

COUNTY LINE FUELS PROJECT



Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District
Huron-Manistee National Forests



Introduction

The Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District of the Huron-Manistee National Forests (HMNF) is preparing an Environmental Assessment for proposed management activities within the County Line Fuels Project Area (Project Area).

The proposed activities in the County Line Fuels Project Area encompass approximately 723 acres of vegetative treatments, including pine plantation thinning and shelterwood and clearcut harvesting. Approximately 157 acres of wildlife habitat improvement activities are proposed, including upland opening maintenance and aspen regeneration harvesting. Also, approximately 12 acres of riparian planting and treatment of non-native invasive species are also proposed. Approximately 1,345 acres of fuel reduction projects are proposed including: sanitation cuts, low-intensity controlled burning, pile and burning, and fuelbreak construction (including fuels thinning/barrens restoration).

The proposed activities in the County Line Fuels Project Area are located on the Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District of the HMNF in T20N, R16W, Sections 1 through 18 of Free Soil Township, Mason County, Michigan.

The attached maps show the Project Area vicinity and the location of the proposed treatments. All county roads will remain open. Unauthorized, user-developed, or other unclassified roads may be closed.

Purpose and Need

The Purpose and Need for a project is arrived at by addressing the differences between the existing condition and the desired future condition. All management activities that occur within the HMNF are directed by the objectives and guidelines of the Forests' Land and Resource Management Plan (Forests' Plan). This plan identifies how different areas of the HMNF are managed in distinct ways. The Purpose and Need of the County Line Fuels Project is primarily fuels management. Other goals of the project include sustaining forest health, conducting vegetative management activities, and meeting the goals and objectives of the Forests' Plan for Management Prescription Areas (MA) 4.2 and 4.4 which are:

MA 4.2 provides for vegetative age diversity in all vegetation classes; manage permanent openings and/or grasslands to meet species viability needs; and increase utilization of wood residues and other currently non-merchantable material, when not needed for resource

concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products.

MA 4.4 provides for maintenance or increase of wildlife habitat diversity; emphasis on hazardous fuels treatment in wildland urban interface and intermix areas; increase utilization of wood residues and other currently non-merchantable material, when not needed for resource concerns such as soil productivity and wildlife habitat, for fuelwood and other special forest products; manage permanent openings and/or grasslands to meet species viability needs; and manage for mesic grassland habitats.

Vegetative treatments are proposed to address the Purpose and Need and accomplish the following objectives:

Improve public safety and protect private property by reducing the potential of a wildfire to spread from National Forest System lands onto adjacent private property and from private property to public lands.

Current Condition: The majority of the Project Area is considered to be at moderate to high risk from wildfire. The jack pine and jack pine-oak stands in the Project Area are becoming over-mature and developing a mixed conifer and hardwood understory, are exhibiting reduced growth rates, are susceptible to disease and insect infestations, and are greater hazardous fuel risks than other stands in the Project Area. The presence of red and jack pine plantations in and around the Project Area contributes to the potential spread of wildfire to private property and adjacent resources. The canopies of these plantations are contiguous and the amount of fuel in these stands has been increasing. Wildfires occur in and around the area on a yearly basis. The majority of wildfires are human caused, and are associated with recreational users throughout the Project Area and permanent residences on adjacent private land. A wildfire occurring in or near the Project Area has the potential to threaten public and private property and safety.

The Project Area is a good example of Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The general definition of WUI is an area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels. The fragmented ownership pattern in the Project Area plays a large role in the potential for a damaging wildfire. The potential for a wildfire to start on private land and spread to public lands and the possibility of fires starting on public lands and spreading to private lands is a critical factor in managing the fuels in the Project Area.

Desired Condition: Wildfire intensity and rates of spread are reduced to a level that preserves and protects human life and property from wildfires in the area and minimize the likelihood of a wildfire entering or leaving NFS lands. Hazardous fuel types are treated to reduce the threat of a wildfire affecting private property and National Forest resources. Fuelbreaks are established and maintained. Blocks of pine plantations in and around the Project Area are not contiguous and their canopies are more open. Fine fuel loadings are reduced.

Need: There is a need to reduce fuels in the Project Areas. Specific vegetation treatments of over-mature jack pine and jack pine-oak stands will reduce the amount of hazardous fuels in the Project Area. Pine plantations will be thinned to open the

canopies of these stands. Fuelbreaks and barrens will be created and maintained to slow the spread of wildfires. Broadcast burning and pile and burning will be used to eliminate fine fuels throughout the Project Area where practical. These activities will minimize the potential spread and damage as a result of a wildfire.

Sustain individual tree growth rates, vigor, and increase vegetative diversity in red and jack pine stands and improve ecosystem health.

Existing Condition: Overstocked red and jack pine stands are exhibiting reduced growth rates, are susceptible to insect and disease infestations, and represent plantation conditions established for reforestation purposes. The overall vegetative diversity in these stands is limited. Competition exists for sunlight, water, and nutrients, thus reducing the continued growth of the trees. Plantation red and jack pine stands in the Project Area are unnatural in appearance, have trees of approximately the same height and diameter, a pronounced row effect, and little horizontal and vertical diversity within each plantation. Non-native, invasive plants (NNIP) have been identified in the Project Area.

Desired Condition: Plantations contain more species and structural diversity. Individual red and jack pines grow at increased rates and native vegetation has the opportunity to become established in the understory, and promote long term vegetative and structural diversity. The red and jack pine plantations have a more natural appearance, native herbaceous and shrub vegetation in the understory is established, and the row effect is decreased to enhance visual quality. Snags, downed woody debris, and den trees are present in these stands. The presence and spread of NNIP is limited.

Need: There is a need to open the canopy in the red and jack pine stands in the Project Area to increase productivity and minimize insect and disease attacks, enhance vegetative diversity, improve wildlife habitat, and improve stand and visual quality. There is a need to reduce current infestations and future spread of NNIP.

Enhance and increase the variety of wildlife habitats, including oak-pine barrens, aspen clones, and upland openings.

Existing Condition: Currently there are no existing oak-pine barrens in the Project Area, although there are stands within the area that have shown characteristics of these types of habitats, including low regeneration and growth rates, as well as remnant plant species typically found in functioning barrens. The aspen stands in the Project Area are over-mature and gradually converting towards later successional species. A variety of tree species are encroaching on the existing openings within the Project Area, leading to the gradual loss of early successional and upland opening species habitat.

Desired Condition: Areas that contained barrens in the past have these ecosystems restored, based on location and suitability. The aspen forest type and early successional habitat is maintained, and age classes are more evenly distributed within the Project Area. Upland openings maintain existing vegetative composition of grasses, forbs, and berry-producing shrubs.

Need: There is a need to provide a diversity of wildlife habitats, including oak-pine barrens. There is a need to maintain the aspen forest type and to improve aspen age class diversity and early successional habitat in the Project Area. There is a need to maintain upland openings to prevent the encroachment of tree species, and stimulate the growth of opening vegetation, berry-producing shrubs, and mast producing trees for wildlife habitat diversity.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action would:

Thin selected pine plantations to improve stand quality, reduce competition within these stands for sunlight, water, and soil nutrients, improve wildlife habitat, and reduce the row effect in the pine stands. Approximately 315 acres of red pine plantations are being considered for treatment.

Regenerate selected jack pine-oak stands by shelterwood harvesting to maintain an open overstory in jack pine dominated stands and promote the establishment of hardwood, especially oak regeneration. Site preparation for regeneration will be conducted if advanced regeneration is inadequate. Approximately 103 acres of jack pine-oak stands are being considered for shelterwood treatment.

Regenerate selected mature jack pine stands by clearcut harvesting to improve overall stand quality and health. Site preparation for regeneration will be conducted if advanced regeneration is inadequate. Approximately 305 acres of jack pine, jack pine-oak, and scotch pine stands are being considered for treatment.

Manage existing upland openings to provide vegetative diversity and promote improved plant and animal habitat diversity for species such as the eastern bluebird, wild turkeys, and various plant species. Approximately 118 acres of openings are being considered for treatment.

Create water sources for wildlife in sections that presently contain no sources on federal lands. Four water holes are being considered.

Regenerate mature aspen stands, and an oak inclusion, by clearcut harvesting for wildlife benefits. Approximately 39 acres are being considered for treatment.

Remove non-native tree species in the Project Area and treat other occurrences of non-native invasive herbaceous and grass species. Plant native species in the riparian zone along the Big Sable River. Approximately 7 acres of non-native species are being considered for treatment. Approximately 5 acres of planting in the riparian zone are being considered for treatment.

Use controlled burns throughout the Project Area to reduce fine fuel loading, improve wildlife habitat, and increase the diversity of understory and herbaceous vegetation. Roads and trails in and adjacent to these treatment units may be temporarily closed during periods of implementation to ensure public safety. Approximately 413 acres are being considered for treatment.

Piling and burning of fuels would be conducted to reduce the fuel loading in the Project Area. This will be primarily accomplished using machinery with some limited hand piling, depending on site-specific characteristics. This treatment would occur on selected jack pine and jack pine-oak stands. Approximately 318 acres of jack pine and jack pine-oak stands are being considered for treatment.

Use sanitation harvesting to reduce fuel loading as well as improve stand quality. Approximately 349 acres of jack pine and jack pine-oak stands are being considered for treatment.

Thin selected stands to create permanent oak-pine barrens. This would reduce fuel loadings, restore a native forest ecosystem, and enhance wildlife habitat in stands that are unsuited for timber production. These stands would be permanently removed from the Forests' timber base. Approximately 241 acres of jack pine and jack pine-oak stands are being considered for treatment.

Approximately 1.63 miles (24 acres in area) of fuelbreaks would be treated in the Project Area. These fuelbreaks would be managed along the private land boundaries and roads in primarily jack pine, jack-pine oak, and red pine stands.

There are additional stands within the Project Area; however, we have limited this project to the acres that would be reasonable to complete in the next three to five years. **The Proposed Action is only one approach to meeting the Purpose and Need objectives for this project.** Using the comments received in response to this document, we may develop additional alternatives to the one proposed. The 'Table of Proposed Treatments' at the end of this document condenses all the treatments, and acres of each activity, into one table.

Potential Issues and Existing Resources

The following issues and resources have been discussed and/or evaluated in past projects. Some may be determined to be minor because they would not be affected by the project design. Only issues and resources that would be impacted by an action alternative or vary greatly between alternatives would be used to evaluate the alternatives for this project.

Vegetative Composition

The current vegetative composition and the expected changes as a result of implementing the proposed vegetative treatments, including fuels reduction projects, will be evaluated as part of the analysis.

Recreation and Visual Quality

Within the Project Area is the developed Hoag's Lake Day Use Area, which has a gravel boat launch, picnic area and swimming beach. Recreation occurring within the undeveloped portions of the Project Area includes; snowmobiling on the Irons Area Tourist Association groomed trail, hunting, fishing, berry and mushroom gathering, and dispersed camping. Other less frequent uses seen in the Project Area are driving for pleasure, horseback riding and hiking. The analysis will evaluate how the proposed activities may affect recreation and visual quality within and adjacent to the Project Area.

Soil, Water, and Air

Potential impacts to soil, water, and air resources will be evaluated as part of the analysis. Measures to minimize impacts to soil and water resources will be incorporated into the project.

Wildlife and Management Indicator Species

The effects of the proposed activities on wildlife and Management Indicator Species will be evaluated as part of the analysis.

Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive Species

A Biological Evaluation will be completed as part of the analysis to determine effects on endangered, threatened, and sensitive plant and animal species. There is no indication at this time that activities proposed in this project will impact endangered, threatened, or sensitive species.

Heritage Resources

The area has been surveyed for heritage resources. Any sites that were identified during the surveys that are within the Project Area will be protected.

Economics

An economic analysis is included in the Environmental Assessment in order to evaluate the cost-efficiency of the alternatives.

Civil Rights and Environmental Justice

The analysis will address the civil rights and environmental justice impacts with the implementation of the project.

Analysis Process

This analysis will follow the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures and will be used to determine if there would be any significant environmental effects to the alternatives being considered. **The District Ranger, Jim A. Thompson, will use this analysis to decide whether or not to approve these activities on National Forest System lands or whether or not to prepare a more detailed Environmental Impact Statement.**

The following steps would be followed in developing the Environmental Assessment. The steps shown in *italics* are the formal opportunities for your involvement.

Step 1: Scoping March 2008

Public comment period. This is the time when people can comment on issues and concerns, and recommend opportunities and options to consider in the analysis.

Forest Service develops issues based on comments from the public.

Forest Service develops alternatives based on issues.

Step 2: Analysis August 2008

Forest Service analyzes the effects of alternatives and publishes an Environmental Assessment.

Public comment period (30 days) on Environmental Assessment.

Forest Service analyzes comments and responds (changes to the Environmental Assessment may be based on comments).

Step 3: Decision October 2008

District Ranger makes Decision and notifies the public.

Formal 45-Day appeal period.

Step 4: Implementation 2009-2013

If the decision allows harvest activities to occur, timber sales would be prepared and sold over the next four to five years.

Step 5: Monitoring 2009 and beyond

Monitoring of project implementation and effectiveness would take place during and after the implementation stage.

Please take a few minutes to look at the attached maps and write down any comments you might have on the project. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to call Mark A. Herberger at 231-723-2211 ext 3109.

From:

*Place
Postage
Here*

*TO: Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District
Huron-Manistee National Forests
412 Red Apple Road
Manistee, MI 49660*

Attention: Mark A. Herberger

