



File Code: 1950/2630/5150

Date: August 5, 2004

Dear Interested Parties:

The Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland, Hahns Peak/Bears Ears Ranger District (HPBE) requests your input on the proposed Big Creek Ridge Prescribed Fire Partnership Project.

Project Area

The Forest Service, in cooperation with the Upper Yampa Habitat Partnership Program, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), State Land Board, and private landowners, is proposing to conduct a series of prescribed burns and mechanical treatments. The actions are designed to reduce hazardous fuel (decreasing the potential for large, intense fires) and improve habitat for big game animals (dispersing big game use) in the Big Creek Ridge Analysis Area (see enclosed map; more detailed maps are available on the website or at the Forest Service office in Steamboat Springs).

The analysis area is located in Township 9 and 10 north and Range 85 west, south of Seedhouse Road (NFSR 400) and continuing 8 miles south to Big Creek on RCR 129. The analysis area encompasses approximately 23,000 acres of Forest Service, BLM, State Land Board, and private lands (divided into six units labeled 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7), of which approximately 4,000 acres are identified for potential treatment over the next several years.

Purpose and Need

In the 1997 Revision of the Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LMP) a portion of the analysis area is designated as residential/forest interface. The town of Clark and the North Steamboat Springs region are identified as communities at risk from wildfire in the Federal Register (1/4/2001 and 8/17/2001, respectively). Both of these communities are considered a wildland urban interface zone. In addition, other local governments, the public, and landowners have been consulted to determine where communities consider the need for fuel reduction a high priority with the analysis area identified at the top of the list.

The LMP also designates most of the analysis area as deer and elk winter range. The Yampa Valley Elk Winter Range Assessment identified and prioritized areas where prescribed fire and mechanical fuel reduction can benefit elk winter range by regenerating over-mature, decadent oak, thereby dispersing big game. **In the Big Creek Ridge area, hazardous fuel reduction opportunities coincide with habitat improvement needs.** By looking at all lands, and developing partnerships, HPBE Ranger District is able to develop a project to reduce hazardous fuel, lessen fire behavior, and improve big game winter range in a cooperative manner using Forest Service and partnership funding.



The purpose of the project is to:

- 1) Reduce existing accumulations of fuel, reduce potential severe fire behavior, and reintroduce fire to a fire-adapted ecosystem where past fire intervals have likely been altered. Benefits include reduced risk to firefighters, the public, property, resources, and other values.
- 2) Regenerate decadent and stunted mountain shrub and aspen to improve winter browse in elk winter range, thus redistributing elk herds. Benefits include:
 - a) Meeting private landowner objectives to redistribute elk, thus reduce claims the Colorado Division of Wildlife pays on damage by wildlife to private property.
 - b) Reducing over-browsing of elk winter range forage on National Forest lands.

Proposed Action

The prescribed fire treatment areas identified in the analysis primarily consist of Gambel's oak and other mountain shrub types. Some aspen and conifer stands, or portions of, are also included for treatments with the objectives of reducing surface fuel, regenerating aspen, oak and other shrub species, and returning fire to a fire-adapted landscape.

Treatments will include prescribed broadcast burning, with limited mechanical thinning or clearing where needed to provide for safety and improve prescribed fire feasibility. Burns will occur in either spring or fall, depending on the unit, to increase prescribed burn window options.

Decision

Kim Vogel and Oscar Martinez, Hahns Peak/Bears Ears and Yampa District Rangers, respectively, are the decision-makers for this project. Oscar will decide on those portions of the project that are adjacent to the Big Creek Ranch (units 2, 3, 4, and 5). Kim will decide on units 1 and 7. No unit six exists. The District Rangers will decide the location of: (1) target burn areas, (2) non-target areas, and (3) no burn areas.

The proposed action will be analyzed for National Forest, BLM, State Land Board, and private lands, but the decision will affect only National Forest lands. The BLM, State Land Board, and private lands are identified for treatment only as reasonable foreseeable future actions to proceed through agreements on common objectives.

Public Participation

The Forest Service is initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis for the project. A public meeting is scheduled for **August 24, 2004 between 7:00 and 8:30 p.m., with presentations starting at 7:00 p.m., at the Glen Eden Conference Room** located in Clark, Colorado. The meeting will provide opportunities to see and discuss how burned areas will regenerate and how they will look over time.

Please submit site-specific comments that can be used to further refine the proposed action by **August 24, 2004**. Written comments will be accepted at the meeting. This request for public comments has been mailed to other federal, state, and local agencies, adjacent landowners, and individuals or organizations who may be interested in, or affected by, decisions related to our proposal. Notice of this public involvement effort has also been given through the local news media.

Comments can be submitted on the Web at: r2_mbr_vis@FSNOTES. When submitting comments on the web, the **SUBJECT LINE** must be "**Big Creek Ridge**" to ensure proper routing. All future documents and information on the Big Creek Ridge Prescribed Fire Partnership Project efforts will be posted at www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr/projects/forest_health and you are encouraged to use this site for all your participation in the analysis. Please let us know if you want to remain on the mailing list for hard copy information on this project. When submitting your comments, please include your full name and address.

Written comments should be submitted to: Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, Attn: Joanne Sanfilippo, 925 Weiss Drive, Steamboat Springs, Colorado 80487. Telephone Number: (970) 870-2210. Fax Number: (970) 870-2284.

Implementation

Implementation may start in the fall of 2004 and is expected to occur in the spring and/or fall for several years.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,



KIMBERLEY D. VOGEL
District Ranger
Hahns Peak/Bears Ears District Ranger



OSCAR P. MARTINEZ
District Ranger
Yampa District Ranger

Enclosures: Map