



File Code: 1950 – Rising Cougar Project

Date: September 19, 2003

Hello,

Enclosed you will find information about a Forest Service proposal that I believe is very important. As many of you may know, we are planning a forest management project on National Forest lands between East Hope and the Montana border. In the last two years we have been gathering data on the ground and talking with local private landowners about the Rising Cougar Project (named for Riser and Cougar Creeks within the project area). ***If you are interested in receiving information on this project as it progresses, please read the enclosed information carefully and return the enclosed comment form. If we do not hear from you prior to releasing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, we will remove your name from the mailing list.***

### **About the Project**

The Rising Cougar Project has four primary objectives—1) reduce hazardous forest fuels that lie next to neighboring private lands, 2) improve big game winter range and other wildlife habitat in the project area, 3) re-establish the diversity of forest structures and tree species that would be expected to occur if natural fires were allowed to burn, and 4) manage motorized access in the south portion of the project area to contribute to watershed and grizzly bear habitat recovery goals. To accomplish these objectives we would use logging, slashing (the cutting of brush and small trees), prescribed burning, and possible road decommissioning.

### **Our Proposal Is A Beginning**

It is important to note that this proposal is not refined at this stage. Currently, we are looking at about 6,000 acres of forest stands where activities might occur (see attached map), *but we will likely not treat every stand and every acre.* By putting forth a proposal that shows all the areas we could potentially treat, it helps to generate public comments that allow us to design a more refined, specific proposal.

### **Details Will Be in a Draft EIS**

We expect our “Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement” (EIS) to be published in the Federal Register on September 26 or October 3, initiating our comment period of approximately 30 days. As we receive your feedback, we will begin preparing a Draft EIS. The Draft EIS will present a refined proposal and a range of alternative proposals, including the option of doing nothing. It will also provide a detailed analysis of how the proposal and each alternative could affect different aspects of the social and ecological environments. Once the Draft EIS is published, you will have an opportunity to examine a lot more details about the project, including measures designed to protect resources or alleviate potential problems you may be concerned about. The release of the Draft EIS will begin a second, more formal comment period, during which we will consider all public comments in order to produce a Final EIS and eventually, a decision. We expect to have a Draft EIS published within the next nine months.



Please note that an environmental impact statement is a very complex and technical document, typically over 200 pages. If you would like to only receive a summary of the EIS, please indicate your preference on the enclosed comment form.

### **Have Questions?**

After reviewing the proposal, you may have a lot of questions and feel you don't have enough information to provide comments. If that's the case, I encourage you to call, write, or visit us and arrange a time to discuss the project, look at more detailed maps, or go out to the project area with one or more of my staff. To schedule an appointment, contact Judy York, the project team leader by phone, letter, e-mail or office visit.

**By Mail or Office Visit:**

Judy York  
Rising Cougar Project  
Sandpoint Ranger District  
1500 Hwy 2, Suite 110  
Sandpoint, ID 83864

**Phone**

208-265-6665

**E-mail:**

[jyork@fs.fed.us](mailto:jyork@fs.fed.us)

### **Please Give Us Your Feedback Soon**

Please try to send your comments or contact us by **November 3** so we can proceed with the development of the EIS. If you get them in past that date, we'll still consider them—it's just more helpful to receive comments early on. Remember, if we do not hear from you prior to releasing the Draft EIS, we will remove your name from our mailing list to receive future documents and information. All comments submitted now will be considered and accepted as part of the project record, but you must also provide comments on the Draft EIS in order for your comments to be considered "substantive." If you wish to remain on the mailing list without commenting now you need to let us know. Use the comment form in the enclosed information package to remain on the list.

If you know of anyone who did not receive this information and might be interested, please let us know so we can get him or her information right away. Thank you for your interest in this project. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

RICHARD P. KRAMER  
District Ranger

enclosure

# The Rising Cougar Project Proposal

## Introduction

The Rising Cougar Project is a forest management project on the National Forest lands that face Lake Pend Oreille between East Hope and the Montana border (see map, right). The project is named for Riser and Cougar Creeks located within the project area. Portions of the project area lie within two Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA), the Beetop and Scotchman IRAs (see map, p. 3).

## Why Are We Focusing on This Area?

### The National Fire Plan and Communities at Risk From Wildfire

The Rising Cougar Project has been identified as a National Fire Plan project. In August of 2001, a 10-year comprehensive strategy was released directing Federal, State, tribal, and local governments to work together at reducing wildland fire risks to communities and the environment. During this time, a list of communities within the vicinity of Federal lands that are at high risk from wildfire was identified



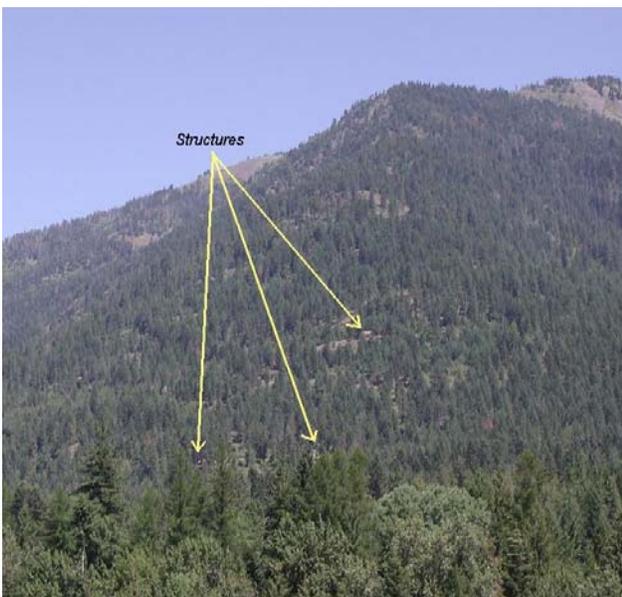
in the Federal Register (Vol. 66, No. 160, August 17, 2001). *The communities of Hope, East Hope, and Clark Fork, Idaho were on this list.*

The Forest Service has received funding for the Rising Cougar Project, to reduce the hazardous fuels on National Forest lands that lie close to Hope, East Hope, and Clark Fork.

### Opportunities to Restore Wildlife Habitat and Forest Ecosystems

Historically, the forests in the project area were different than they are today. Prior to the establishment of the Hope and Clark Fork communities, wildfires played a regular role in influencing the types of trees and habitat that existed on the landscape.

For the last century, the development of communities and private lands has led to active fire suppression, which has halted the natural fire cycle. This has allowed trees such as Douglas-fir and grand fir to increase in numbers, competing



There are many private residences and structures located next to National Forest lands in the Rising Cougar project area.

with and shading out trees and shrubs that require sunlight to thrive.

On the dry sites, fires of varying intensities would thin out young Douglas-fir and grand-fir, leaving a patchy, fairly open mix of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir trees. Shrubs that provided essential winter browse for deer and elk were abundant in the sunny openings, and regained new growth with every wildfire. Winter range areas existed on the lower mountain slopes all the way down to Lake Pend Oreille.

On more moist sites, there was a greater abundance of larch and white pine --that is, until white pine blister rust was introduced into the U.S. and fire suppression policies interrupted the natural fire cycles.

Finally, in the Sugarloaf Mountain area, there are a number of gated and unclassified roads<sup>1</sup> that continue to pose risks to grizzly bear habitat security and water quality due to erosion and OHV use.

## Our Purpose and Need For the Project

Given these changes in the ecosystem and the risk of fire so close to private land, the goals of the Rising Cougar Project are:

1) Maintain or restore the characteristics of ecosystem composition and structure within the range of variability that would be expected to occur under natural disturbance regimes.

*More specific objectives include:*

- ◆ Decrease fuel loadings on National Forest lands along the wildland urban interface to reduce the threat of uncontrollable wildfire to life and property
- ◆ Restore big game winter range conditions and promote the long-term persistence and stability of wildlife habitat diversity.
- ◆ Re-establish structural diversity of forest stands and decrease the proportions of Douglas-fir and grand fir, creating favorable conditions for the growth and establishment of ponderosa pine, white pine and larch

2) Manage motorized access and road densities in the roaded portion of the project area to benefit watersheds and grizzly bear habitat recovery goals.

## Our Proposed Activities

### Activities In Inventoried Roadless Areas:

To achieve our ecosystem objectives in the inventoried roadless areas, helicopter logging and prescribed burning activities would be used.

In scattered areas across the landscape, openings would be created by removing undesirable trees to increase sunlight to the forest floor. Logging would favor leaving the larger, healthy trees, individually, in patches and in clumps, resulting in relatively open stands. Openings would stimulate early successional plant communities of

**“Undesirable” trees to be removed generally include:**

- 1) trees posing a fire risk to healthy trees we wish to retain,
- 2) trees competing with, or crowding healthy trees such as ponderosa pine and larch,
- 3) trees dying or at high risk from insects or disease, or
- 4) excess Douglas-fir and grand fir that have encroached because of fire suppression.

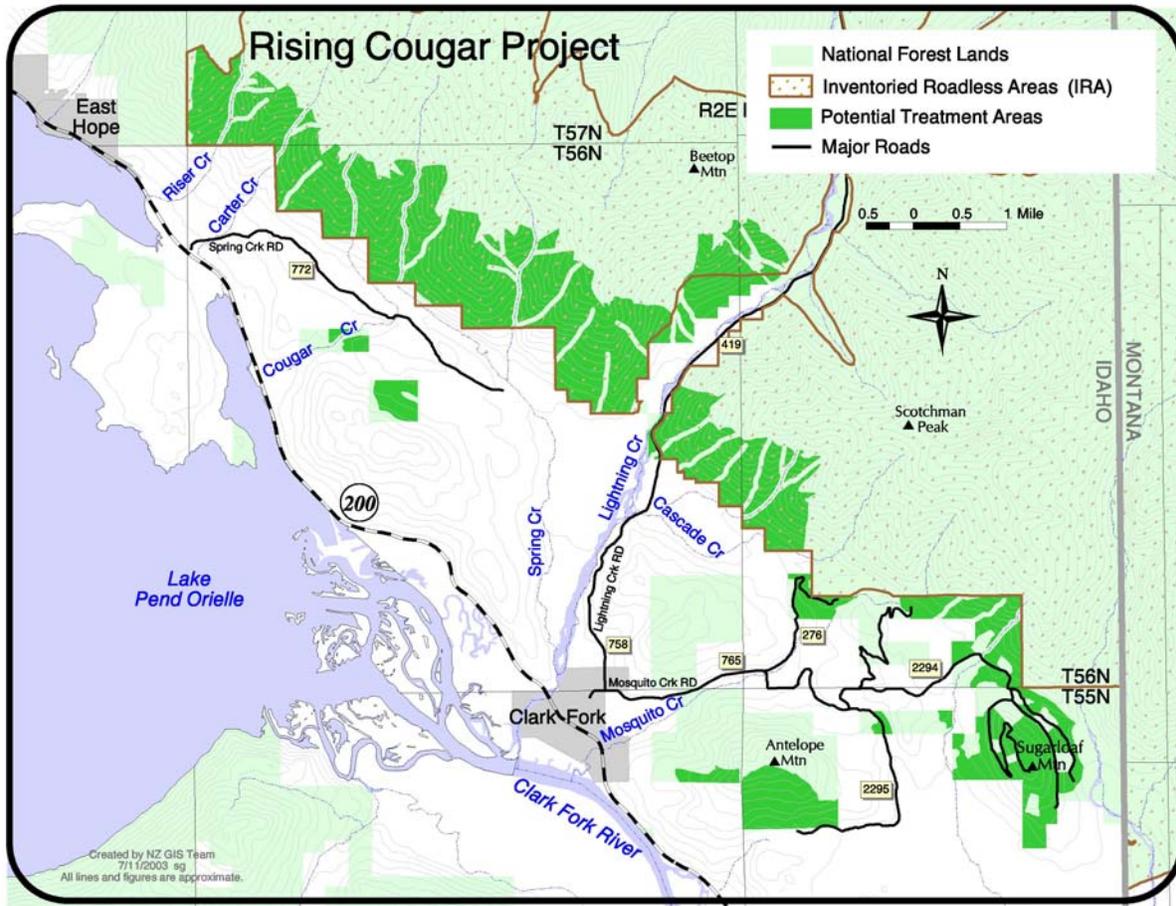
shrubs, grasses, and forbs, creating vegetation patterns more closely resembling conditions that were maintained by relatively frequent fires. Slashing of decadent browse plants like mountain maple and prescribed burning would reduce hazardous fuels and stimulate the growth of winter range browse plants.

Thinning would occur in other areas to help maintain stands and reduce fuels in stands that are already fairly healthy. These stands would retain a majority of their existing forest canopy.

Stand canopies would be generally maintained in patches and clumps across the landscape that historically may have survived low intensity and mixed-severity fires. Some individual trees that are diseased or a fire hazard may be removed in these areas to improve forest health and decrease the risk of fire. Stands of designated old growth will be maintained.

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<sup>1</sup>see Road Definitions p.4



Potential areas of vegetation and fuels treatments

<b>Proposed Vegetation Treatments (acres)*</b>	<b>Roadless Areas</b>	<b>Non-roadless Areas</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Create scattered openings	3,630	1,300	4,930
Thinning	450	665	1,115
<b>Fuel Treatments (prescribed burning and mechanical methods-acres)*</b>	<b>4,080</b>	<b>1,965</b>	<b>6,045</b>
<b>Road Management Activities (miles)*</b>			
Temporary Road Construction	0	0.5	0.5
Permanent Road Construction	0	0.2	0.2
Convert gated road segment to motorized access (2294)	0	0.5	0.5
Decommission open unclassified road (2294UD)	0	0.6	0.6
Decommission unclassified and undrivable roads after use	0	2.8	2.8
Put gated roads into storage after use (2294 segment & 2294B, C & D)	0	5.7	5.7

\* All values are estimates at this time.

## Activities Outside Inventoried Roadless

### Areas:

To achieve our ecosystem objectives in the south portion of the project area, helicopter and road-based logging systems, and prescribed burning would be used. Proposed activities would be the same as those proposed in the roadless portion, however, in areas where we need to promote the regeneration of white pine, ponderosa pine, and larch, openings would be planted with these species.

Prescribed burning would be used to reduce hazardous fuels and prepare the site for planting. In addition, about one-half mile of temporary road would be constructed on Sugarloaf Mountain to access stands for treatment using road-based logging systems.

To achieve our watershed and grizzly bear habitat recovery goals, the following changes to National Forest roads are proposed:

- ◆ Roads 2294B, C and D which are currently closed to motorized use with a gate, would be put into storage following use for the project (see map, p.5).
- ◆ To alleviate erosion problems from the unclassified road that leads to the West Fork of Blue Creek, we would decommission (recontour) the first half-mile or so. The remaining section of road would be accessed from road 2294 immediately to the west, where the existing gate would be removed and the first half-mile would become the new access point. About 600 feet of road would be constructed to connect the two road sections together. The remainder of road 2294 on National Forest land would be put into storage.
- ◆ To reduce road densities and improve wildlife habitat security, other unclassified road

### Road Definitions:

**Classified Road** – Officially designated road in the National Forest transportation system.

**Unclassified Road** – On National Forest land but not included in the transportation system for regular maintenance.

**Storage** – A method of retaining a classified road for future use but removing features to eliminate hydrologic risks and installing a closure device such as a berm or barrier.

**Decommissioning** – The restoration of unneeded roads to a more natural state.

segments that exist on National Forest land would be decommissioned, unless new information shows they have high recreation or management value.

The results of the Rising Cougar project should be very similar to those seen in the recently completed Kirby's Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project and recent treatments on Antelope and Middle Mountains (see photos). Not all acres within the potential treatment areas will be treated. Riparian and wet areas, and cedar-dominated swales will have little to no disturbance. Important structural components including old growth trees and snags would be left.

### Issues To Date

Preliminary issues and concerns we've identified include potential effects of the proposed activities on:

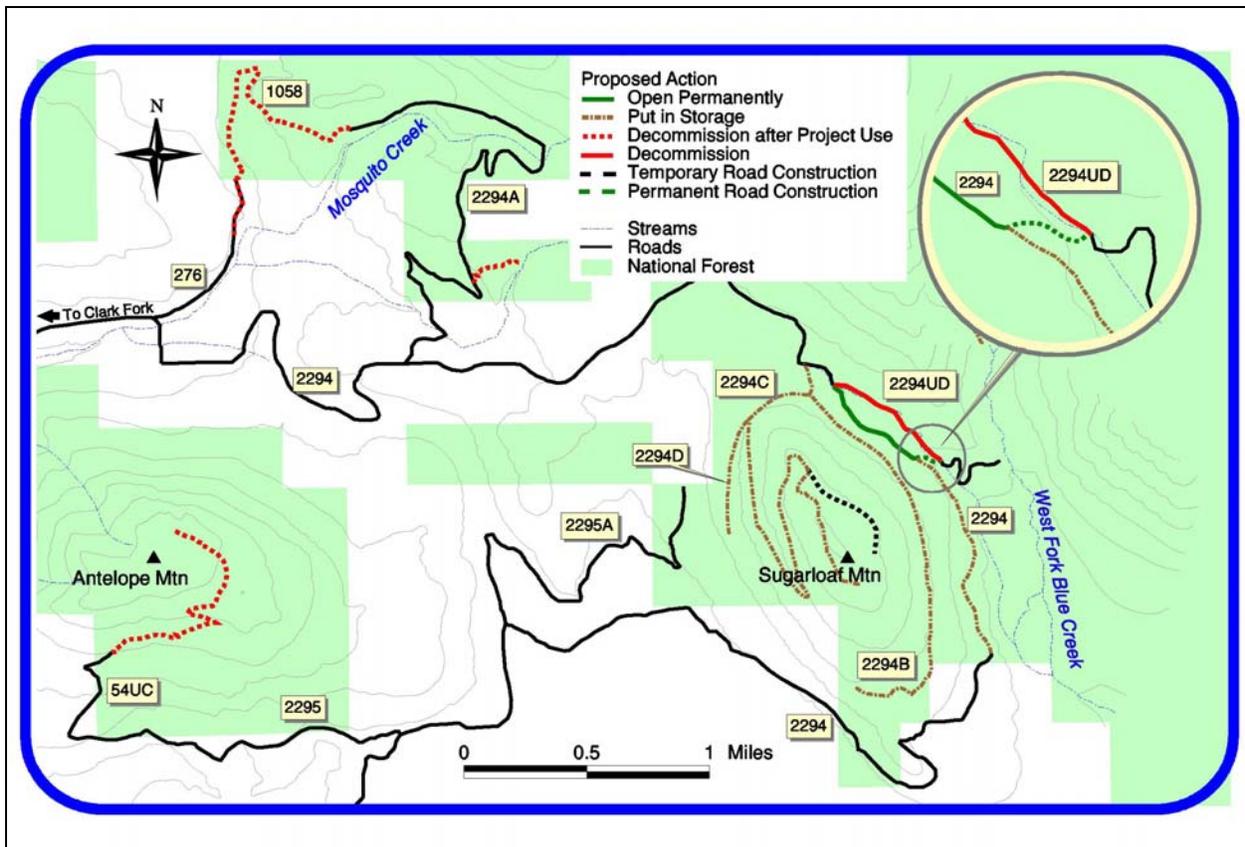
roadless area characteristics ◆ public road access  
◆ water quality and fish habitat ◆ risk of fire ◆ air quality ◆ noxious weed spread ◆ visual quality ◆ noise ◆ soils ◆ heritage resources ◆ old growth ◆ finances ◆ threatened, endangered or sensitive fish, wildlife and plant species.

### We Need Your Feedback

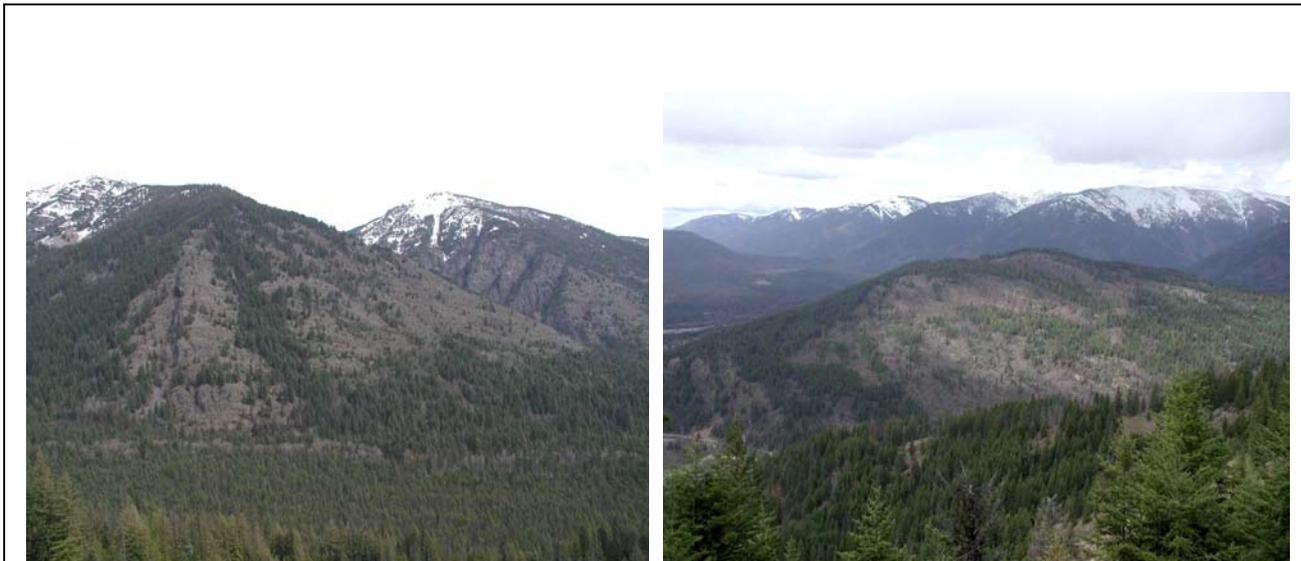
This proposal is very general at this point in our planning and will get more specific prior to producing a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). In order to get more specific and develop a range of alternatives to our proposal, we need feedback from you.

Enclosed is a comment form for your convenience. Write, call or visit and tell us your concerns or ideas about this project. Please be specific. Tell us about information we may be unaware of (like small domestic water sources). Your comments will help us develop a more specific proposal and alternatives to present and analyze in a Draft EIS.

Once a Draft EIS is released, you will have an opportunity to provide more substantive comments on the proposed action and alternatives. These comments will then be used to prepare a Final EIS and to help the Forest Supervisor make a decision whether to proceed with the proposal or an alternative course of action.



Proposed road management following logging activities. For clarity, not all roads in area are displayed.



**A Comparison of Openings** One of these photos shows stands with natural openings and one shows stands with openings we created. The left photo is of a natural brush field in the West Fork of Blue Creek drainage, near the Montana border. The right photo is of Middle Mountain near Clark Fork, Idaho, which was logged in the late 1990s. Some of the openings proposed in this project could look like this, however, site conditions, resource protections and visual considerations will influence the final outcome.

## Lack of Fire Has Changed Forest Habitats



This ponderosa pine (large tree in foreground) is surrounded by younger Douglas-fir trees, which are slowly shading out the pine's branches. As Douglas-fir and other shade-tolerant trees increase on the landscape, the number of pine will continue to decrease due to lack of sunlight.



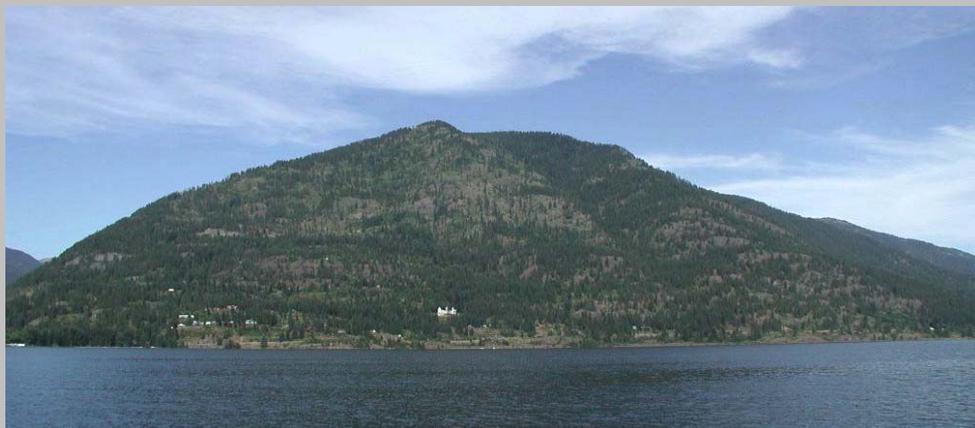
**TOP:** Douglas-fir trees that have filled in forest openings are succumbing to insects and diseases, and adding to forest fuels as they die. The broom-like growths caused by the parasitic plant mistletoe are very flammable and can carry a fire from the ground into the canopy of the trees. **BOTTOM:** Due to a lack of natural fire, browse plants for deer and elk have grown tall and woody, limiting the amount of nutritious forage available.

### **The Kirbys Project: Predecessor to Rising Cougar**

The Rising Cougar Project is a larger version of a previous project, the Kirbys Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project. The Kirbys Project had the same forest management objectives as Rising Cougar, but it was more of a pilot project over four smaller areas on the lake-facing slopes between Pack River Flats and East Hope. Using helicopter logging we opened up ponderosa pine forests and removed dead and dying trees that were contributing to hazardous fuels. We cut back old woody browse plants to provide more succulent browse for big game, and used prescribed fire to stimulate the browse and reduce accumulated ground fuels. We still have two areas that we need to burn on Eagen and Grief Mountains.

Except for the people that live right next to the Kirbys project, many people in the surrounding communities were unaware that the project even occurred. That is, until last August when the Hope 44 wildfire ignited at the base of Grief Mountain. A car accident on Highway 200 ignited the fire, and it quickly spread uphill onto private land and eventually into one of the Kirbys Project areas that we had logged but had not yet burned. Although there were excess fuels from logging debris still on the ground, the fact that we had removed the standing “ladder” fuels—the dead and dying trees—kept the fire primarily on the ground, rather than in the crowns of the remaining trees.

Our monitoring shows we’ve accomplished the objectives of the Kirbys project pretty well. The area has already received increased use by deer and elk, and the removal of the ladder fuels proved to be effective at making the Hope 44 fire one that we could control more safely.



Visible from Lake Pend Oreille and residents of Sandpoint, the Kirbys Project was designed to maintain scenic integrity while accomplishing forest management objectives. This is Mount Eagen near Hope, Idaho. The mid- to upper slopes were logged by helicopter in the 1990s.

From:

TO: Sandpoint Ranger District  
ATTN: Judy York  
1500 Highway 2, Suite 110  
Sandpoint, ID 83864

COMMENT FORM  
PROPOSED RISING COUGAR PROJECT

After reviewing the enclosed project proposal, take a moment to write down your thoughts, issues, ideas, or any information you may have relevant to this project. Please be as specific as possible. That way we can consider ways to modify our proposal to address your comments. If you have any questions about this proposal, please don't hesitate to call, write, visit, or e-mail (e-mail address is [jyork@fs.fed.us](mailto:jyork@fs.fed.us)). Please return this form or call in your comments right away.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

**How would you like to continue receiving information?**

If you do not indicate a preference, you will automatically receive a CD-ROM to view the Draft EIS and Summary on a computer. ***If we do not hear back from you, we will remove your name from our list for future information on this project.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Please send me the summary of the Draft EIS only.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please send me the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Summary (Note: the Draft EIS will be a very large, technical document, several hundred pages long).

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like to view documents on the internet. Please inform me when they are available. My e-mail address is listed above.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please remove my name from your mailing list for this project.