

## **Scoping Comment Summary Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project**

A brief description of location and type of project was included in the Eldorado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) each quarter since April 2001. An article was published in the Mountain Democrat on December 12, 2002 that discussed the Healthy Forests Initiative and the Pilot Projects (Last Chance). Approximately 250 letters were mailed out to adjacent property owners, potentially effected businesses, federal, state and local agencies, and local special interest groups. The letter contained the detailed proposed action, map, methods for participation, and an invitation to the Last Chance public meeting on February 1, 2003. The mailing list is included in the project record. Articles were published in the Mountain Democrat on January 20, 2003 and January 30, 2003 describing the proposed action and notification of the public meeting. A public meeting was held in Grizzly Flat on February 1, 2003. Approximately 60 people attended, including representatives of CDF, USFS, and El Dorado County Fire Safe Council. Meeting notes are included in the project record.

Nine individuals responded to the scoping. No significant issues were raised; therefore, no alternatives other than the proposed action and the no action alternative have been fully developed and analyzed.

Scoping Period: January 14, 2003 – February 7, 2003

### **Commenters:**

1. Californians for Alternatives to Toxins (CATs) (Petra Taylor-Vandormael)
2. John Muir Project of Earth Island (Chad Hansen)
3. The Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign (Craig Thomas)
4. Victor Reyes
5. Brad Crozier
6. Gary Gould
7. Public Meeting (list of attendees attached)
8. Frank Showers

### **Californians for Alternatives to Toxins**

1. Connected actions should be assessed in a single environmental impact statement (EIS). It would be a violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to piecemeal a project involving several agencies and private landowners by only analyzing a part of a larger plan. It is clear that this project is part of a larger fuel management plan.

**Non-significant issue:** The Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project is a stand-alone project. There are similar projects in the area, both on federal and private lands, that will both benefit from and enhance this project. However, these other projects are not connected actions as defined by NEPA (40 CFR 1508.25 (a)(1)). The cumulative effects of these other projects are analyzed in the EA.

2. CATs is concerned that herbicides may be used in maintenance and noxious weed control.  
**Non-issue:** No herbicide use is proposed for maintenance or noxious weed control.
3. Prescribed fire causes resprouting of the native seedbank and nutrient pulses that create an environment conducive to the introduction of invasive weeds. This is an issue that should be addressed in the environmental analysis (EA).  
**Non-significant issue:** The noxious weed risk assessment addresses the resprouting of native seedbanks and nutrient pulses (Noxious Weed Risk Assessment, project record). The three occurrences in the project area would be hand pulled or lopped in early August or September.
4. The scoping letter mentions various treatment methods would be utilized to control noxious weeds. Would these include herbicides?  
**Non-issue:** No herbicide use is proposed for noxious weed control. Existing noxious weeds would be pulled by hand. The following strategy is described in the Design Criteria under noxious weeds.

**The prevention and eradication strategy includes the following:**

- All off-road equipment would be cleaned to insure it is free of soil, seeds, vegetative matter or other debris before entering National Forest system land if it is known to have most recently operated in an area infested with noxious weeds, or if the last operating location is unknown. In addition, clean equipment prior to moving from an infested treatment unit, to a unit that is free of such weeds.
- Locations of any new infestations of noxious weeds would be mapped and documented. New sites would be treated by hand pulling or lopping (late summer/early fall lopping treatments have been shown to minimize resprouting).
- Post fuels treatment surveys would be conducted at the documented sites. Grub or hand-pulled populations prior to seed-set. Where appropriate, seeding of weed-treated areas with native grass species would be done to reduce, through competition, further weed establishment or expansion of existing infestations.

**John Muir Project of Earth Island**

1. The scoping notice does not mention what type of logging and extent to which canopy closure would be reduced. The analysis is fatally flawed without this information. You must provide pre-logging and post-logging data on timber strata, flame length and crown base height for each unit. What on the ground analysis was done to determine the existing flame length? Are some units at 6 feet or less flame length currently?  
**Non-issue:** Forest wide stand structure standards and guidelines pertaining to large trees, canopy cover, snags, and large down wood apply in all land allocations, and would be met where they currently exist. Pre-logging data and post-logging estimates on timber strata are in the project file.

2. “You must prepare a full EIS for this project since you plan to log a spotted owl PAC and HRCA and a goshawk PAC . . . . Under NEPA regulation you must prepare an EIS due to potential adverse impacts to critical ecological areas.”

**Non-issue:** The Proposed Action would comply with the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) Environmental Impact Statement, as described in the SNFPA Record of Decision (ROD). Specifically, the proposed action is designed to meet objectives based on Forest wide standards and guidelines (ROD, pages A-25 to A-32), as well as land allocation standards and guidelines for Northern Goshawk and California Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers (PACs) (ROD, pages A-33 to 37), and Urban Wildland Intermix Defense and Threat Zone standards and guidelines (ROD pages A-46 and A-47).

The SNFPA ROD (page A-3) states “Fuel treatments conducted in PACs outside the nesting season or den sites are designed to enhance or maintain long-term habitat conditions. PACs in the defense zone of the urban wildland intermix zone are managed to maintain suitable owl habitat while addressing the need to reduce fire hazards near human communities.” The proposed action includes 46 acres of understory thinning within California spotted owl and northern goshawk PACs that are within the defense zone. The prescriptions are designed to enhance and maintain long-term habitat conditions. The proposed action states, “Mechanical treatments would occur except within the 500’ radius buffer around the activity center. Prescribed fire and preparatory hand treatments are allowed in the 500’ buffer. Prior to burning, hand treatments, including handline construction, tree pruning, and cutting small trees less than 6 inches in diameter, are allowed within a 1 to 2 acre area surrounding known nest trees as needed to protect these trees (ROD, page A-35).” The remaining area of the PAC (within units 227 and 237) would be mechanically treated to achieve the fuels reduction outcomes described for the general forest land allocation. (ROD, page A-35) The wildlife Biological Evaluation (BE) addresses effects to spotted owls, goshawks, and their habitat.

3. The research of Forest Service scientist Jack Cohen establishes clearly that homes can be effectively protected by reducing the flammability of the home itself and its immediate surroundings within at most 100 to 200 feet-NOT 1.5 miles. The Framework FEIS did not adequately or honestly analyze Cohen’s research.

**Non-significant issue:** Outside the scope – We agree with the research in relation to structure protection. The Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project is designed to meet the standards and guidelines of the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Plan as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) Environmental Impact Statement, as described in the SNFPA Record of Decision (ROD). Specifically, “Fuel reduction treatments are designed to protect human communities from wildland fires as well as minimize the spread of fires that might originate in urban areas. The

management objective in the urban wildland intermix zone is to enhance fire suppression capabilities by modifying fire behavior inside the zone and providing a safe and effective area for possible future fire suppression activities.” (ROD, page A-10)

4. The removal of trees up to 30 inches dbh in the Defense Zone, and severe reduction of canopy cover in such areas, may increase the potential for severe fire behavior.

**Non-Significant Issue:** Conjectural - Proposed mechanical thinning located within the Defense Zone have a 30” maximum dbh, and no residual canopy cover requirements according to the SNFPA ROD. Thinning prescriptions, for this project, are based on understory thinning to achieve fuels objectives of raising height to live crown, reducing fuel ladders, and restoring shade intolerant fire adapted species. There are situations where trees greater than 20 inches would be removed to better meet the landscape purpose and need. Shade tolerant species (true fir, incense cedar, Douglas fir) tend to maintain live crowns closer to the ground than do shade intolerant pines and black oaks. Thus it may be preferential to harvest a 20” white fir with an 80% live crown ratio than a 14” ponderosa pine with a 50% live crown ratio. The SNFPA FEIS Vol 1, pg1 states, “These alternatives aim to sustain lower westside hardwood ecosystems.” An arbitrary diameter limit of 10” or 12” would often preclude the survival of hardwoods, which are becoming over topped by shade tolerant conifers. Fuels objectives described in the ROD are based on the stand level, landscape level, and on a temporal scale. All stands within the wildland urban interface will not be treated; therefore reducing fuels to the absolute minimum on a stand basis would not achieve the larger landscape or temporal scale goals.

5. Due to controversy among experts and scientist, you must prepare an EIS to fully analyze these issues, as well as the issue of brush maintenance in the areas to be mechanically thinned. How and when do you propose to maintain these areas? Do you intend to use herbicides?

**Non-issue:** This project cannot establish long-term management practices. The expected duration of the proposed treatments is 5 to 10 years, at which point maintenance by light underburning could be an effective tool. No herbicide use is proposed.

### Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign

1. We assert that a Categorical Exemption from more detailed NEPA analysis is inappropriate for this scale of project within this particular landscape.

**Non-significant issue:** Outside the scope – The analysis for this project will be documented in an Environmental Assessment. In August 2002, President Bush announced the Healthy Forests Initiative, directing the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to develop administrative and legislative measures that will help reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire to America’s forests and rangelands. One of the proposed steps to restore forest and rangeland health is to improve the environmental assessment process. The Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project

is one of seven demonstration projects that have been identified to highlight implementation of the CEQ guidance clarifying policy on the preparation of environmental assessments.

2. Cumulative impacts from the Ridgerunner Timber Sale, Clear Timber Sale, Tie Die, Nelly, Plummer and other recent projects should be part of a credible effects analysis. How much habitat alteration has occurred in the past decade? How many areas of suitable nesting and foraging habitat exist in the core area and home range of any sensitive species in the project area?

**Non-issue:** Cumulative impacts from past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions have been analyzed by resource. A complete list of activities that have occurred or will occur within the Last Chance project area is in the project file by resource. Habitat alteration and acres of suitable nesting and foraging habitat in the core have been analyzed in the wildlife BE.

3. “There are potentially significant cumulative impacts to the spotted owl and other sensitive and MIS on the ENF from past, current and reasonably foreseeable future actions, particularly if the ENF proceeds with an expanded UWI delineation that has not been considered in a broad effects analysis. This may lead to significant impacts requiring an EIS.”

**Non-issue:** The wildlife BE addresses direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to California spotted owls and other sensitive species. For additional information see response to John Muir Project of Earth Island issue 2 and Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign issue 5.

4. The project map needs the UWI, general forest and old Forest zones clearly disclosed.

**Non-issue:** The land allocations within the project area are Urban Wildland Intermix Zones, California Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers, Northern Goshawk Protected Activity Centers, and Spotted Owl Home Range Core Areas. A map displaying the land allocations is in the project file and on the Eldorado National Forest website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado/projects/hfi.html>.

5. The expanded defense and threat zone determination is not supported by the SNFPA record and may have significant impacts to sensitive and MIS, requiring an EIS. This is both a site-specific and regional concern with potential cumulative impacts not analyzed in the SNFPA FEIS.

**Non-significant issue:** The SNFPA ROD (page A-10) states “The actual boundaries of the urban wildland intermix zone are determined locally, based on the actual distribution of structures and communities adjacent to or intermixed with national forest lands. Strategic landscape features, such as roads, changes in fuel types, and topography, are used in delineating the physical boundary of the urban wildland intermix zone.” We have not change the size of the urban wildland intermix zone but have made a reallocation of acres within this area (changed from *threat* to *defense*). Originally the Sierra Nevada Framework allocated 919 acres as defense in the project area. The Middle Fork of the Consumnes Landscape Analysis and this project have taken 2,740 acres previously allocated as threat and changed that allocation to

defense following the procedures outline in the ROD. See discussion in Fire and Fuels Report pages 3-4 located in the project record or can be viewed on the website.

6. We request that the road segments slated for decommissioning be ripped and replanted and removed from the forest roads atlas.

**Non-issue:** That is in the proposed action to be analyzed in the EA.

7. “Lower Steeling Fork Cosumnes River is at “extreme risk” of cumulative watershed effects and is considered at 98% of threshold of concern. This tributary of the Cosumnes River is public municipal water supply and is at high risk of degradation from intensive logging or catastrophic fire. Treatments in this watershed that degrade water quality may have significant impacts to the environment.”

**Non-significant issue:** Conjectural - Each watershed within the project area will be analyzed for cumulative watershed effects. Road closures, landing rehabilitation, and waterhole rehabilitation reduce the risk of adverse impacts to down stream uses.

8. Due to increased sunlight, re-sprouted shrubs can grow vigorously in the understory. Maintaining higher canopy cover, as in the Framework prescriptions may help to lesson re-growth compared to areas such as Plummer Ridge or in many past CASPO sales, but none-the-less, a 5-8 year second treatment will be necessary, as will the third treatment until conifers fill the growing space. The need for repeated burns on treated landscapes, in perpetuity to maintain treatment effectiveness and to be cost effective, should be fully disclosed to the public.

**Non-issues:** Thinning prescriptions, for this project, are based on understory thinning to achieve fuels objectives of raising height to live crown, reducing fuel ladders, restoring shade intolerant (fire adapted species) and designed to last a minimum of 10 years before densities again reach hazardous levels. The expected duration of the proposed fuel treatments is 5 to 10 years, at which point maintenance by light underburning could be an effective tool.

#### Victor Reyes

1. Request additional information on proposed treatments.

Non-issue

#### Brad Crozier

1. Interested in project time frame.

**Non-issue:** The project is planned for implementation in 2004.

2. Increased vehicle traffic along Caldor Railroad Grade (9N45) creates additional dust and mud. Would like road improved.

**Non-significant issue:** Outside the scope – Caldor Railroad Grade (9N45) is county maintained from the intersection of Grizzly Flat Road to the east end of Henry’s Diggins. The proposed action includes dust abatement for activities proposed within the project area. The county is responsible for additional maintenance beyond the scope of this project.

## Gary Gould

1. Supports proposed project.  
Non-issue

## Public Meeting

1. Don't leave sharp pointed stubs sticking up out of the ground close to homes because they are a hazard to kids who play out in the forest.  
**Non-issue:** Clarified in the Design Criteria to read: within 100 feet of private property trees and brush will be cut flush with the ground.

## Frank Showers

1. Supports fuels project.  
Non-issue:
2. Request that the roads proposed for closure be left open for OHV use.  
**Non-issue:** The transportation analysis identified the seven roads proposed for closure as maintenance level 1 roads that should have been closed to travel previously.
3. Request that access road proposed for rehabilitation and closure be repaired and left open for OHV use.  
**Non-issue:** The proposed action describes the location as the drafting site on the Steely Fork of the Cosumnes (located off 9N59). The proposal is to obliterate the portion of the road north of the Steely Fork that is on the National Forest; barricade either end of the road; remove the cement crossing at the drafting site; restrict vehicle access at the drafting site and parking area next to the river. The portion of road proposed for rehabilitation and closure has experienced sediment loss into the Steely Fork Cosumnes. To prevent further resource damage and improve riparian habitat the road would remain closed to vehicle traffic.