

UDELL HILLS PROJECT



Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District
Huron-Manistee National Forests



Introduction

The Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District of the Huron-Manistee National Forests (Forest) is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) for proposed management activities in the Udell Hills Project Area (Project Area), as shown on the attached map.

The proposed Udell Hills Project activities includes wildlife and fisheries habitat improvement; red pine, white pine, jack pine, and aspen timber harvest treatments; timber stand improvement; fuels reduction projects; and non-native invasive plant species control on National Forest System lands within the Udell Hills Project Area.

The attached map shows the Project Area vicinity and the approximate location of the proposed activities. The proposed activities in the Project Area are located on National Forest System lands on the Cadillac-Manistee Ranger District of the Huron-Manistee National Forests in T21N, R 14W, Norman Township, Sections 7-11, 14-19, 21, 22, and 30; and T21N, R15W, Stronach Township, Sections 9-16, 22-27, 35, and 36; Manistee County, Michigan.

Purpose and Need

The Purpose and Need for a project is arrived at by addressing the differences between the existing condition and the desired condition. The Purpose and Need of the Udell Hills Project is to meet the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan for Management Areas 4.2, 4.3, 4.3D, and 8.3 and accomplish the following project objectives:

❖ **Provide early successional habitat, maintain the aspen forest type, and improve aspen age-class diversity**

Existing Condition: Many of the aspen stands in the Project Area are over-mature and are gradually converting towards later successional species, such as maple, beech, and white ash. A variety of tree species are encroaching on the existing upland openings within the Project Area, contributing to the gradual loss of shrubs and grasses needed by many game and non-game species.

Desired Condition: The aspen forest type and the early successional habitat it represents, is sustained within the Project Area. The vegetative composition of upland openings consists primarily of grasses, forbs, and berry-producing shrubs.

Need: There is a need to maintain the aspen forest type and improve aspen age class diversity and early successional habitat in the Project Area, especially for ruffed grouse habitat needs. 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.

❖ **Sustain forest and ecosystem health and reduce wildfire potential**

Existing Condition: Overstocked red pine and white pine stands are exhibiting reduced growth rates and are susceptible to insect and disease infestations. The overall vegetative and structural diversity in these stands is limited. Competition for sunlight, water, and nutrients is reducing the growth of the trees. Plantation red pine stands in the Project Area are unnatural appearing, have a pronounced row effect, and contain little horizontal and vertical diversity. Jack pine stands are declining and contributing to an increase in fuel loading and subsequent wildfire potential. Non-native, invasive plants, such as Canada thistle, bull thistle, hounds tongue, autumn olive, honeysuckle, purple loosestrife, and Scotch pine have been identified within the Project Area.

Desired Condition: Red and white pine stands contain vegetative and structural diversity and grow near maximum rates and native vegetation is established in the understory. The plantation red pine plantations have a natural appearance and native herbaceous and shrub vegetation occurs in the understory. Fuel loading and wildfire potential is reduced. The presence and spread of non-native, invasive plants is limited.

Need: There is a need to open the canopy in the red and white pine stands in the Project Area to sustain forest health, concentrate growth on larger trees, minimize insect and disease attacks, reduce fuel loading and reduce wildfire potential, improve wildlife habitat, enhance vegetative diversity, and improve stand and visual quality. There is a need to reduce current infestations and future spread of non-native, invasive plants.

❖ **Improve aquatic habitat**

Existing Condition: A portion of Pine Creek within the Project Area is impacted by sand bedload which reduces instream habitat and water quality. The sand bedload is a result of eroding banks, poorly designed roads and trails, and road/stream crossings. Some culverts at road/stream crossings are poorly designed and contributing sediment and negatively affecting aquatic organism passage within the Project Area.

Desired Condition: Sand bedload is reduced and high quality aquatic habitat occurs in the Project Area. Culverts at road/stream crossings are properly aligned, functioning, allow aquatic organism passage, and contribute little to no sediment into streams.

Need: There is a need to repair or realign culverts and improve road/stream crossings to reduce erosion and allow for aquatic organism passage. There is a need to reduce the sand bedload and improve instream habitat in the Project Area.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action identifies specific management activities that would be implemented to achieve the Purpose and Need objectives. The following lists the proposed actions to accomplish each project objective.

Project Objective - Provide early successional habitat, maintain the aspen forest type, and improve aspen age-class diversity

- ❖ Harvest aspen stands by clearcutting to optimize aspen regeneration, maintain the aspen forest type, and improve wildlife habitat for early successional species. The individual size of these clearcuts would not exceed 40 acres. Approximately 154 acres of aspen clearcutting is proposed.
- ❖ Maintain existing upland openings by brushing, mowing, prescribed burning, apple tree pruning, and shrub planting to provide vegetative diversity and promote plant and animal habitat diversity and promotes native species. Convert a jack pine stand to an upland opening to create additional early successional habitat. Approximately 45 acres of upland opening improvement, 29 acres of upland opening creation, and 17 acres of shrub planting is proposed.

Project Objective - Sustain forest and ecosystem health and minimize wildfire potential

- ❖ Thin and/or regenerate red, white, and jack pine stands to provide current and future wood products, promote the establishment of hardwood regeneration, reduce competition for sunlight, water, and soil nutrients, minimize wildfire potential, and improve wildlife habitat and visual diversity. The following treatments are proposed: approximately 642 acres of red and white pine thinning, 21 acres of red pine overstory removal, and 99 acres of jack pine overstory removal, convert a jack pine stand to an 29 acre upland opening to reduce fuel loading and subsequent wildfire potential (same opening creation treatment described above).
- ❖ Non-native, invasive plant species are located in stands scattered across the Project Area. Treat non-native, invasive plant populations or individuals to reduce current infestations and future spread in order to sustain forest productivity. Methods may include manual and mechanical removal, and spot treatment with herbicide or prescribed fire. Approximately 9 acres of non-native invasive plant control activities in about 25 stands is proposed.
- ❖ Conduct timber stand improvement (TSI) in a hardwood stand by releasing existing young oak trees from red maple competition and provide future oaks for wood products and wildlife habitat in the Project Area. Approximately 20 acres of TSI is proposed.

Project Objective - Improve aquatic habitat

- ❖ Road/stream crossings would be improved at approximately 2 locations along a tributary of Pine Creek to reduce erosion and improve passage for aquatic organisms. Approximately 1 mile of stream is being considered for treatment along Pine Creek to improve fisheries and aquatic organism habitat. Aquatic habitat would be improved by placing brush and log structures along Pine Creek.

Additional activities that would occur within this project include closing Forest System road (FR 8169) (approximately ½ mile in length). This road is eroding and depositing sand onto Good Road, which impairs public use and increases maintenance costs. Another activity that is planned within this Project Area includes a scenery enhancement/vista improvement around Udell Fire Tower. This project would include reducing the density of trees and creating a scenic vista in an area of about 10 acres around the fire tower.

There are additional stands within the Project Area; however, we have limited this project to the activities 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 from this document, we may develop additional alternatives to the one proposed.

Potential Issues and Existing Resources

The following issues and resources have been discussed and/or evaluated in recent similar 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 treatments will be evaluated as part of the analysis.

Soil and Air

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

Non-Native Invasive Plant Species and Human Health and Safety

This analysis addresses the effects of herbicide use for invasive plant control measures on human health and safety.

Heritage Resources and Threatened, and Sensitive Species

Heritage resource sites and threatened and sensitive plant and animal species have been identified in the Project Area. Recommended protection measures for these resources will be incorporated into the design of the project.

Wildlife, Fisheries, Watershed, and Management Indicator Species

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

Recreation and Visual Quality

Recreation within the Project Area includes hunting, hiking, biking, skiing, snowmobiling, driving for pleasure, horseback riding, camping, fishing, berry/mushroom picking, and viewing the old fire tower. The analysis will evaluate how the proposed activities and the time of year they occur affect recreation activities, and the aesthetic quality in the Project Area.

Social Economics

The environmental analysis addresses the effects of the proposed vegetative treatments and transportation system on social economics and evaluates the cost-revenue of the alternatives.

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 February-March 2008

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

Forest Service develops issues based on comments from the public and then develops alternatives based on issues.

Step 2: Analysis March-May 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 on the Environmental Assessment and responds (changes to the Environmental Assessment may be based on comments).

Step 3: Decision August, 2008

District Ranger makes Decision and notifies the public.

Formal 45-day appeal period.

Step 4: Implementation 2008 and beyond

If the decision allows harvest activities to occur, timber sales would be prepared and sold over the next four to five years. The remaining project activities would likely be implemented during this same time frame, but may extend for about five years after the timber sale activities are completed.

Step 5: Monitoring 2008 and beyond

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

From:

**Place
Postage
Here**

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

Attention: Patricia O'Connell