



United States Department of Agriculture

Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration

Decision Notice



Forest Service

Nebraska
National Forests
and Grasslands

Pine Ridge
Ranger District—
Dawes County,
Nebraska

2014

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Table of Contents

Decision	2
Rationale for Choosing the Proposed Action.....	2
Project Location	3
Action to Be Implemented.....	3
<i>Hazardous Fuel Reduction and Prescribed Fire</i>	3
<i>Thinning</i>	3
<i>Understory Vegetation Control</i>	4
<i>Meadow Enhancement</i>	4
<i>Range Improvement</i>	4
<i>Riparian, Hardwood or Dry-Draw Ecosystem Enhancement</i>	4
<i>Upland Shrub or Hardwood Tree Planting</i>	5
<i>Other Treatments</i>	5
Public Involvement (36 CFR 220.7(c) (3)).....	5
Collaboration.....	6
Incorporated by reference (36 CFR 220.7(c) (4))	6
Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations Applicable to the Decision (36 CFR 220.7(c) (5))..	7
<i>American Indian Tribal Consultation</i>	7
<i>Clean Air Act</i>	7
<i>Clean Water Act and Nebraska State Water Quality Standards</i>	7
<i>Endangered Species Act</i>	7
<i>Executive Order 11988 – Flood Plain Management</i>	8
<i>Executive Order 11990 – Protection of Wetlands</i>	8
<i>Executive Order 12898 – Environmental Justice</i>	8
<i>National Historic Preservation Act</i>	8
Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).....	8
Objection Opportunity (36 CFR 218)	8
Implementation Date (36 CFR 215.9)	9
Contact Information (36 CFR 220.7(c)(8))	9
Signature of Responsible Official – Date of Decision.....	9

Decision

Based upon my review of the Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration Project Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), it is my decision to implement the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action will reduce fuel loading and improve other broad-scale desired conditions through a combination of thinning, prescribed burning, mowing, fencing, planting, and seeding across approximately 22,366 acres.

The Proposed Action will be implemented as described in the environmental assessment (pages 4-8), including all integrated design features (environmental assessment, pages 8-13), except as described below, with the understanding that management requires some flexibility to allow for the use of new tools or treatment strategies that will meet project objectives, while remaining within the sideboards analyzed as part of the interdisciplinary process.

Changes to the Proposed Action:

- All planting of ponderosa pine seedlings initially proposed under the Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration project has been removed and added to a separate project called West Ash Reforestation. That project addresses pine planting needs caused by the 2012 fires at a scale and effect broader than the limited artificial reforestation work initially proposed under Pine Ridge. West Ash now comprises about 1,900 total acres.
- All other refinements consist of finalizing the project design features identified to conserve particular resources, protect environmental values, or avoid or mitigate adverse effects. These design features are integrated with planned treatments of the revised proposed action, as shown in the environmental assessment.

Rationale for Choosing the Proposed Action

The project is largely aimed at improving undesired conditions created by the 2006 Spotted Tail Fire (east of U.S. 385) and the 2012 West Ash Fire (west of U.S. 385) and reducing the threat of stand-replacing wildfires in adjacent areas not impacted by those large fire events.

My decision on this project is based on how well the proposed management actions met the purpose and need, along with consideration of the public concerns that were raised during the scoping process. I considered the Forest Plan standards and guidelines, the intent of the National Fire Plan, and the interests and values of the public.

I believe that the proposed action best meets the needs identified for this project (environmental assessment, page 2). Implementing this project will:

- Reduce hazardous standing dead fuels;
- Decrease the density of pine stands to reduce the potential for large-scale, active crown fires;
- Reduce ladder fuels;
- Reduce the accumulation of surface fuels;
- Reduce fine fuels;

- Implement treatments in cooperation with community wildfire protection partners and seek to complement hazardous fuel reduction activities already completed or being performed on neighboring lands;
- Improve forage, streamside vegetation, recreation and wildlife habitat consistent with broad-scale desired conditions of the management plan

Project Location

The Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration project is located on national forest system lands in Dawes County, Nebraska, immediately south of Chadron. It is roughly bisected by the Highway 385 corridor (see figure 1 in the environmental assessment on page 1).

Action to Be Implemented

Hazardous Fuel Reduction and Prescribed Fire

Treating fuels to reduce fire hazards involves three types of operations as follows:

1. Piling hazardous woody fuel residues from past wildfires or management activities using mechanized or non-mechanized equipment, and burning or chipping the woody debris piles
2. Approximately 42 miles of roadside mowing along open Forest Service roads using mechanized equipment
3. Prescribed fire, both broadcast burning and “jackpot” burning woody fuel concentrations, including approximately 36 miles of fireline construction using mechanized or non-mechanized equipment, to help ensure the prescribed fire stays within desired areas

These operations may occur separately or in combination according to location. They are broad-scale and ongoing in nature, to be carried out over many different areas and timeframes involving the next five or more years. Areas to be treated will be selected and scheduled in annual operating plans that consider the following general order of priorities:

- National Forest System lands adjacent to residential or developed areas
- National Forest System lands adjacent to non-residential private property
- National Forest System lands adjacent to Forest Service or other public roads
- Interior National Forest System grazing lands with heavy fuel loads
- Interior National Forest System forest lands with mixed fire effects (partial stand mortality) from recent fires
- Interior National Forest System lands with heavy fuel loads on steep slopes requiring special design considerations to conserve soil, plants, or other resources

Additionally, all treatment-selection and scheduling will be done in cooperation with community wildfire protection partners and seek to complement hazardous fuel reduction activities already completed or being performed on neighboring lands.

Thinning

Thinning consists of reducing forest stand density to a target level, under a detailed silvicultural plan to achieve stated objectives. In this case, objectives will include moderating potential wildfire intensity and limiting its potential adverse effects in any currently “green” forest areas unaffected by the 2006 or 2012 fires. Objectives will also include making progress toward desired stand-level and broad-landscape forest

vegetation conditions identified in the management plan. In addition to thinning “green” areas, some thinning will occur in mixed-severity 2012 wildfire areas that comprise both live and dead-standing trees.

Operationally, thinning involves the following activities:

1. Cutting and removing live and dead trees with mechanized and non-mechanized equipment
2. Piling harvested material and burning it
3. Lopping-and-scattering smaller cut trees and limbs
4. Developing temporary roads as required for vehicle and equipment access to treatment units and for removal of timber products

Thinning and hazardous fuel reduction operations may sometimes occur in combination, based on location and timing.

Understory Vegetation Control

This treatment focuses on areas that have already been thinned; that is, where the density of the main or high forest canopy is already reduced to a targeted stand basal area. The treatment removes understory or low-level pine seedlings-saplings (trees 0 to 5 inches in diameter at breast height) that are undesired because they overstock the stands in question, contribute to potential crown fire initiation, and compete with desired grass forage for livestock and wildlife. The treatment involves cutting designated live trees with mechanized or non-mechanized equipment and lopping-and-scattering cut trees or slash. Alternatively, slash may be piled and burned.

Meadow Enhancement

Meadow enhancement consists of removing pine trees encroaching into meadows where the desired condition is an open pine savannah with vigorous grass forage for permitted grazing and wildlife. It involves cutting designated live trees with mechanized and non-mechanized equipment and piling-and-burning or lopping-and-scattering slash.

Range Improvement

This treatment is aimed at maintaining or improving the quality of grasslands and their forage-production for permitted grazing. It involves two types of operations that may occur separately or in combination, according to location:

1. Future construction of 4.5 miles of exterior (property line) fences, and repairing 2.0 miles of existing exterior and interior fences, using mechanized or non-mechanized equipment, in order to better manage permitted grazing operations
2. Seeding native grasses and forbs, using machine or hand methods, as needed to rehabilitate or improve with appropriate cover and forage, areas such as forest thinning units, burn-pile sites, prescribed burn units, 2012 wildfire areas that have not naturally recovered or that currently support noxious weed infestations to be reduced via chemical spraying prior to seeding

Riparian, Hardwood or Dry-Draw Ecosystem Enhancement

This treatment seeks to improve plant diversity and wildlife habitat in riparian, hardwood or dry-draw corridors. The favored plants will be hardwood trees, including quaking aspen where it naturally occurs, and various native shrub species. Detailed plans will be developed at the time of implementation to achieve silvicultural objectives by location.

Operationally, the treatment may involve cutting designated live trees or parts of trees with chainsaws to selectively remove storm damage and encroaching conifers. Additional activities would include lopping-and-scattering small cut trees or limbs (slash), hand-piling and burning slash, hand-planting desired species, and protecting planted or naturally occurring seedlings with shelters or fencing.

Upland Shrub or Hardwood Tree Planting

On upland sites including within thinning units, shrub planting may occur in order to enhance the shrubby component of forest ecosystems for wildlife cover and foraging. This may encompass up to 5,000 acres, depending upon how the shrub component of the treatment units responds after proposed activities are completed.

Additionally, there may be up to 400 acres of tree planting for wildlife habitat enhancement within the upland ecosystems. These plantings would focus on providing hard or soft mast forage for a variety of wildlife species by planting mainly hardwood species.

These planting operations may employ hand or machine methods.

Other Treatments

Noxious Weed Control

This treatment seeks to control or reduce infestations of noxious weeds or nonnative invasive plant species that have been located and documented along roads and within grasslands or forest stands of the project area. Treatment operations may involve one or more of the following methods: herbicide treatment; manual or mechanical methods such as hand-pulling, clipping, digging or mowing; or biological control agents.

Road Closure

In order to curtail an ongoing erosion problem and protect soil and water resources, the Forest Service plans to permanently close to motorized vehicle traffic Forest Road 765. This road is approximately 0.5 miles in length and currently makes multiple crossings of a tributary to Dead Horse Creek. The closure is expected to result in natural vegetation recovery and stabilization of the stream banks and bed at the crossings sites.

The closure will be implemented by erecting a sign notifying the public, and by placing heavy woody debris on portions of the road surface. Additionally, trail 221 will be extended north to connect with Forest Road 702, bypassing and replacing the vacated road 765 on a more suitable upland route.

Public Involvement (36 CFR 220.7(c) (3))

On May 23, 2014, the project proposal and invitation to comment was issued and mailed to approximately 90 interested individuals, organizations, state and federal agencies, tribes, and congressional offices.

Under the project purpose and need for action summarized above, the proposal recommended approximately 22,366 acres of land and resource management treatments within a gross project area of 35,259 acres. Proposed treatments consisted of hazardous fuel reduction, thinning, understory vegetation removal, meadow enhancement, range improvement, reforestation, and streamside habitat improvement. Treatment methods and integrated measures to conserve natural resources or protect the human environment were generally described. The full proposal and cover letter are in the project record.

On June 5, 2014 the Pine Ridge Ranger District hosted a public meeting in Chadron to introduce and take comments on the proposal. The meeting was conducted in an open-house setting, in which neighboring landowners, lessees, and partner organizations conversed informally with Forest Service staff that was on hand to explain the proposed treatments, go over maps, and discuss ways to leverage positive outcomes for all interests. Participants came and went over the four-hour event. Some provided specific written comments that have been considered to make refinements to the proposal and determine the scope of the environmental review.

The opportunity to comment ended on Friday June 27, 2014. Overall, nine parties commented in writing and one by telephone. Information, ideas, or concerns conveyed by the comments were considered relevant if they appeared to address natural resource conditions or human environmental values related to the proposed action. Forest Service review of the comments found they contributed to, or advocated for, certain themes, as follows (in alphabetical order):

- Adequate reforestation of burned areas
- Adequate retention of coarse woody debris
- Consideration of alternatives to broadcast burning
- Effectiveness of proposed treatments
- Partnership and ongoing collaboration
- Prevention or control of non-native plant invasion
- Protection of important archaeological sites or historic properties
- Protection of unburned areas from wildfire
- Wildlife conservation in conjunction with burning or other practices

Many of these themes reinforced project-design features and applicable standards embodied by the proposal. Some indicated a need for the Forest Service to immediately clarify or improve aspects of its planned activities; this was done via an update letter to commenters sent July 15, 2014. Finally, all relevant comments have been used as criteria for the environmental analysis, to determine whether the proposed action and its integrated conservation and protection measures are adequate, and make changes or additions where necessary.

Collaboration

In addition to goals and objectives of the management plan, the Pine Ridge Area Community Wildfire Protection Plan–Update 2013 forms an important basis on which this project is developed. The planned treatment of current fuel hazards; their identification, location, and priority; as well as treatments aimed at long-term management of the national forest and grassland resources, are all intended to serve cooperative goals of the wildfire protection plan and complement the work of wildfire protection partners in the area. Wildfire hazard reduction, risk management, and direct fire suppression strategies should all benefit as a result of implementing the planned treatments.

Incorporated by reference (36 CFR 220.7(c) (4))

My decision incorporates by reference the following documents:

- USDA Forest Service. 2014. Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration Project Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact. October. 21 pages.

- USDA Forest Service. 2001 as amended 2009. Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations Applicable to the Decision (36 CFR 220.7(c) (5))

This action complies with the Land and Resource Management Plan and does not violate Federal, State, or local law requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (Pine Ridge Restoration Project Environmental Assessment, page 2).

American Indian Tribal Consultation

The proposed action and invitation to comment was sent to potentially interested American Indian Tribes. No requests for consultation were received.

Clean Air Act

Activities to be implemented in the Proposed Action will be coordinated to meet the requirements for the 1977 Clean Air Act and the Nebraska Environmental Quality Act.

Clean Water Act and Nebraska State Water Quality Standards

Activities associated with the Proposed Action will comply with all applicable State water quality standards. All temporary roads will be designed in accordance with applicable Best Management Practices and engineering standards.

Endangered Species Act

The Proposed Action as approved with conditions by this decision is consistent with the Endangered Species Act. The Forest Service, with concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has determined that the proposed action would have no effect on current federally listed species.

The northern myotis (*Myotis septentrionalis*) is proposed for federal listing in the spring of 2015 as endangered across its range. This includes Dawes County, Nebraska, and encompasses the Nebraska National Forest near Chadron, NE (USFWS 2014). The Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands are highly supportive of bat conservation which has been demonstrated through the many agreements and permits that have been issued to conduct bat surveys across the Forests and Grasslands over the last couple of decades, including several on the Pine Ridge Ranger District. One such agreement was developed in 2012 with the University of Nebraska–Kearney to conduct bat surveys on the Pine Ridge Ranger District, and professors representing all three branches of the University of Nebraska (Kearney, Lincoln, and Omaha) have conducted several surveys within the project area over the past 2 years. Survey methods have included the use of mist nets and acoustic recording devices. Although suitable forested habitat with an abundance of prey is present for roosting and foraging within the project area, the northern myotis has not been identified through mist net surveys (Geluso 2014). The northern myotis is considered to be relatively easy to capture with mist nets in areas of Nebraska where it is known to occur (Geluso 2014). Based on recent surveys, the northern myotis is considered a recent arrival to the Pine Ridge region of northwestern Nebraska, likely coming from a population in the Black Hills of South Dakota. “Although the northern myotis appears to be a recent arrival to eastern parts of the Pine Ridge (Sheridan County), our acoustic and mist netting surveys demonstrate it is presently absent or limited in abundance throughout the western portion of the region in Dawes and Sioux counties” (Geluso 2014). There has only been one positive acoustic recording of northern myotis occurring in Dawes County at Fort Robinson State Park (near the White River and west of the project area), but it is highly likely that this was a false positive identified by the acoustic surveys for two reasons. The first is this call was not

identified by other acoustic recording devices within the same vicinity; and second, it is possible that variant clutter calls were recorded from little brown bats (a species abundant in the area) or another species of *Myotis* (Geluso 2014).

The main threat to the survival of the northern myotis is the outbreak of white-nose syndrome, and not forest management. Design criteria for this project utilizes the Standards and Guidelines for bats that are set forth in the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan and the recommendations set forth by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a memorandum pertaining to the northern myotis dated May 12, 2014. These measures will be applied through the implementation of the Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration project where appropriate. Based on recent survey data (Geluso 2014), the northern myotis is not suspected to be in the project area at this time, but current monitoring efforts will continue in cooperation with the University of Nebraska–Kearney and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. In addition we expect a graduate student from the University of Nebraska–Kearney to begin research on bats in the Pine Ridge area within the next year. Should any of these survey or research efforts identify the presence of the northern myotis in or near the project area, or if the species known range is extended west of the project area, the Forest Service will revisit the effects analysis for this species.

Executive Order 11988 – Flood Plain Management

The Proposed Action is not expected to have adverse impacts on flood plain areas found in association with wetlands.

Executive Order 11990 – Protection of Wetlands

Project design criteria are included as part of the Proposed Action to protect wetlands from any long-term adverse impacts.

Executive Order 12898 – Environmental Justice

The Proposed Action is not expected to impact minority or low-income populations.

National Historic Preservation Act

A cultural resources survey has been completed that is in accordance with 36 CFR 800 and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (1966, amended 1992). Because all eligible and unevaluated sites will be avoided by project activities, the project is consistent with protection requirements of these policies.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

The FONSI was mailed with the environmental assessment in November 2014 and outlined the reasons why an Environmental Impact Statement would not be prepared for this project in accordance with direction provided by the Guidance for Environmental Assessments of Forest Health Projects (Council on Environmental Quality memorandum, December 9, 2002).

Objection Opportunity (36 CFR 218)

This project is subject to the pre-decisional objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and C. The opportunity to object ends 30 days following the date of publication of the legal notice in the Rapid City Journal. The publication date of the legal notice in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection, and those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Objections will be accepted only from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after designated comment opportunities §218.8(c).

The objection must contain the minimum content requirements specified in §218.8(d) and incorporation of documents by reference is permitted only as provided in §218.8(b). It is the objector's responsibility to ensure timely filing of a written objection with the reviewing officer. All objections are available for public inspection during and after the objection process.

Written objections, including attachments, must be filed with:

Timothy M. Buskirk, District Ranger
Pine Ridge Ranger District
125 North Main Street
Chadron, NE 69337

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to comments-rocky-mountain-nebraska@fs.fed.us.

Please state "Pine Ridge Landscape Restoration Project" in the subject line when providing electronic objections, or on the envelope when replying by mail.

Implementation Date (36 CFR 215.9)

If no objection is received, signature and implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the objection filing period. If an objection is received, signature of the decision and project implementation may not occur until a written objection response is issued by the reviewing official and any instructions issued to the responsible official have been completed.

Contact Information (36 CFR 220.7(c)(8))

For additional information, please contact Timothy M. Buskirk, District Ranger by phone at (308) 432-0300 or email tbuskirk@fs.fed.us.

Signature of Responsible Official – Date of Decision



Timothy M. Buskirk
District Ranger
Pine Ridge Ranger District
Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands

12 Jan 15
Date