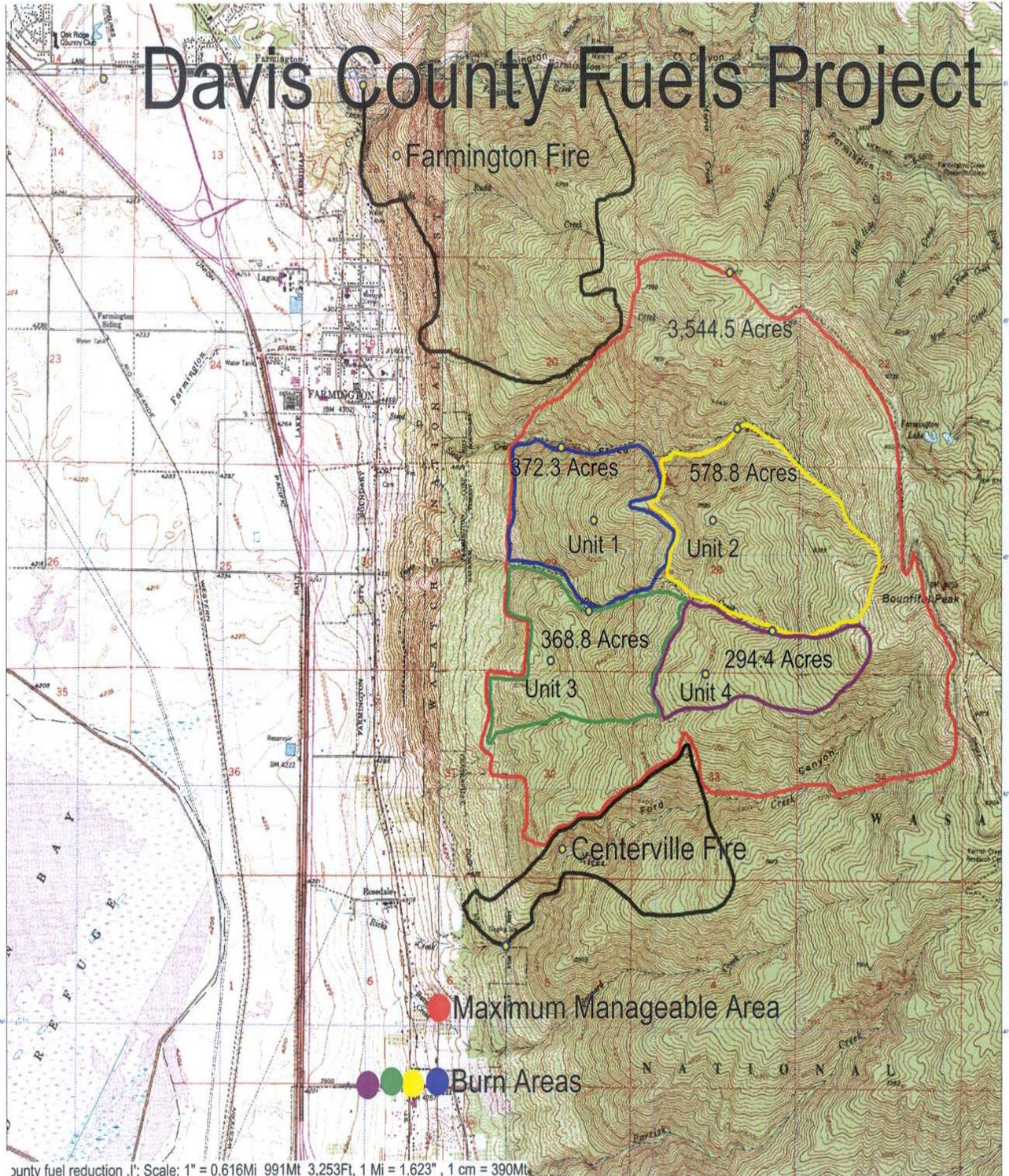
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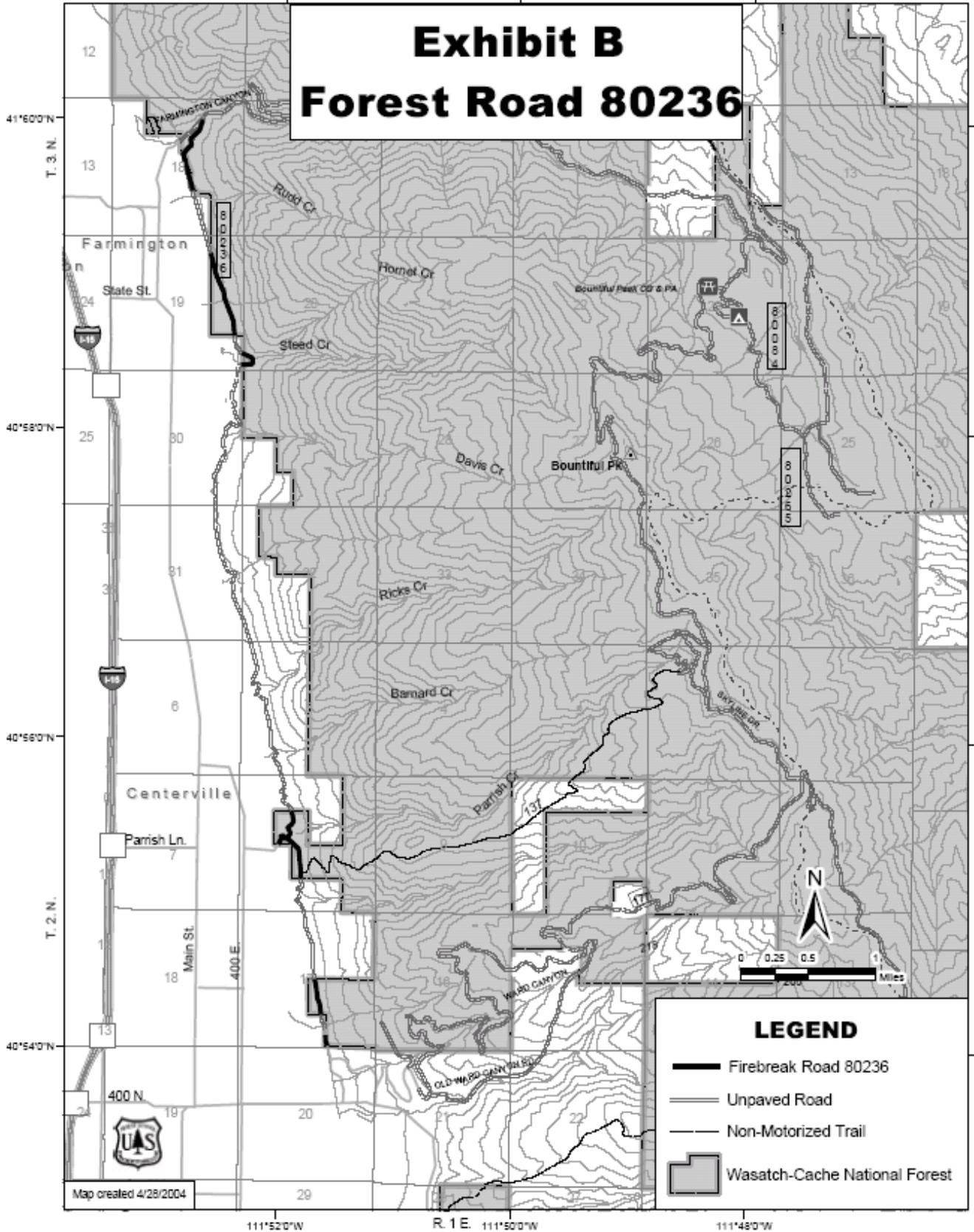
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Davis County Fuels Project



R. 1 E

Exhibit B Forest Road 80236



LEGEND

-  Firebreak Road 80236
-  Unpaved Road
-  Non-Motorized Trail
-  Wasatch-Cache National Forest

Map created 4/28/2004

111°52'0"W

R. 1 E 111°50'0"W

111°48'0"W