



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service



Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Grass Flat Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Restoration Project

Plumas National Forest
Feather River Ranger District

August 2012



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and
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Grass Flat Fuels Reduction and Forest
Health Restoration Project

Plumas National Forest
Feather River Ranger District

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Abstract

An Environmental Assessment (EA) disclosing the effects of the No Action Alternative and one action alternative has been prepared for the Grass Flat Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Restoration Project. The EA is available for public review at the Feather River Ranger District office of the Plumas National Forest, at 875 Mitchell Avenue, Oroville, California 95965.

Based on comments received during the public comment period, the Forest Supervisor has selected Modified Alternative B. Modified Alternative B responds to the purpose and need of reducing and/or modifying fuels to reduce risk to the La Porte and surrounding communities by constructing Defensible Fuel Profile zones (DFPZs) over a 1,815 acre Project Area. Forest health within the Little Grass Valley Recreation Area, restoration and improved riparian and watershed health and wildlife and aquatic habitat qualities are also proposed actions included in this alternative. This action is needed since forest stands in the Grass Flat project area are crowded with dense and diseased timber and brush that have become increasingly flammable with age, resulting in the elevated risk of wildfires. There is also a need for restoration improvements throughout the highly popular Little Grass Valley Recreation Area to prevent further resource damage.

Background

The Plumas National Forest (PNF) proposes to construct Defensible Fuel Profile Zones (DFPZs) over a 1,815 acre Project Area in the southeast portion of the Feather River Ranger District (FRRD), Plumas County. The treatment area elevation ranges from 4,600 feet to 5,200 feet and is located in T21N, R8E, sections 24 and 24 and T22N, R9E, section 10, 11, 15, 17, 19-23, 27-34; Mount Diablo Meridian. The proposed action is a fuels management project to be conducted as a part of the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group (HFQLG) Pilot Project, which is to be implemented under provisions of the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) to the PNF Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP). Under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects are subject to objection (§ 218.2) when comments are received during the opportunity for public comment period (§ 218.7(a)). The Grass Flat project received comments during the public comment period. The responsible official must issue an explanation with the record of decision (ROD) or decision notice (DN) that the project was subject to objection.

The HFQLG Act was amended in 2007 and then again in 2008 to address application of sections 104 – 106 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act to HFQLG projects. The most recent amendment states that section 106 (judicial review) of HFRA “shall apply” to all HFQLG projects, while sections 104 (environmental analysis and collaboration) and 105 (predecisional administrative review) of HFRA “may be applied” to HFQLG projects.

Approximately 85 percent of the Grass Flat Project lies within the wildland urban interface (WUI). The total population in and adjacent to the Project Area is approximately 400 people, with hundreds of scattered homes and structures. The La Porte area homeowners have voiced their concerns over nearby fire hazards on NFS lands during Fire Safe Council/Forest Service public meetings. La Porte is identified as a “community at risk” from the threat of wildfire in the Plumas County Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP).

There are four distinct purpose and need objectives for the Grass Flat Project:

- Reduce the risk to natural resources, the rural community of La Porte, and adjacent communities by modifying hazardous fuels condition.
- Improve forest health to restore the natural recreation settings and scenery aesthetics while providing a safe environment for forest visitors in and around the Little Grass Valley Reservoir Recreation Area.
- Improve watershed health and maintain and restore riparian/aquatic/wildlife habitats.
- Contribute to the stability and economic health of rural communities.

During the development of the alternatives the no action alternative (Alternative A) was used as a baseline for development of the project action alternatives and to identify the current condition of the project area. The action alternatives examined are: Alternative B, the original proposed action, Modified Alternative B, the preferred alternative, and Alternative C, the noncommercial funded alternative which is in effect until the agency remedies the deficiencies of the programmatic 2004 Sierra Nevada Framework. The noncommercial funded alternative is viable until a settlement agreement is reached or a supplemental EIS is completed.

An opportunity for the public to comment on this project coincided with the publication of the legal notice in the newspaper of record (Feather River Bulletin) on December 14, 2011. The concurrent scoping and comment period remained open through January 17, 2012, according to established procedures, based on a statement of the Proposed Action. Subsequent analyses of potential environmental effects were carried out to meet requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, the federal Endangered Species Act, and other laws and policies. All resource and project-level (heritage and botany) surveys necessary for the effects analyses were recently completed. Surveys for threatened, endangered, and sensitive (TES) fish and wildlife species have been conducted in portions of the Feather River Ranger District (FRRD) at various intensities in different years for various projects. Surveys were conducted to protocol for TES species for the proposed project. A detailed accounting of surveys for each of these species is given in the project biological assessment-biological evaluation (BA-BE). If new occurrences of the species are found during the pre-implementation surveys, provisions summarized in this document and described in the BA-BE would be implemented.

Modified Alternative B would meet the project purpose and need based on both the findings during the analysis and the comments received during the comment period. Potentially adverse consequences of the project were identified. Upon analysis of the Grass Flat project area by Interdisciplinary Team members, no significant issues were found to warrant the writing of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). To document results of the effects analysis, an environmental assessment (EA) meeting requirements of 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1508.9 was prepared for the project and is available from the FRRD (see *Environmental Assessment – Grass Flat Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Restoration Project*, July 2012). The EA incorporates by reference interdisciplinary team specialists reports that address effects of the proposed action. An appendix to the EA as well as design features within the EA summarizes standard management requirements for resource management that would be applied to project activities.

Decision

The modifications to the proposed action are based on issues raised by the public to apply PSW GTR-220 and PSW GTR-237 concepts and retain a minimum 50 percent canopy cover within California spotted owl home range core areas (CSO HRCAs), forest carnivore movement areas and CWHR 4D/4M habitats. After reviewing the project EA, I have decided to approve the modified proposed action (Modified Alternative B) as designed with the objective of providing connectivity as part of a larger strategic plan of DFPZs to reduce the risk to rural communities from wildfire as well as implement restoration opportunities unique to a developed recreation area. The approved action is described in detail in the EA and is summarized as follows. (EA Chapter 2, section 2.5 page 10)

Construct Defensible Fuel Profile Zones

- Defensible Fuel Profile Zones (DFPZs) are proposed for construction by treatments designed to reduce surface, ladder, and canopy fuels through a variety of methods such as mechanical harvest, hand thinning, piling, burning, chipping and removal, and prescribed underburning. No trees greater than 30 inches diameter breast height (dbh) would be cut.
- Treatments throughout the DFPZs would reduce canopy cover from 40 to 59 percent, while increasing canopy base height and reducing surface fuel loading to less than 5 tons per acre of dead woody material less than 3 inches in diameter. Treatment prescriptions would call for removal of the smaller, suppressed, and intermediate crown-class trees, removal of some co-dominant trees, and retention of the largest trees to achieve the target canopy cover or spacing guidelines. Species preference for the residual trees would include shade-intolerant species. Ponderosa pine is the most preferable, followed by Jeffery pine, sugar pine, Douglas fir, black oak, incense cedar, and true fir.

- Standards and guidelines to retain trees greater than 30 inches in diameter and to avoid reducing pre-treatment canopy by more than 30 percent would preclude the reduction of canopy cover to 40 percent minimum in CWHR size class 5 stands. Canopy cover in CWHR size class 4 stands varies based on site specific conditions.

The Preferred Action (Modified Alternative B) would:

- **Mechanically thin trees from 8.9 inches dbh to 29.9 inches dbh totaling 200 acres**, including treating stumps greater than 14 inches in diameter with a borax compound. The spacing of residual conifers would be approximately 18 to 24 feet ($\pm 25\%$) to allow retention of the healthiest, largest, and tallest conifers and to avoid creating openings.
- **Remove trees as biomass from 3- 8.9 inches dbh on 98 acres (totaling 12 percent of the total thinning area)** – trees that are from 3 to 8.9 inches in diameter would be mechanically thinned and removed offsite.
- **Hand or tractor pile, and burn 3 – 8.9 inches dbh a total of 494 acres** – After small conifers (generally less than 9 inches dbh) and brush (generally greater than 12 inches in height) have been hand cut, the material would be piled by a tractor or by hand into burn piles and covered with material to keep dry. The piles subsequently burned in the winter months or during periods of low fire danger. This treatment removes ladder and surface fuels throughout the treatment unit.
- **Hand cut, grapple pile and burning on 371 acres thinning 3- 8.9 inch dbh** – Hand thinning is an activity that utilizes crews with chainsaws or handsaws that cut understory conifers less than 9 inches in diameter and brush (greater than 12 inches in height) in order to reduce ladder fuels.
- **Mastication on 328 acres** – Mechanical grinding of harvest residue or thinnings usually left at the harvest site.
- **Prescribed Underburning 107 acres** – Prescribed underburning would be used to treat live and dead vegetation. Treatment in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) would be limited to underburning. Ignition would occur along contour strips upslope of the RHCA and fire would be allowed to back down-slope into them.
- **Sanitizing (targets diseased and infected trees) over 45 acres** – Removing small, dense overstocked trees within the recreation area.
- **Roadside Hazard Tree Removal** – Estimated to produce 3500 ccf.
- **Spot planting tree seedlings (2+ years) and native shrubs over 45 acres** – To establish vegetative screening between campgrounds.

The Forest Service proposes to establish 56 acres of Group Selection by:

- mechanical thinning,
- mastication, or hand cut, or grapple pile and burning, prescribed underburning,
- Site prep, reforestation, and release

Restoration objectives: designed to restore watershed health and maintain and restore riparian/aquatic/wildlife habitat. Treatments would include:

- Hand cut and mechanically remove conifers and/or hand cut and fell conifers within 12 meadows and wetlands to total 15 acres.

- Mechanical thinning around the perimeter of 36 meadows and wetlands over 19 acres,
- Remove 1 stream crossing culvert on a decommissioned road and upgrade another culvert on FS System Road 22N57,
- Realign 726 feet (630 feet + 96 feet or 0.14 miles) two spring fed, diverted streams,
- Revegetate (plant) barren streambanks on the South Fork Feather River and an intermittent tributary to Black Rock Creek over 24 acres.

Plantation Management (3 to 30 years old) on 38 acres

- Spot plant a variety of 1-2 year old ponderosa pine, Jeffrey pine, sugar pine, Douglas-fir, and incense cedar,
- Conduct site prep using mechanical grapple pile and pile burning on,
- Release (grub around seedlings) using hand cutting and piling and/or burning on slopes greater than 40 percent and grapple piling, masticating, pulling root sprouts, and/or underburning on slopes less than 40 percent.

Logging and Transportation Systems

Modified Alternative B includes removal of conifers ranging from 8.9 to 29.9 inches dbh as necessary to obtain 40 – 59 percent canopy cover. All trees larger than 29.9 inches dbh would be retained unless removal is required for safety.

Whole tree-ground based logging systems utilizing mechanical thinning and biomass removal would be used in the construction of DFPZs. Whole tree yarding removes most limbs and tree tops from the stand, effectively reducing the need for post-project slash pile fuels treatment. Mechanical equipment used in thinning operations would not impact Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) as buffers would be put in place for protection and only underburning would be used for treatment. After thinning, pile burning would be used to treat residual slash and pre-existing shrubs where necessary.

Hardwoods greater than 8 inches dbh would be retained as feasible to meet future recruitment needs for retention of 25 to 35 square feet per acre of oaks greater than 15 inches dbh. Conifers and hardwoods from 3 feet in height to 8.9 inches in diameter (dbh) are considered biomass and would be thinned, piled and burned.

A borax compound would be applied to approximately 500 acres with evidence of annosus root rot (*Heterobasidium annosum*) or in the surrounding treatment area. In these areas, borax would be applied to all harvested stumps over 14.9 dbh.

The existing transportation system of roads, landings, and skid trails will be used for treatment access and product removal. The following needs were identified based on the roads analysis and known access needs proposed for DFPZ implementation.

Road construction such as heavy brushing and curve widening and maintenance such as light brushing and grading are needed to bring the existing classified roads up to the current maintenance standards and to provide access to the treatment areas. Reconstruction and road maintenance are also necessary to reduce erosion and sedimentation and to provide for public safety.

- Up to 0.9 miles of temporary roads will be constructed to provide access to the DFPZ treatment areas.
- Up to 1.8 miles of temporary road reconstruction is proposed to provide access to treatment areas where existing roads access is needed to facilitate the removal of wood products from the DFPZ treatment units, and

- Approximately 20 new landings (likely to be ½ acre or less) in addition to the 23 existing landings will help with visual compliance to move landings away from view on County Road 22N57.
- All temporary roads which are reopened or newly constructed will be closed after operations are completed. These actions will reduce erosion and sedimentation, and will reduce impacts to wildlife as planned with design features to prevent habitat fragmentation. (EA pg. 160).

Design Criteria and Mitigation Measures

This project will comply with the directions, and standards and guidelines within the Plumas National Forest LRMP as amended by the 1999 HFQLG FEIS and ROD and 2004 SNFPA FSEIS and ROD. In addition to measures included in the project description, the following resource protection measures are included as part of the proposed project design. Implementation of the following Resource Protection Measures would meet Forest Service Management Direction and is incorporated in the proposed action. Further discussion of design features and mitigation measures is located in Chapter 2 of the EA and appendix A following chapter 4 of the EA.

Air Quality

Specific air quality mitigations for prescribed burning would include number of acres burned daily, preferred wind direction for smoke dispersal, and desired weather conditions. These mitigations would be agreed upon with the appropriate Air Quality Districts and addressed in the Smoke Management portion of the Burn Plans developed for the Grass Flat Project.

Hydrology and Aquatics

Applicable Best Management Practices (BMPs) and Scientific Analysis Team (SAT) guidelines would be implemented before and during the timber harvest, DFPZ construction, and temporary road closure process.

- SAT and RMO Guidelines. The SAT guidelines for delineating RHCAs are defined in the Northwest Forest Plan, and adopted for the 1999 HFQLG FEIS and ROD. RHCAs in the Grass Flat Project would be underburned only. In general, standards and guidelines prohibit activities within RHCAs not specifically designed to improve the structure and function of the RHCA and benefit aquatic species. Where riparian conditions are presently degraded and a determination that lack of action would result in adverse effects, management activities must be designed to improve habitat conditions and meet Riparian Management Objectives (RMOs). RHCA widths shall be consistent with Riparian Management Objectives.
- RHCA widths applied to the Grass Flat Project are 300 feet for fish-bearing streams and lakes; 150 feet for perennial non-fish-bearing streams, lakes, and ponds, and wetlands greater than one acre; and 100 feet for ephemeral and intermittent streams, and wetlands less than one acre; or to the extent of landslides and landslide prone areas. The RHCAs would be defined and marked onsite when DFPZ units are laid out.
- Best Management Practices. These are practices designed to minimize or eliminate points of pollution from timber harvest and other management activities, by prohibiting or limiting types of ground disturbance that are likely to discharge sediment and negatively affect water quality.

Noxious and Invasive Weeds

Noxious weeds would be controlled through the use of integrated management practices. Prevention measures would be implemented to reduce the introduction and spread of noxious weeds. (FSM 2081.2). Also, the overall risk that project activities would spread noxious weeds has been analyzed in a Noxious Weed Risk Assessment as outlined in the HFQLG FEIS and located at the Feather River District Office.

Soils

Applicable Best Management Practices (BMPs) would be followed during the implementation of all activities of the Grass Flat Project. BMPs would be implemented throughout timber harvest, DFPZ construction, and road closures to ensure appropriate erosion and sedimentation protection in disturbed areas and to protect long term soil productivity.

The Limited Operation Period for soils is applicable to all the units that have mechanical treatment.

- The LOP would only allow ground-based harvest equipment to operate when soils are considered dry. Soil is defined as “dry” when the upper 8 inches is not sufficiently moist to allow a soil sample to be squeezed and hold its shape, or crumbles when the hand is tapped. Dryness would be determined by the sale administrator upon the recommendation of a soil scientist.

Additional Soils Mitigations. The Forest Service Handbook (Soils Management Handbook, Washington Office Amendment, FSH 2509.18-95-1; Soils Management Handbook, Region 5 Supplement, FSH 2509.18-95-1) establishes National and Regional direction for soil quality analysis. All mitigations would be specified in the Grass Flat Project timber sale contract and in the service contracts and adhered to for any work performed for this project.

Wildlife

Alternatives would be implemented in compliance with all rules and regulations governing land management activities, including the use of appropriate Limited Operating Periods (LOPS) identified in table 2-1, LOPs are listed in the HFQLG FEIS, pages 2-8, table 2.3 and 2004 SNFPA ROD, pages A-54, A-58, A-60, A-61 and A-62.

Table 2-1 Limited Operating Periods by Wildlife Species and Location.

Species	Location	Limited Operating Period
California Spotted Owl	Within ¼ mile of a protected activity center boundary	March 1 – August 15
Goshawk	Within ¼ mile of territory or active nest site	February 15 – September 15
Marten den	100 acre den site buffer	May 1 – August 1
Fisher den	700 acre den site buffer	March 1 – July 1
Willow Flycatcher	Within occupied willow flycatcher sites	Breeding period (June 1 – August 15)
Pallid and Townsend’s big-eared bats	Within ¼ mile of maternity and other roosts	April 1 – October 31
Western red bat	Within RHCAs with hardwoods	May 20 – August 21
Mountain Yellow-legged Frog	Where suitable habitat is found	October 15 or the 1st wetting rain greater than ¼ inch

Vegetation

All standard contract practices would be applied (timber sale contract B-provisions) as would some additional C-provisions and site specific prescription recommendations. Recommended mitigations associated with vegetation management would be designed to reduce logging damage to residual trees, reduce fuels, and reduce opportunities for infection of trees by fungal disease or insect attack.

Recommended mitigations include: 1) minimizing logging in the spring when bark is loose and trees are more susceptible to logging wounds; 2) removal of small trees damaged beyond repair in harvesting operations, particularly in thinning units; 3) no chainsaw thinning in plantations from January through July to minimize bark beetles (*Ips* spp.) attack. 4) no removal of specially identified trees (e.g. marked survey trees, superior genetics trees, and/or proven rust resistant sugar pine).

Application of a borax compound to freshly cut stumps over 14 inches dbh may be used to reduce the potential for spread of annosus root disease. Application of borax would not occur within any RHCA in the project area. The Evaluation of Human and Ecological Risk for Borax Stump Treatments for the Grass Flat Project can be found in the Silvicultural Report Appendices.

Where California black oak is present in DFPZs, an average basal area of 25 to 35 square feet per acre would be retained for oaks over 15 inches dbh where present; where basal area of oaks is below desired levels, oaks 8 inches dbh or greater will be retained where feasible on a site specific basis when determined necessary for future recruitment. In the Grass Flat Project Area only two units have oak populations.

DFPZs in CWHR in 5M, 5D, and 6 Size Classes

- Design projects to retain a minimum of 40% canopy cover.
- Design projects to avoid reducing pre-treatment canopy cover by more than 30%.
- Design projects to retain at least 40% of existing basal area, generally comprised of the larger trees.
- Design projects to retain, where available, 5% of total post-treatment canopy cover in lower layers comprised of trees 6-24 inches dbh.
- Design projects to retain all live trees >30 inches dbh, with exceptions allowed for safety and/or operability. Minimize impacts to ≥ 30 inch trees as much as practicable.

Down Wood Snags

- Determine retention levels of down woody material on an individual project basis. Within Westside vegetation types, generally retain an average over the treatment unit of 10-15 tons of large down wood per acre. Emphasize retention of wood that is in the earliest stages of decay. Consider the effects of follow-up prescribed fire in achieving desired retention levels of down wood.

A design feature may be in place to not YUM (Yard Unmerchantable Material) logs 20 inches diameter and 10 feet length but to leave the cull logs to meet the large down wood standard, where feasible.

Snags

- Determine snag retention levels on an individual basis. Design projects to sustain across the landscape a generally continuous supply of snags and live decadent trees suitable for cavity nesting wildlife. Retain some mid and large diameter live trees that are currently in decline, have substantial wood defect, or have desirable characteristics (teakettle branches, large diameter broken top, large cavities in the bole) to serve as future replacement snags and to provide nesting structure. When determining snag retention levels, consider land allocation, desired condition, landscape position, and site conditions (such as riparian areas and ridgetops) avoiding uniform distribution across large areas. During project-level planning, consider the following guidelines for large-snag retention:

- In westside mixed conifer and ponderosa pine types, retain four of the largest snags per acre.
- In the red fir forest type, retain six of the largest snags per acre.
- In westside hardwood ecosystems, retain four of the largest snags per acre (hardwood or conifer).
- Where standing live hardwood trees lack dead branches, retain six of the largest snags per acre to supplement wildlife needs for dead material.
- Use snags larger than 15 inches dbh to meet this guideline. Snags should be clumped and distributed irregularly across the treatment units. Consider leaving fewer snags strategically located in treatment areas within the WUI and DFPZs. While some snags will be lost due to hazard removal or use of prescribed fire, consider these potential losses during project planning to achieve desired snag retention levels.

Cultural Resources

Under Alternative B Cultural Resources will be protected from all activities using the *Standard Resource Protection Measures* set forth in the Regional 106 Compliance Programmatic Agreement (USDA 2001). All sites will be considered potentially eligible for the National Register and therefore will be protected until such time as an eligibility determination is made.

Archaeological sites will be afforded protection using the *Standard Resource Protection Measures* set forward in the Regional 106 Compliance Programmatic Agreement, (USDA 2001), as follows:

- Within site boundaries felled trees may be removed using only hand bucking and carrying.
- No skidding or tracking equipment shall be allowed within historic property boundaries.
- All activities must be monitored by qualified heritage specialists at time of removal.
- Flag and avoid sites.
- A map showing the location of sites in the Project Area will be provided to the Forest Service Project Manager.
- Sites will be monitored during and after the project.
- If additional heritage resources are identified during the project activities, all work shall stop in that area until the District Archaeologist assesses the situation.
- Historic sites within burn units must have fire lines placed around them so they are not burnt over.
- Linear sites may be crossed or bounded in areas where their features or characteristics clearly lack historic integrity.

Rationale for the Decision

My decision is based on meeting the need for the Proposed Action. The need for and purpose of the project is described in detail in the project EA. In addition the Grass Flat Project would contribute to fulfilling the long-term goals of the National Fire Plan by providing protection to rural communities at risk from wildfire on federally managed land. The Grass Flat Project would also meet the intent of the 2003 Healthy Forest Restoration Act by decreasing the wildfire risk to people, communities, watersheds, and other at-risk-lands through the construction of DFPZs, and provide safer areas to initiate fire suppression activities in the event a fire starts outside the DFPZ. (EA Chapter 1, page 1). My decision will benefit safety and scenic qualities within the Little Grass Valley Recreation Area to promote outdoor recreation.

I considered fulfilling the recommended HFQLG targets for addition Group Selection (GS) areas however resource constraints such as the visual requirements set forth under the Pacific Crest Trail agreement, archeology and historic concerns, and riparian/aquatic area and wildlife protection prevented further consideration.

Based on the comments we received Modified Alternative B was developed. While similar to Alternative B (the proposed action), concepts from the GTR-220 and GTR-237 were incorporated by retaining more acres of higher canopy cover (40 percent versus 25-35 percent over 281 acres) in CWHR 4D/4M habitats. A higher canopy cover provides opportunities for greater pine retention and recruitment as well as moves the landscape towards the desired condition. (EA Chapter 2, section 2.5 page 10).

The Forest Service was asked to develop an alternative based on the GTR-220. All action alternatives were developed incorporating concepts of the GTR-220 “An Ecosystem Management Strategy for Mixed-Conifer Forests” and GTR-237 “Managing Sierra Nevada Forests.”

Management plans should be explicit about maintaining current high-value habitat in sufficient amounts and distribution while at the same time treating other areas more heavily to accelerate developments of desired future conditions. For large-scale assessments of landscapes, it is often difficult to determine the optimal size and distribution of different forest conditions for the local vertebrate community. There are few references with active fire regimes, and the spatial configuration of habitat conditions in such landscapes has yet to be examined.

While research can suggest general principles for landscape-scale wildlife management, such as providing for connectivity and a mosaic of forest conditions (PSW GTR-237 - Hilty et. al 2006, Lindenmayer and Fisher 2006, Lindenmayer et. al 2008), specifics are generally lacking and will differ with different species and forest conditions. Lacking better information, a prudent approach may be to emulate the variation in forest conditions that could be expected to occur given the influence of local topographical conditions on fire frequency and intensity (PSW GTR-237 – North et.al 2010).

The Grass Flat Project meets the requirements to develop a noncommercial funding alternative under Alternative C, where the sole purpose is to achieve the fuels reduction element of the purpose and need and where all the proposed treatments are directed solely at reducing hazardous fuels. This initiative is in effect until the agency remedies the deficiencies of the programmatic 2004 Sierra Nevada Framework. Therefore, it is in place until a settlement is reached or a supplemental EIS is completed.

In July of 2003, a ROD was signed for the HFQLG FSEIS. It documented the results of an environmental analysis of the effects of alternative management strategies for maintenance of DFPZs within the HFQLG Pilot Project area. The HFQLG FSEIS and ROD, in combination with the original HFQLG Act FEIS and ROD, provide programmatic guidance for DFPZ construction and maintenance in the HFQLG Pilot Project area. The HFQLG FSEIS ROD calls for consideration of all practicable methods of vegetation control for site-specific projects.

Even if no maintenance is conducted in these DFPZs, the DFPZs should be effective for 10-15 years. In the natural stands, the DFPZs' effectiveness should not be seriously reduced for 10 to 15 years. DFPZs will retain many beneficial characteristics such as increase overstory crown spacing and reduced ladder fuels that will aid in fighting fire and reducing fire intensity and may be effective even beyond 10-15 years.

Long term DFPZ maintenance is outside the scope of this EA and would be addressed in another document as needed.

Public Involvement

The Feather River Ranger District has been collaborating with private land owners and the Plumas County Fire Safe Council to design and implement fuel reduction projects on public and private lands in the La Porte area annually since 2005.

To prepare for the Grass Flat Fuels Reduction Project, the district initiated a strategic plan of collaboration, as directed under HFRA to include the local residents in the development of the Proposed Action, and the alternatives, and to identify potential concerns related to the implementation of the project. As part of this process, the Feather River Ranger District Fuels Officer has maintained a direct line of communication and has worked diligently with the La Porte Pines County Club Homeowner Association by attending meetings and conducting site visits.

A meeting was held on March 11, 2010 in Quincy during the regular session of the Plumas Fire Safe Council Meeting. Attendees had the opportunity to comment and become more geographically oriented with the proposed project during that time.

A public meeting was held in LaPorte at the Fire House on August 7, 2010 to share the current status of the Grass Flat project with the local community. This meeting opens the 30-day comment period through September 7th. The project is proposed for implementation in spring of 2011.

A scoping packet was sent to those who expressed interest in the project, were directly affected by the project, or lived in the adjacent area. The legal notice to open the comment period for this project was published in the Feather River Bulletin, the newspaper of record, on December 14, 2011. The comment period remained open through January 13, 2012. Comments were received from the Sierra Forest Legacy (SFL) on January 13, 2012 and Frank Stewart, QLG Forester on January 10, 2012. (EA Chapter 1, section 1.5.1 page 13).

Timing of Implementation

Project implementation is proposed for spring 2013.

Finding of No Significant Impact Disclosure

The following is a summary of effects that were considered during the analysis process, not necessarily as issues, and not always totally quantifiable. All effects were determined to be consistent within the standards and guidelines identified in the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment ROD (2004), and the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group FEIS and ROD (1999 and 2003), and the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP).

The environmental assessment must disclose information necessary to support a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) to the environment. The following discussion is organized around the 10 Significance Criteria described at 40 CFR 1508.27. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse:

The Forest Service proposes to benefit the rural community of La Porte by reducing the risk of wildfires by modifying fuels, constructing DFPZs, and eliminating safety hazards to the public such as diseased trees within the recreational area surrounding the Little Grass Valley reservoir. Temporary adverse effects during implementation may determine the need for traffic control and to implement air pollution standards for burning operations.

2. Degree of effect on public health and safety:

The action alternatives are designed to eliminate diseased trees within the recreation area which may pose a hazard to forest visitors. Down woody material from past activities in the campground areas will be piled and burned or removed as biomass further opening up trails to the reservoir, eliminating obstacles, and improving views. Initially there may be short term impacts as alternate campgrounds will be closed during the implementation of the project which is unavoidable due to the high elevation and seasonal weather. Extensive scoping did not reveal any issues or concerns associated with public health. All interested and affected parties will continue to be informed throughout the decision making and implementation process.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas:

The Grass Flat project is adjacent to the Pacific Crest Trail and visual continuity will be an important aspect of the design. Care will be taken to not impact canopy levels in the CWHR size Class 5M and 5D. There are no prime farmlands or wild and scenic rivers in the project area. Cultural resources were identified during the development of the alternatives and monitoring and environmental commitments will be implemented during project construction to minimize the potential for adverse impacts to heritage resources. Riparian Management Objectives will be enforced to provide protection to sensitive riparian areas.

4. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial:

Short term uses are expected to change the human environment during prescribed burning and logging/hauling operations. Long term effects would not appreciably change the human environment after fuel reduction operations have concluded.

Public input regarding the Proposed Action has been solicited during an extensive project planning process, distribution of the project scoping packet and public meetings have not produced concerns regarding effects on the quality of the human environment.

5. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk.

The availability of natural resources contributes to the quality of life for many county residents. Many communities are closely tied to the forest through work and recreation. These communities are directly influenced by changes in the supply of resources produced from the forest, and by the forest production of firewood, game, scenic resources, and recreational opportunities. Implementation of the preferred alternative would cause no unavoidable or highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks other than the effects already stated.

6. Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:

Fuels reduction is an integral part of the *Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act*, mandated by Congress through 2012. The stated objectives within the Act are to both provide forest products to enhance rural community economic stability and provide wildfire protection to rural communities. Careful consideration is extended to each proposed project on an individual basis to ensure standards and guidelines are met for environmental protection.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts:

No individually or cumulatively significant impacts were identified for the preferred alternative. Any adverse impacts identified for the preferred alternative, in conjunction with any adverse impacts of other past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions will result in negligible to moderate impacts to natural and cultural resources.

8. Degree to which the action may adversely affect district, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources:

An intensive archeological inventory to identify districts, sites, or other properties eligible for listing to or included on the National Register of Historic Places was completed for this preferred alternative. No historic properties were identified within the project area.

All surveyed and inventoried cultural resource sites, including new sites discovered during operations will be protected from entry and excluded from any resource activities in compliance with the Preservation of American Antiquities Act, June 1906. The California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) will be consulted concerning proposed activities in the project area. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) will be consulted about measures to protect significant archeological sites from adverse effects, would any be identified. All significant and potentially significant Heritage resources within the scope of this project shall be protected from adverse effects through avoidance.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered and/or threatened species (TES) or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973:

No threatened and/or endangered species have been identified within the Grass Flat Project area. If, during the implementation of this project evidence of T&E species is determined, a qualified biologist will be called immediately to make the determination on the future of project implementation.

Forest Service Sensitive Species: It is the biologist's determination that the proposed activities within the Grass Flat Project area may affect individuals, but are not likely to result in a trend towards Federal listing or loss of viability. Direct effects are expected to be unlikely, and indirect and cumulative adverse effects are expected to be low by adhering to management directions, standards and guidelines, Best Management Practices, mitigations, and resource protection measures.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with a determination that the preferred alternative is “not likely to adversely affect” endangered or threatened species and critical habitat (Letter dated Dec. 23, 2002).

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local environmental protection law:

The preferred alternative violates no federal, state, or local environmental protection laws. All populations are provided the opportunity to comment before decisions are rendered on, are allowed to share in the benefits of, are not excluded from, and are not affected in a disproportionately high and adverse manner, by government programs and activities affecting protection of the environment.

Signature and Date

Date _____

Earl W. Ford
Forest Supervisor
Plumas National Forest