



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service

May 2013



Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Julius Park Vegetation Management Project

Vernal Ranger District, Ashley National Forest
Uintah County, Utah

Uintah Meridian, Township 3 North, Range 1 East, all or portions of sections 7, 8, 17,
18, 20, 28, and 29
and Salt Lake Meridian, Township 2 South, Range 18 West, portions of sections 3, 4, 9,
10, 15, 16, and 22



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Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The project area and environs have experienced substantial mountain pine beetle caused tree mortality. This, in combination with the additional accumulation of broken tree tops from a heavy, wet snowfall event that occurred a few years ago, has contributed to high fuel loading in the area. Also, many of the regenerating stands in the area are currently susceptible to infestation by lodgepole pine dwarf mistletoe.

The Forest identified a need to recover the economic value of dead and dying trees in this area, to reduce fuel loading, and to maintain tree growth and vigor to help reduce loss from damaging biotic agents and environmental events. Although most of the mortality occurred over 5 years ago, many of the trees still retain some economic value. The area is popular for numerous recreational pursuits, and high fuel loading creates a public safety concern for recreationists in the area. There is substantial potential for continued mortality and reduced tree growth due to forest pests and similar weather events.

The purpose of this project is to improve long-term forest health and maintain ecosystem functions (including historic fire regimes) by influencing tree species composition; moderating stand densities; and adjusting stand structures and spatial patterns, while protecting, maintaining, or improving water and soil resources.

Decision

I have decided to implement the proposed action, as analyzed in the April 10, 2013 Julius Park Vegetation Management Project Environmental Assessment (EA), to meet the above-identified purpose of and need for the project. The action will involve vegetation management treatments on 764 acres in a project area of approximately 1,057 acres in size and is described below. All acreages are approximate. See maps in Appendix A to the EA for a spatial depiction of planned treatments. ***The project design criteria and mitigation measures listed on pages 6-13 of the EA will be implemented as part of this decision.***

Shaded Fuel Breaks (211 acres): We will treat vegetation in these areas to approach fuel and fire characteristics for a fuel model 8¹. Most of the area is currently a fuel model 10². Partial removal of both live and dead understory vegetation will occur. Additionally, pruning of branches on remaining trees in the fuel break from ground level up to a height of 8 feet may also occur. We will reduce dead and down fuels to approximately 10 tons per acre, through a combination of prescribed fire treatment, chipping, or removal. Vegetation treatment will include dead and damaged tree removal; additionally, mostly sapling and pole size trees will be removed to reduce the residual tree density to 180 to 300 trees per acre.

¹ Fuel model 8 is a timber group fuel model characterized by slow-burning ground fires with low flame lengths, although fires may encounter occasional heavy fuel concentrations that can display more active fire behavior. This fuel model only poses a fire hazard under severe weather conditions involving high temperatures, low humidities, and high winds. (Anderson 1982)

² Fuel model 10 is a timber group fuel model characterized by greater fire intensity than the other timber litter models. Heavy amounts of dead and down material are present. Crowning out, spotting, and torching are more frequent in this fuel situation, leading to potential fire control difficulties. (Anderson 1982)

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Clearcutting (26 acres): This is a regeneration treatment in small units where there has been heavy mortality, where there are few vigorous trees, and where there is little or insufficient regeneration present. Clearcut units will be limited to 10 acres in size.

Overstory Removal (148 acres): This is a regeneration treatment in areas where a manageable understory of seedlings or saplings is already present. We will remove the overstory to promote the development of the understory and to reduce the future impact of dwarf mistletoe. The overstory trees in these areas are generally scattered, diseased, damaged, have poor form, or are of poor health and vigor.

Improvement Cutting (92 acres): This is an intermediate treatment to remove damaged, poor form, and poor vigor trees. Some dead and diseased trees may also be removed. Many of the trees to be removed have dead tops, broken tops, and forked tops. This treatment will maintain a two-storied or uneven-aged stand structure and a mixed species composition of lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce. This treatment will permit the future use of either even-aged or uneven-aged silvicultural systems depending on management objectives.

Sanitation and Salvage Cutting (48 acres): This is an intermediate treatment to remove dead and diseased trees. Dwarf mistletoe is the most prevalent tree disease in this area. We do not anticipate the proposed treatment would result in a widespread regeneration event, although the harvest may be heavy enough in small isolated areas to create conditions favorable for lodgepole pine to regenerate.

Commercial Thinning (215 acres): This is an intermediate treatment designed to promote individual tree growth, good tree form, and tree vigor by managing stand densities. We will remove trees most frequently from the intermediate and suppressed crown classes to reduce the residual tree density to 120 to 300 trees per acre; live trees removed will generally range in diameter at breast height (DBH) from 2.5 to 10.0 inches. Some dead and damaged trees may also be removed.

Pre-Commercial Thinning (89 acres): The purpose of this treatment is to promote individual tree growth, tree form, and vigor by managing stand densities. This treatment will follow an overstory removal treatment on approximately 65 acres and will be the only treatment on the remaining 24 acres. Trees generally less than 6 inches DBH will be removed to reduce the tree density to approximately 300 trees per acre.

A total of up to 1 mile of short sections of temporary road may need to be constructed to get to landings. We will identify specific locations for any temporary roads during implementation in association with the identification of landing areas. We will close and rehabilitate all temporary roads upon project completion. Closure techniques will involve blocking off access with boulders and dropped trees and slash. We will re-seed if necessary.

Approximately 293 acres within the project area is deferred from any kind of treatment at this time. These areas may be treated at some future time, but we have no proposal to harvest trees or manipulate the vegetation in these areas in the foreseeable future. Any possible future treatment of these deferred areas will be covered in subsequent analysis and decision documents in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

We expect this project will achieve the following objectives.

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- 1) Improve the resilience and adaptive capacity of the forest stands within the project area.
- 2) Promote tree vigor and form to minimize the future impacts of forest pests, such as mountain pine beetles and lodgepole pine dwarf mistletoe, and to minimize damage from abiotic factors, such as wind and snow.
- 3) Reduce the risk of uncharacteristic or unacceptable wildfires by reducing hazardous fuel loading.
- 4) Maintain or improve long-term range conditions, water quality, and watershed conditions.

Other Alternatives Considered

No unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources were identified, therefore no additional alternatives are analyzed in this document (36 CFR 220.7[b][2][i]). One respondent to scoping commented that an interpretive sign could be erected in lieu of implementing the project. Increased interpretation could and may be done alongside the proposed action as well as if no action is taken, however, as interpretation in and of itself does not fulfill the purpose of and need for the project and is outside the scope of the project, we did not consider the erection of a forest health interpretive sign as a stand-alone alternative. Also, the no action alternative, although it aided the analysis, would not help to achieve the purpose of and need for the project.

Public Involvement

The proposal has been listed in the Forest's quarterly schedule of proposed actions (SOPA) since the fourth quarter of 2011. We provided the proposal to the public and other agencies for comment during a 60-day scoping period ending April 1st, 2012, and during a 30-day comment period on the EA ending May 17th, 2013. We received a total of eight letters in response to scoping (see Appendix B to the EA for our responses to these comments) and one supportive letter during the comment period. The input provided by interested publics and agencies who commented during scoping aided the interdisciplinary team's development of issues, as well as design criteria and mitigation measures, in this analysis.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering both the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following.

Context

The setting of this project is localized with implications to the immediate area only. Short-term adverse effects will be mitigated through implementation of the design criteria and mitigation measures developed for the project. These include such measures as excluding equipment from riparian zones according to designated buffers; completely blocking and allowing any temporary roads to rehabilitate following project completion; treating slash, cull, and butt logs to prevent spruce and pine engraver beetle population increases; instituting noxious weed mitigation measures; and ensuring adequate retention of snags, downed logs, and coarse

woody debris for wildlife and ecological function (see pages 6-13 of the EA for a complete list). Long-term adverse effects are not expected.

Intensity

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse: A significant effect may exist even if the federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Both beneficial and adverse effects have been taken into consideration when making a determination of significance. There will be neither significant beneficial nor significant adverse effects.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

We expect the creation of shaded fuel breaks will improve safety in the area by allowing for safe egress of Forest visitors from Paradise Campground and along Forest Road 104 (Paradise Park Road), as well as by creating a situation where firefighting resources will be able to more successfully directly attack and suppress wildland fires in the area if needed. This project may also improve the safety of the area for hikers and hunters, as there will be less risk of getting hit by a falling snag. However, this positive impact is localized and, given the small treatment area, is not significant.

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 project area does not contain any unique characteristics that will be significantly impacted by the project. The three National Register eligible heritage sites in the area will be avoided with 100-foot buffers. Equipment will be excluded from riparian zones adjacent to Paradise Creek (300 feet) and intermittent and ephemeral streams (100 feet); Paradise Park and Julius Park reservoirs (to be determined and marked on the ground by the district hydrologist prior to project implementation; ponds, meadows, potholes, and wetlands (150 feet); and open ditch sections of the Mosby Canal (100 feet). None of the project lies within inventoried roadless or potential wilderness areas, although a portion of the project lies adjacent to inventoried roadless and potential wilderness. We expect any effects on wilderness or roadless characteristics (such as a temporary increase in noise) will be negligible.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Based on the limited context of the project and on my review of public comments and the environmental analysis, I do not find the effects of this project to be highly controversial. There is no substantial scientific controversy over the effects of the proposal.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The risks associated with this project are recognized, familiar, and acceptable (EA, *Environmental Consequences* section, pages 17-51). The analysis is based on the best available data and science regarding the effects of timber harvest and on our extensive experience with this type of project.

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6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

This project is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects because the action is routine in nature and is neither precedent-setting nor are significant effects expected from similar actions (see EA, *Environmental Consequences* section, pages 17-51). Any proposed future project must be evaluated on its own merits and effects. The interdisciplinary team analyzed the project in consideration of the best available science on the effects of vegetation management on other resources.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

There will be no cumulatively significant impacts (see EA, *Environmental Consequences* section, pages 17-51).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

No historic properties will be affected by this action (EA, pages 27-28). The three National Register eligible sites in the area will be avoided and protected.

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

The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as described in the EA. We reached a “no effect” determination for all federally listed species, with the exception of the Canada lynx and North American wolverine, for which we reached a “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” determination (EA, pages 40-43). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with these determinations.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The action will not violate federal, state, or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment and meets the disclosure requirements of NEPA. The action is consistent with the Ashley National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) as summarized in the EA (pages 14-16).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to implement a vegetation management project in the Julius Park project area is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives. The proposed action is allowable in the management prescriptions in which the project area occurs (f and n).

To the best of my knowledge, this decision is in compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies. Some of the principal laws and regulations I considered include the National Forest Management Act (NFMA); National Environmental Policy Act; the Endangered Species Act; Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670); Clean Air Act; Clean Water Act; Wetlands

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(Executive Order 11990); Floodplains (Executive Order 11988); Migratory Birds (Executive Order 13186); Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898); National Historic Preservation Act; Archaeological Resources Protection Act; and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

Specifically in relation to NFMA, this project meets the following requirements (as specified under 16 U.S.C. 1604[g][3][E]; see also FSM 1921.12a).

1. Soil, slope, or other watershed conditions will not be irreversibly damaged (EA, pages 33-40).
2. There is assurance that the lands can be adequately restocked within 5 years after final regeneration harvest (see forested vegetation specialist report in project record).
3. Streams, streambanks, shorelines, lakes, wetlands, and other bodies of water are protected from detrimental changes in water temperatures, blockages of water courses, and deposits of sediment where harvests are likely to seriously and adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat (EA, pages 17-19 and 38-40).
4. The harvesting system to be used is not selected primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output of timber.

In reference to the 26 acres of clearcutting that is designed to regenerate an even-aged stand of timber:

1. The type of cut prescribed is the optimum method and is appropriate to meeting the objectives and requirements of the relevant plan (16 U.S.C. 1604[g][3][F][i]). The stand diagnosis (Forest Service 2009) in the project record documents clearcutting as the optimum treatment method for those stands planned for clearcut harvest. These stands have heavy tree mortality and trees heavily infected with dwarf mistletoe. Removing the infected overstory will reduce the risk of infection to lodgepole pine regeneration as it becomes established.
2. The interdisciplinary review has been completed and the potential environmental, biological, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts have been assessed on each advertised sale area and the cutting methods are consistent with the multiple use of the general area (16 U.S.C. 1604[g][3][F][ii]). See *Environmental Consequences* (pages 17-51) section of EA.
3. Cut blocks, patches, or strips are shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain (16 U.S.C. 1604[g][3][F][iii]). The planned cut blocks are on gentle slopes approximately 600 feet to ½ mile apart in areas of natural stand deterioration (small and irregular shape). See project map in Appendix A to the EA.
4. Cuts are carried out according to the maximum size limit requirements for areas to be cut during one harvest operation (FSM 1921.12e). There is no NFMA or FSM limit for opening sizes of areas harvested because of catastrophes such as fire, insect and disease attack, or windstorm; however, our current Forest Plan only allows opening sizes of up to 40 acres in the applicable management areas for this project. We will be well under 40 acres, as we are limiting clearcut units to 10 acres in size for this particular project (EA, page 5).
5. Timber cuts are carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, aesthetic resources, cultural and historical resources, and the regeneration of timber resources (see EA, *Design Features* section, pages 6-13 and *Environmental Consequences* section, pages 17-51).
6. The planned clearcut units are harvested according to requirements for culmination of

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mean annual increment of growth (CMAI) (16 U.S.C. 1604[m]; FSM 1921.12f; FHS 1909.12, ch. 60). See the forested vegetation specialist report and the stand diagnosis (Forest Service 2009) in the project record.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

On March 27, 2013, a final rule revising 36 CFR Part 218 (pre-decisional objection procedures) was published in the Federal Register and became effective upon that publication date. However, as we have been identifying the Julius Park Vegetation Management Project as a 36 CFR 215 project in our quarterly schedules of proposed actions (SOPAs) since October 2011, we will proceed under applicable transition language in order to complete this analysis using the 36 CFR 215 appeal procedures as the relevant administrative review process.

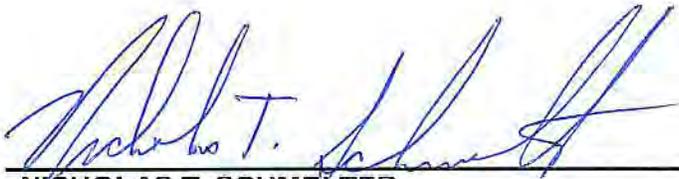
However, as we only received one comment during the comment period on the EA and it was supportive of the project, there are no parties with standing to appeal; therefore, this decision is not subject to appeal.

Implementation Date

Implementation of this project may begin at any time following publication of the notice of this decision in the *Vernal Express* (expected Wednesday, May 29th).

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, you may contact James McRae, Timber Management Officer, or Lesley Tullis, NEPA Coordinator, both located at the Ashley National Forest Supervisor's Office, 355 North Vernal Avenue, Vernal, UT 84078. Their contact information can be found on the title page of this document.



NICHOLAS T. SCHMELTER
District Ranger
Vernal Ranger District
Ashley National Forest

May 23, 2013

Date

Literature Cited

Anderson, Hal E. 1982. Aids to determining fuel models for estimating fire behavior. A publication of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group. Gen. Tech. Report INT-122.

Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ashley National Forest. 1986. Land and resource management plan for the Ashley National Forest. Available online at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/ashley/landmanagement/planning/?cid=stelprdb5277265>.

Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ashley National Forest. 2009. Silvicultural diagnosis for the Julius Park vegetation management project. 2009. Prepared by James McRae, Timber Management Officer. July.

Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ashley National Forest. 2013. Environmental assessment for the Julius Park vegetation management project. Available online at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ashley/landmanagement/projects>.

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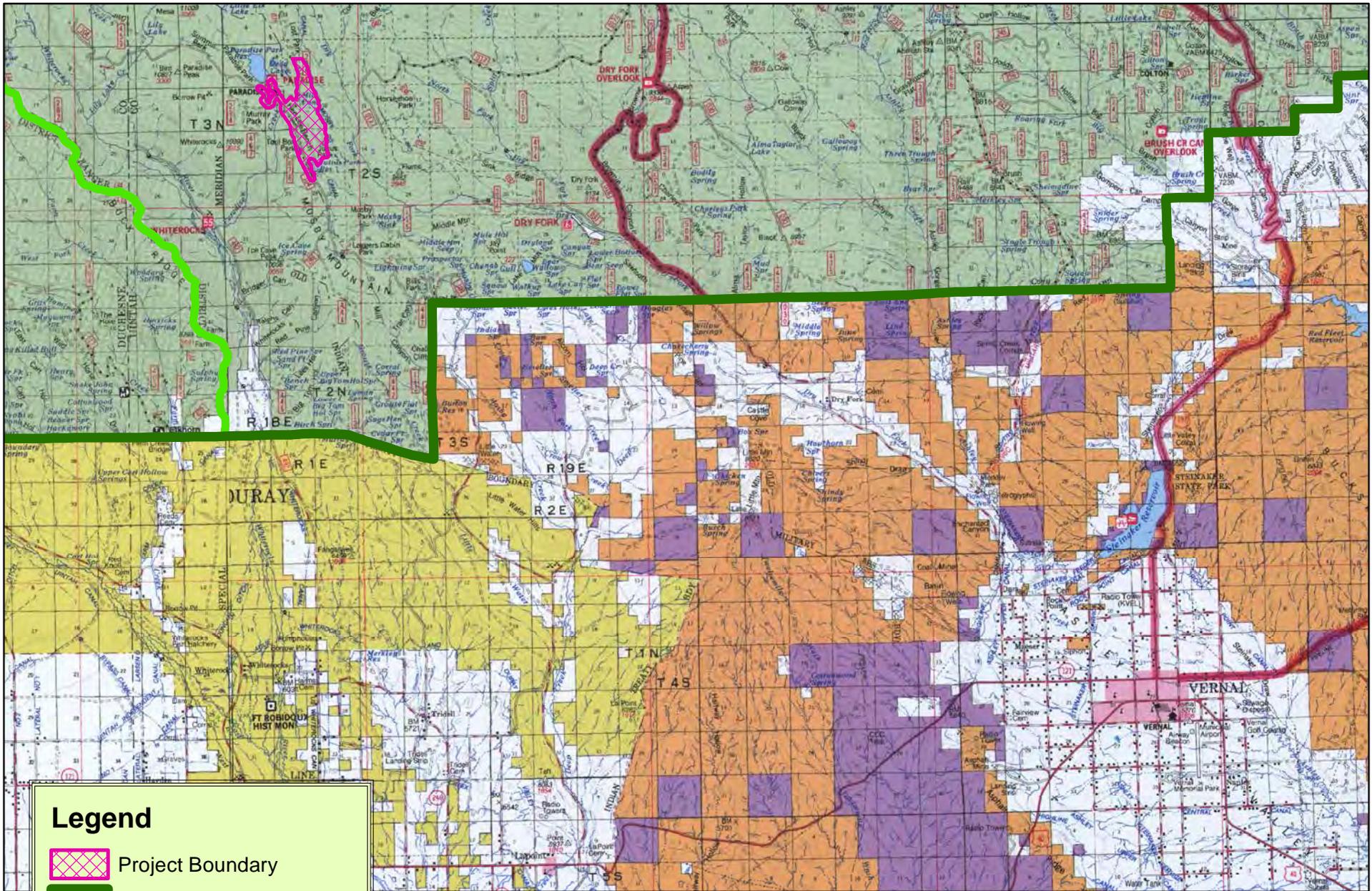
**TDD = telecommunications device for the deaf*

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Vicinity Map Ashley National Forest Vernal Ranger District

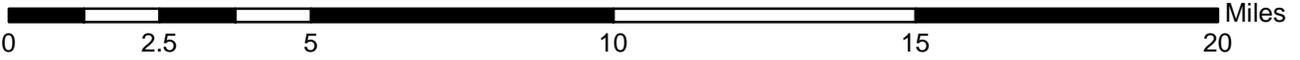


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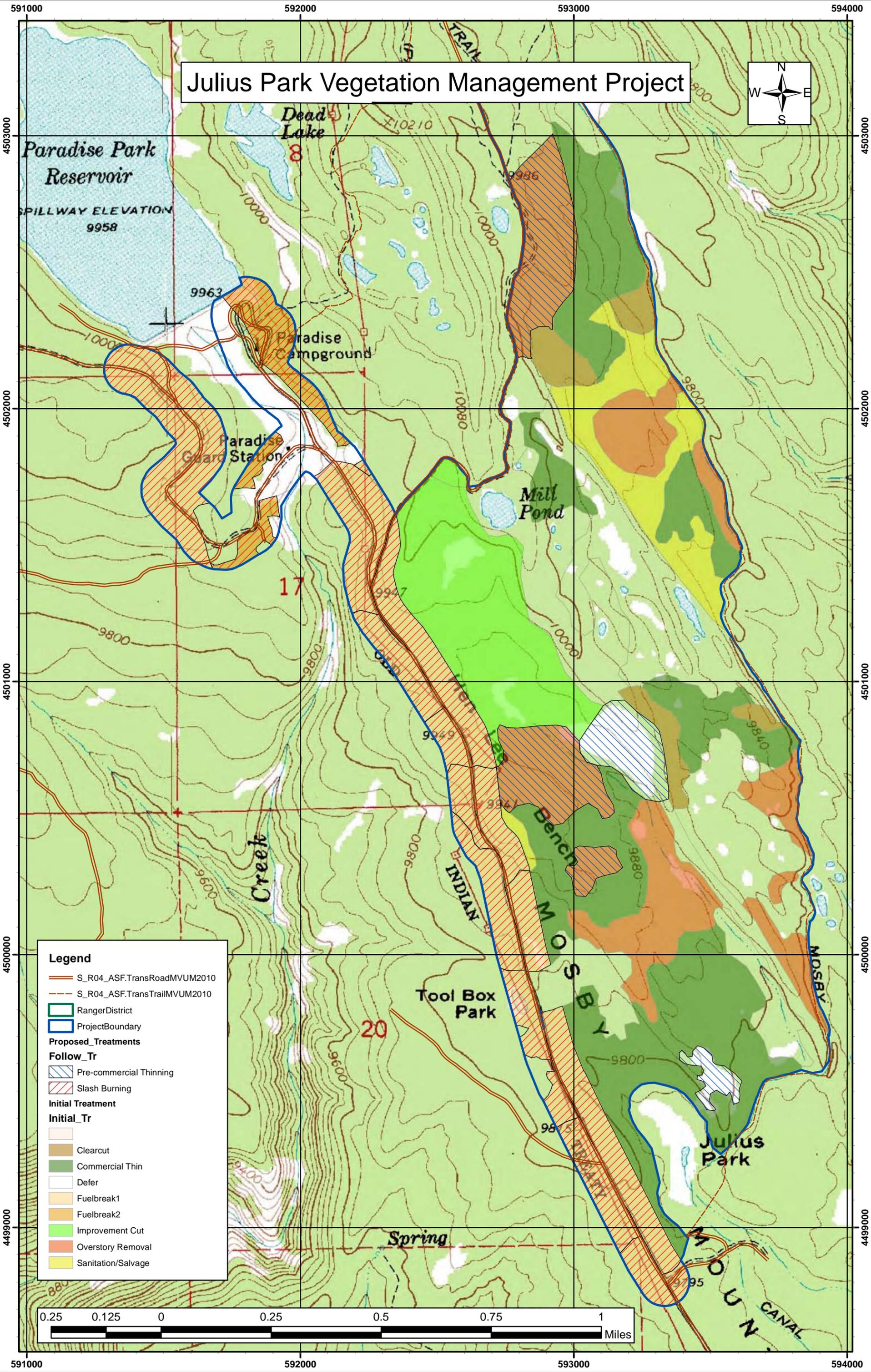
Legend

-  Project Boundary
-  Forest Boundary
-  Ranger District Boundary



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Julius Park Vegetation Management Project



Legend

- S_R04_ASF.TransRoadMVUM2010
- S_R04_ASF.TransTrailMVUM2010
- RangerDistrict
- ProjectBoundary

Proposed_Treatments

Follow_Tr

- Pre-commercial Thinning
- Slash Burning

Initial Treatment

Initial_Tr

- Clearcut
- Commercial Thin
- Defer
- Fuelbreak1
- Fuelbreak2
- Improvement Cut
- Overstory Removal
- Sanitation/Salvage

