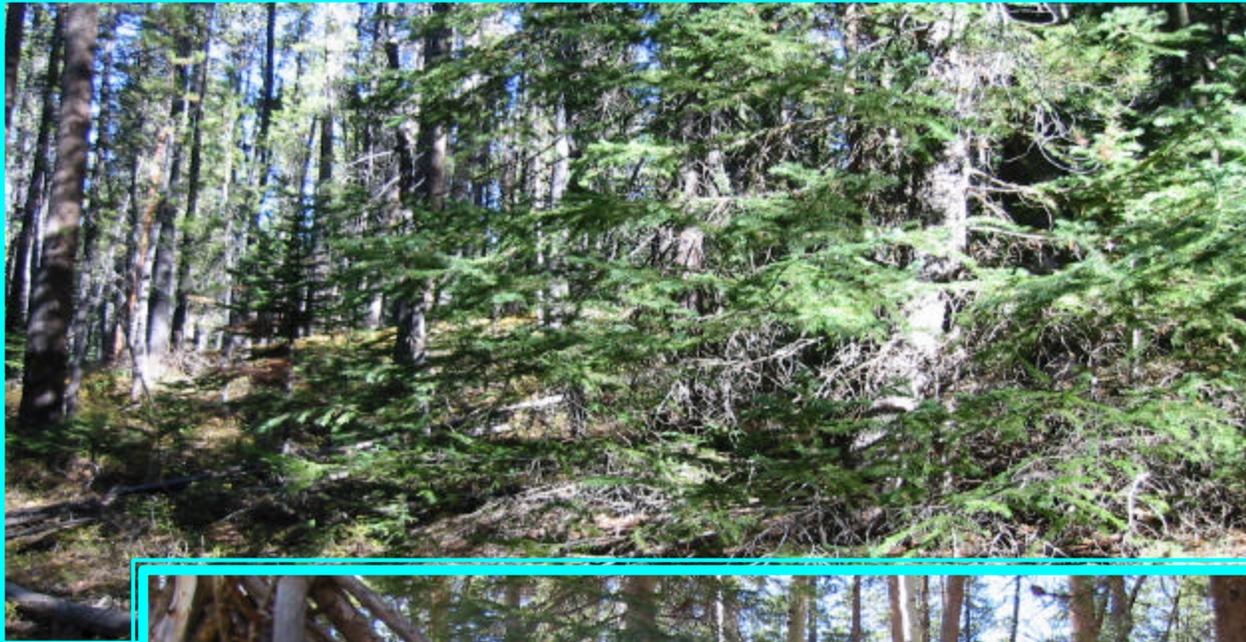


**Accelerated Watershed Restoration Plan (AWRP)**  
**5 year Action Plan**



Stage Coach WUI Fuels Project – Before (above) and After (Yampa Ranger District)

**Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National  
Grassland (MBR-TB)**  
**March 2004**

# **Accelerated Watershed Restoration Plan (AWRP)**

## **5 year Action Plan**

### **Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland (MBR-TB)**

#### **Purpose**

The AWRP 5-Year Action Plan (5-YAP) is companion to the AWRP 10-Year Strategy (the Strategy) of January 12, 2004. It is designed to build on the Strategy by providing the implementation detail and specific processes in place or being developed to achieve the Strategy.

The Strategy presents the “big picture” and framework context for addressing “values at risk” for fire hazard and insect and disease infestation on the MBR-TB. The 5-YAP provides project specific details for Forest programs involved in vegetation management actions that promote changes in Condition Class within emphasized fires regimes. It also displays proposed management actions in ecosystems characterized by long fire-return interval disturbance regimes, which feature large scale stand-replacing fire occurrence and extreme fire behavior, but which pose unacceptable risks to human health and safety and resource values.

#### **Action Plan Elements**

##### **Identify how to provide program elements to meet the objectives of the unit strategies.**

The MBR-TB 5-YAP displays the proposed projects for several program areas (and BLIs)--hazardous fuels (WFHF), timber (NFTM and SSSS) and wildlife (NFWF) that affect vegetation condition. Other program areas that affect vegetation condition—range (NFRG and NFVW) and vegetation and watershed (NFVW)—are important program areas but do not approach the scale of opportunity in the former three program areas. Forest health management funding (SPFH) is significant on the MBR-TB as long as opportunities for focused intervention in active bark beetle epidemics and preventive integrated strategies remain successful. To date, these funds have been critical to retain high values associated with mature spruce and lodgepole forests, even as larger spruce beetle and mountain pine beetle epidemics envelope the backcountry forests. However, they are very specific to their allocation and purpose. While available, they can be used synergistically with other funds to achieve a cumulative set of objectives. But at some future time, as the large-scale epidemics wane, SPFH funds will not be available at the levels they have been in recent years.

This 5-YAP will principally speak to the Timber, Fuels and Wildlife program funds and priorities. The enclosed spreadsheets detail the proposed projects for fiscal years 2004-2008.

##### **Focus on outcomes, effective changes in land condition and land management objectives.**

The desired conditions for the Strategy and 5-YAP include modifying vegetation conditions and risk to create diversity in structure, composition, age class, and distribution in landscapes that presently are in a developing or advanced stage of potential extreme fire hazard and insect and disease risk.

The three Land Management Plans include detailed sets of desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards and guidelines, that provide direction for management action in areas of high resource and social values. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following:

***Medicine Bow National Forest Revised Forest Plan (2003)***

*Timber Management...*

“...is implemented on the Forest to meet the objectives defined in the Plan, to maintain forest health, to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, to reduce losses to insects and diseases, and to provide wood fiber to meet the nation's demands for wood products in ecologically sustainable ways, maintaining the integrity of soil and air resources and biodiversity needs.” (MB RFP, page 1-16)

*Fire and Fuels Management...*

“...identified communities threatened by wildfires, developed strategies and prioritized projects to avoid, reduce, and mitigate fire losses in those communities, increased efforts to protect natural resources, including watersheds, wildlife and TES habitats, and rehabilitated and restored forests.” (1-18)

“...the Forest has institutionalized the goals of the NFP, working with states and counties to reduce fuels in interface areas, communities at risk, and areas of high resource value.” (1-18)

*Watershed Protection...*

“...Forests in the Hog Park Reservoir and North Fork Encampment River watersheds are managed to maintain long-term water quality and quantity, while reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and insects and diseases.” (1-19)

***Routt National Forest Revised Forest Plan (1998)***

*Disturbance Processes*

“...use preventive vegetation management practices to meet objectives and reduce the risk of insects and disease.” (Routt RFP, page 1-15)

***Thunder Basin National Grassland Revised Land Management Plan (2002)***

*Goal 1: Ensure Sustainable Ecosystems*

“...Goal 1.c: Increase the amount of forests and grasslands restored to or maintained in a healthy condition with reduced risk and damage from fires, insects and diseases, and invasive species.” (TBNG LMP, page 1-2)

**Identify a purpose and need for the project and solutions to barriers**

The purpose and need vary by project but generally:

~~✎~~ *Fuels projects* focus on reducing hazardous fuels in WUIs and changing vegetation condition and risk of extreme fire behavior in interface communities and developments. In non-WUI treatments, the purpose is to reduce fuels conditions, continuity, and vertical fuel ladders and introduce managed disturbance in landscapes.

Wildlife projects principally focus on modifying vegetation conditions to improve forage, regenerate desirable vegetation species, benefit early seral habitat dependent wildlife species or species that occupy transitory habitat after disturbance, and create diversity in vegetation age class, structure and distribution in important habitats, such as winter range or shrublands. Regeneration of aspen is also an important wildlife objective for vegetation management.

Timber projects have a variety of objectives, depending on the presence and magnitude of insect and disease activity in suited lands and proximity to WUI, municipal watersheds, and important wildlife habitat. If the area is moderate to high risk to insect and disease infestation, the purpose may address reducing density and competition through thinning types of treatments. Depending on stand age and structure and condition, conventional silvicultural practices may be planned to regenerate mature stands, reduce dwarf mistletoe. If bark beetles are active, density management may also be augmented by suppression strategies to remove infested trees or create trap trees to catch and active flight for subsequent removal. Conventional treatments for long term stand health and vigor and to produce a sustainable flow of wood products can have the ancillary effect of reducing hazard and risk.

The Strategy and 5-YAP have been designed to address barriers and obstacles to implementing the AWRP. Many of these actions—expedited NEPA pipeline, rapid assessment, restructuring organization, increased accountability, program integration, collaboration, and completing fire management plans for all units—continue from existing and ongoing efforts. Additional discussion of resolving barriers and issues is described in the “AWRP Presentation Discussion Items” section at the end.

### **Provide a critical timeline for projects. Allow for shifts in program priorities and adjustments**

See 5-YAP spreadsheets for project-specific time frames.

Monitoring will be conducted periodically during development of the annual program of work in the vegetation management related programs. It may entail the three forms of monitoring—*implementation, effectiveness, and validation*—although project monitoring will focus primarily on the first two types. Forest Plan level monitoring will normally address validation monitoring.

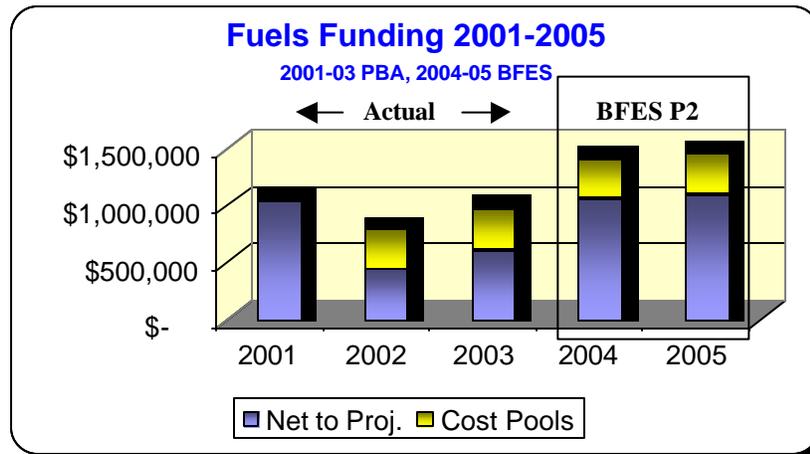
Monitoring will provide feedback on project planning, treatment strategies, achievement of desired results, and cumulative progress toward desired conditions in the landscape context. These findings will allow effective adaptive management with course corrections for strategic program planning, and development of more effective projects.

Organization review and monitoring will be continuous to assess that the appropriate staffing, quality, availability and distribution of expertise is adequate to meet program objectives. Periodic adjustments or restructuring, as needed, of organization and staffing may occur. Annual reevaluation of Non-Negotiables, review and concurrence on BFES program priorities and funding submissions, and performance accountability will be pursued.

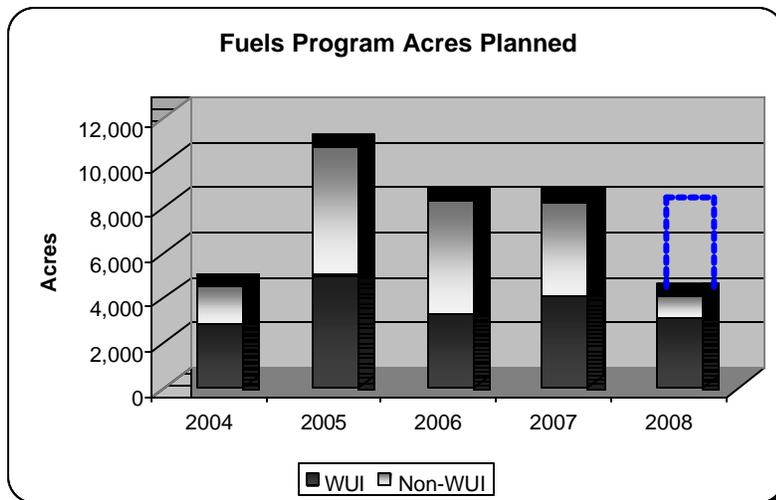
### **Represent incremental increase in treated acres over the 5-year length.**

*Fuels program* – funding has been volatile and unpredictable. The figure below describes the three-year period of swings in fuels funding. The MBR-TB received initial NFP emergency appropriated fuels funding (WFW2) of over \$1 million to project (after cost pools) in 2001.

Numerous additional employees were hired and active fuels project planning began. This was followed by a 57% decline in net WFHF fuels funds to project in 2002. In 2003, WFHF recovered some but was still about 40% below 2001 in net funds to project. Available funds were prioritized for implementation of fuels projects, which starved the planning pipeline for the outyears. MBR-TB BFES03 submission in WFHF was \$1.029 million after costs pools—2003 allocation was nearly 43% under the net BFES P2 request. The graph displays BFES requests for WFHF in 2004 and 2005, for comparison.

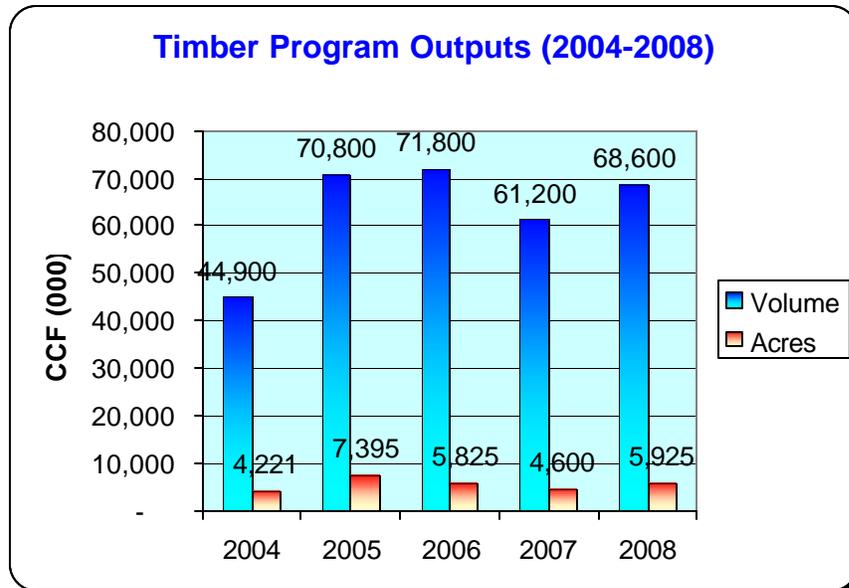


Fuels program outputs are displayed in the enclosed spreadsheets. The following chart displays significant planned increases in treated acres in the near term program, primarily because of large prescribed burns. The 5<sup>th</sup> year decline from the prior years is largely because the program has not looked that far ahead to anticipate the needs that far out. We expect that the planned fuels treatment will be similar to the 8,000-acre level proposed for 2006 and 2007. Additional *unplanned* acres from Wildlife Fire Use, not included in the following chart, will likely occur.

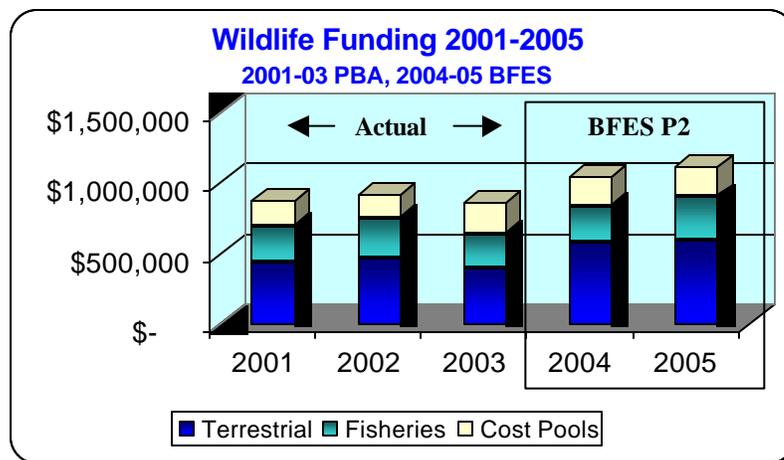


*Timber program* – increasing outputs and acres treated. The bark beetle epidemics on the Routt and moderate-high risk conditions draw the focus of the timber program. The current and

proposed program will grow from a recent 30,000 CCF offer level to an average for the 5-Year Plan of 63,460 CCF offered annually. Annual treated acres average about 5,600 acres but cannot presently be identified as to whether these activities affect or change condition class. The MBR-TB is seeking additional NFTM and looking to borrow SSSS to achieve the planned program.



*Wildlife Program* – Terrestrial wildlife funding is limited and unpredictable. This BLI is split between terrestrial wildlife programs (65%) and fisheries and aquatic habitat (35%). Funding has not been at BFES P2 levels since funds have been allocated using BFES. Furthermore, fire borrowing in 2002 and 2003 reduced available funds even more late in each fiscal year. Some terrestrial NFWF is committed to vegetation management for habitat improvements. Other NFWF funds, when available, can be used as cost-share funds for partnerships to conduct habitat treatments. **This is a major emphasis for the MBR-TB—to significantly expand the partnership cost-share program in habitat management actions, species conservation and recovery.** But this wildlife program emphasis has been stunted by an insufficient NFWF allocation, below P2, to grow this part of the program.



The enclosed spreadsheet for NFWF displays projects planned from 2004 through 2008. Estimated treatment acres are not displayed in the Wildlife spreadsheet. Instead, the anticipated acre outputs are included within the Fuels program spreadsheets for 2004-2008.

*Wildland Fire Use (WFU)*-- One other opportunity to increase achievement of changed condition class or reducing values at risk to extreme fire severity is positioning our line officers to make effective decisions regarding Wildland Fire Use. The Forest Supervisor, Deputy Forest Supervisor, all District Rangers and Renewable Resource Director (including Fire and Aviation) have either been to *Fire Management for Agency Administrators* training, or will be scheduled to attend. The Routt completed its Fire Management Plan (FMP) in 2002 just before that historic fire season. Nearly 5,500 acres were managed for WFU in the Lost Lakes Fire and the FMP Appropriate Management Response (AMR) polygons were used to manage incidents in the Mt. Zirkel and Sarvis Creek Wildernesses under a containment suppression strategy.

The Medicine Bow Forest Plan revision has just been completed. The Forest will update its FMP within the next three years, including incorporating Revised Plan direction for WFU in Management Areas with a “prescription control” AMR. The Thunder Basin Plan has limited opportunity for WFU because of the intermingled private land ownership pattern of the National Grassland.

**Guided by landscape perspectives with highest priority given to effective treatment across jurisdictional boundaries.**

The changes in the MBR-TB NEPA strategy are discussed in the Strategy. The scope of vegetation treatments analysis areas has been expanded to generate increased efficiency and look at larger landscapes as a precursor to project planning. The MBR-TB is conducting a rapid assessment process and adapting the Regional focused assessment process to more general application to vegetation management projects. This will improve integration and evaluate larger landscape scale areas before proceeding to NEPA proposed actions.

Collaboration with adjacent ownerships, described in the Strategy and detailed in the 5-YAP spreadsheets, will continue.

**Expand use of cooperative authorities, agreements & partnerships (where appropriate).**

See the Strategy for more detailed discussion of collaborative actions. The MBR-TB will continue to look for opportunities in this area.

## **AWRP Presentation Discussion items**

**(Items 1 and 2 are the 10-Year Strategy and the 5-YAP content.)**

### **3. What are the issues/concerns that could affect the Forest's ability to complete the 5 Year Work Plans on schedule?**

#### **a. Identify any issues/concerns/barriers, i.e. need for Forest Plan revision, etc.**

The three Forest and Grassland Plans have been revised. We are in the ramp-up phase to understand, interpret, and implement. Monitoring will be a challenge for the 3 plans with NFIM funding commensurate to one land management plan, not three plans. Limited Plan monitoring will make adaptive management difficult.

Funding availability and stability—see previous graphs of WFHF funding. The MBR-TB is not Front Range and not strictly CC 2 or 3 or FR 1,2, or 3. Most of the elevated hazard and risk conditions are in systems that are not outside HRV. This may create a problem competing for funds to address forest health needs. We will continue to emphasize values at risk.

There is limited expertise in and availability of Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) skills among fuels program staff. This makes fuels management through increased contracting challenging.

Need to expand fuels expertise and training to develop qualified burning cadre, particularly if burn windows open across a large area.

More cross-discipline collaboration between timber and fuels staff in vegetation management: support of TM contracting, silviculture with Fuels' fuels modeling and treatment strategies expertise.

Continuing appeals in timber and mechanical fuels projects. Issues are related to wildlife/MIS.

The area wood products industry is in considerable flux. L-P mill in Saratoga, WY closed, and was subsequently bought by Intermountain Forest Resources (IFR) but it is uncertain whether IFR will reopen the mill or scrap it. IFR has a surfeit of accessible, available wood from Colorado fire and salvage sales near their Montrose mill, which may affect their interest in bidding on MBR sales. The capability of a new small material mill in Encampment is uncertain. Big Horn Lumber, the local mill in Laramie, has been acquiring wood from sources in CO with bark beetle epidemics on private lands. Because of this alternative private wood source, Big Horn has expressed little interest in upcoming MBR timber sales. Mechanical fuels treatments through commercial timber harvests, conventional timber sales, salvage sales, POL--which feature lower value small material--face an uncertain market.

We are seeing upward trends in cheatgrass occurrence on the Forests, probably drought related. Some areas with proposed Rx burns are affected. The Forest is planning to

conduct a Forest-wide EIS to do aerial spraying to control cheatgrass in 2005. This could affect ability to burn and/or increase costs for cheatgrass control where burning is done. Related to this is the need for an economical source of native plant materials and seed for revegetation, restoration and rehab needs.

Bottlenecks are increasing in Heritage Resources (HR) and Wildlife support as area analysis size increases. The MBR-TB is adopting a Forest-wide IDIQ contract for HR support to improve timeliness.

**b. Identify what assistance is needed to address these issues/concerns**

**Regionally, review the effectiveness of ESA streamlining process in effect since 2001.**

Are we getting the intended results—streamlined projects and expedited consultation? There have been some observable benefits, such as batched processing of lynx “NLAA” determinations through the court mandated formal consultation process, and development of species screens. Also, there have been by-products of good working relationships, communication, and coordination with FWS. But are the Level 2 Forest Supervisors seeing projects being streamlined and efficiencies realized?

**RO biologists provide guidelines to streamline ESA consultation documentation processes, BE/BA development under the new CEs, provide “short form” documentation tools to expedite project planning and implementation.** Though we have the new CEs for fuels treatments and limited timber harvest, the analysis tools in place for BE/BA development are for the typical NEPA documentation. There may be opportunities to use checklists, incorporation by reference of white papers, and other “short form” means to reduce the documentation burden, yet still meet standards for analysis quality, sound determinations, and defensibility.

**As the AWRP is rolled out, Forests need affirmative endorsement from RO staff groups** that will largely provide support to other program actions—e.g., biologists, ecologists, hydrologists, etc. AWRP is not just a Fuels/Timber emphasis but those programs will likely be the primary drivers. Affirmative endorsement of the AWRP from all program areas contributing to it would aid in success of the initiative and elevate commitment among their peers on the Forests.

**Complete the Species Conservation Project in 2004 and release the NFIM and NFWF funds financing this RO TIN to the Forests.** These funds are needed at the Forest level to achieve essential monitoring to address lack of information in critical species and habitat areas and averting legal risks of deferring MIS monitoring for lack of funding. These funds could also support additional cost-share partnership development with external cooperators to achieve vegetation treatments and species conservation. *These two BLIs are critical to integration, monitoring, and adaptive management essential to achieving the AWRP objectives.*

**Complete the Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment decision expeditiously.** The Routt has a bark beetle project on hold for lack of a plan amendment incorporating lynx direction into the Forest Plan. Continued delay will likely mean a lost opportunity to intervene in the epidemic with integrated strategies.

**c. Identify if there are new tools needed?**

We need to catch up, digest, and apply consistent direction on the use of new tools (HFRA, CEs, ESA streamlining and consultation, stewardship contracting, appeal rules, NEPA signing authority, etc.) They are coming faster than WO and RO can issue detailed direction to the field.

Need RO guidance on streamlining BA/BE documentation on projects falling under the new expedited tools—CEs, HFRA, etc.—and to provide assistance to implementing the AWRP.

Look at options for how we count mechanical acres treated. For example, mechanical treatments designed to treat a “mosaic” within a landscape, that change the larger vegetation condition to reduce overall hazard and risk, should be able to claim the total acres of altered vegetation or condition class rather than just the treated acres. This is analogous to a prescribed fire analyzed to treat 1,000 acres that actually burns only 60 % of the planned area. The total 1,000 acres are claimed as accomplishment. This would need to be identified in the Purpose and Need and be part of the project planning and design from the beginning to be legitimate and defensible.

Need reissued Interim Directive for roadless management to clarify decision space and avoid wasting resources (if no-go) or avoiding needed action (if roadless entry permissible, and under what circumstances).

Need to issue a final Planning Rule. MIS are expected to be dropped in the new Rule.

**4. What assistance do you need from others?**

- a. *Washington Office*—stable policy (can depend on elections); issue new Planning Rule and directives; issue new Interim Directive for roadless management, get HFRA rules/Directives out to field.
- a. *Regional Office*—RO staffs (SP&F, RR, Planning) provide guidance on implementing new process tools and consistency in interpretation and application of direction.
- b. *States*—continue collaboration on assessments, land management actions, fire suppression response and initial attack.
- c. *Other Federal agencies*—coordination with adjacent ownerships; collaboration on projects in shared landscapes; interagency coordination in areas of fire suppression (IA, incident management, including WFU) and fuels project implementation (interagency burn projects, shared fuels planning resources)
- d. *Externals*—continued collaboration and input on WUI and other vegetation projects; increase in partners to cost-share habitat treatments, assist in monitoring and inventory, and other partnership opportunities—which will require increased NFIM and NFWF funding to the Forests.