

Chapter 1

Purpose of and Need for Action

This chapter describes the proposed action, the purpose of and need for action, the Analysis Area/Project Area, direction from the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Rio Grande National Forest, as amended (Forest Plan), the decisions to be made, the key issues associated with the proposed action, other issues, and public scoping. All timber volumes and acres are approximate.

1.1 The Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to salvage timber within an area approximately 623 acres in size that was burned during the Million Fire, which started on June 19, 2002 and burned approximately 9,222 acres over a two week period (approximately 7856 acres of National Forest Lands and approximately 1,366 acres of private property, including 11 homes). The treatment will include commercial timber sales. No new road construction or reconstruction is required to implement this proposal.

1.2 Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is as follows:

- To salvage sawtimber and provide wood products damaged by the Million Fire to the local public and support the local economy.
- To take advantage of past investments by utilizing existing transportation systems.
- To maintain or improve big game winter range habitat impacted by the fire by: Encouraging the regrowth of healthy plant communities with a variety of plants for food and cover in the burn area, by ground scarification, and by providing mulch (from slash) to the site.

The need for the proposed action is tiered to the Forest Plan and is as follows:

- To ensure long-term sustained production of timber resources for economies, communities, and people, ensuring healthy and vigorous forested stands (Particularly in areas zoned for timber resource production) while providing forest and wood products through the management of a financially efficient timber resource program.

The project is designed to achieve the Regional and Forest Wide Objectives identified in Chapter II of the Forest Plan. These include the following:

1.1 - Maintain or improve long-term soil productivity, and protect against significant or permanent impairment of the land.

1.2 - Manage the Forest to maintain or improve the health and vigor of all native plant associations (including trees).

1.3 - Ensure the sustainability of viable populations of all native wildlife species through the maintenance or improvement of habitat conditions.

1.4 - Manage wildlife habitat at the appropriate scale to maintain the ability of species to disperse over large areas.

3.2 – Emphasize long-term sustainable production of resources for economies, communities and people.

3.4 – Use existing roads, instead of constructing new ones.

4.5 – Offer a diverse range of outdoor-recreation opportunities.

6.2 – Manage, as much as practicable, the Forest’s market-oriented programs so that they are financially profitable.

1.3 Forest Plan Direction

Management direction for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF) is included in the Forest Plan as amended. The Forest Wide desired condition for timber resources as provided in the Forest Plan directs: “The vegetative structure on the RGNF is capable of sustaining timber harvesting that supplies wood products for humankind while providing for the biological diversity of those forested areas.” The analysis is tiered to both the Forest Plan and the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan. The Forest Plan emphasizes, (a) long-term sustainable production of resources for economies, communities and people, while maintaining or improving long-term soil productivity, water quality, and other resources and, (b) there is a demonstrated and ongoing demand for wood and miscellaneous forest products, such as firewood, and poles (FEIS p. 3-159).

Regulated timber harvest activities will occur on lands classified as suitable for timber production. On unsuitable lands, limited timber cutting may occur for such purposes as salvage, protection or enhancement of biodiversity or wildlife habitat, scenic-resource management, or to perform research or administrative studies consistent with Management Area direction (Forest Plan, p. III-20).

1.4 Analysis Area

The *Analysis Area* contains 9,891 acres in the two following sixth level watersheds: # 130100011503 watershed (4768 acres) and # 130100011505, the Shaw Creek Watershed (5123 acres). See Map 3 in the Map Section for a map of the Analysis Area. It is located primarily within the Gerrard Gulch and West Fork Shaw Creek drainages approximately four miles east of the town of South Fork on the Divide Ranger District, Rio Grande County, Colorado.

The *Project Area* (harvest boundaries) contains 623 acres. The legal description is Township 39N, Range 4E, portions of Sections 5,6,7,8,17, and 18; Township 39N, Range 3E, Section 12. Figure 1.4-1, Vicinity Map, shows the Project Area in context with local communities. Figure 1.4-2 shows a detailed topographical map of the Project Area.

Figure 1.4-1. Vicinity Map

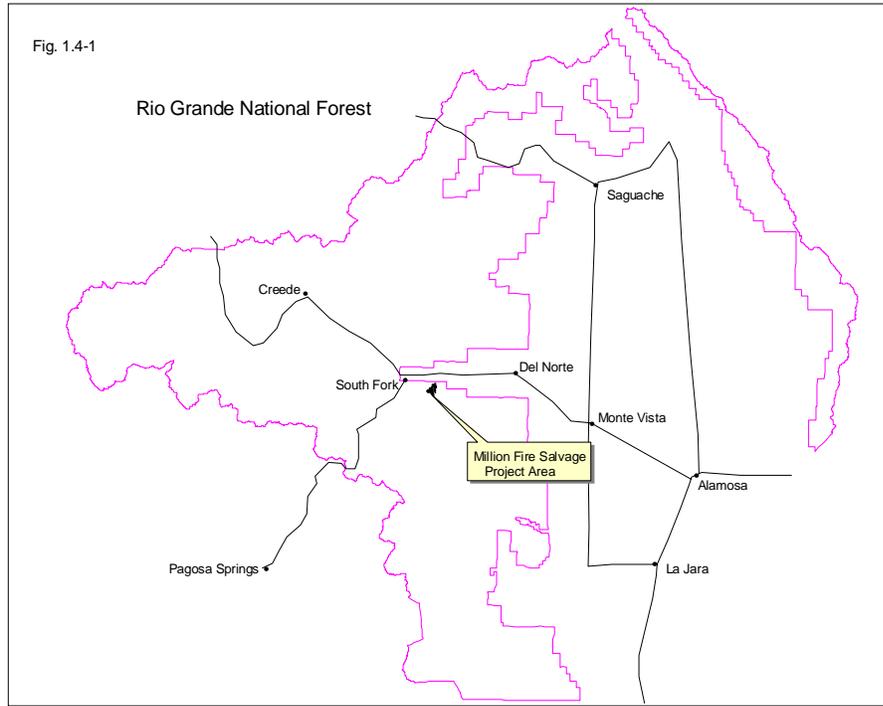
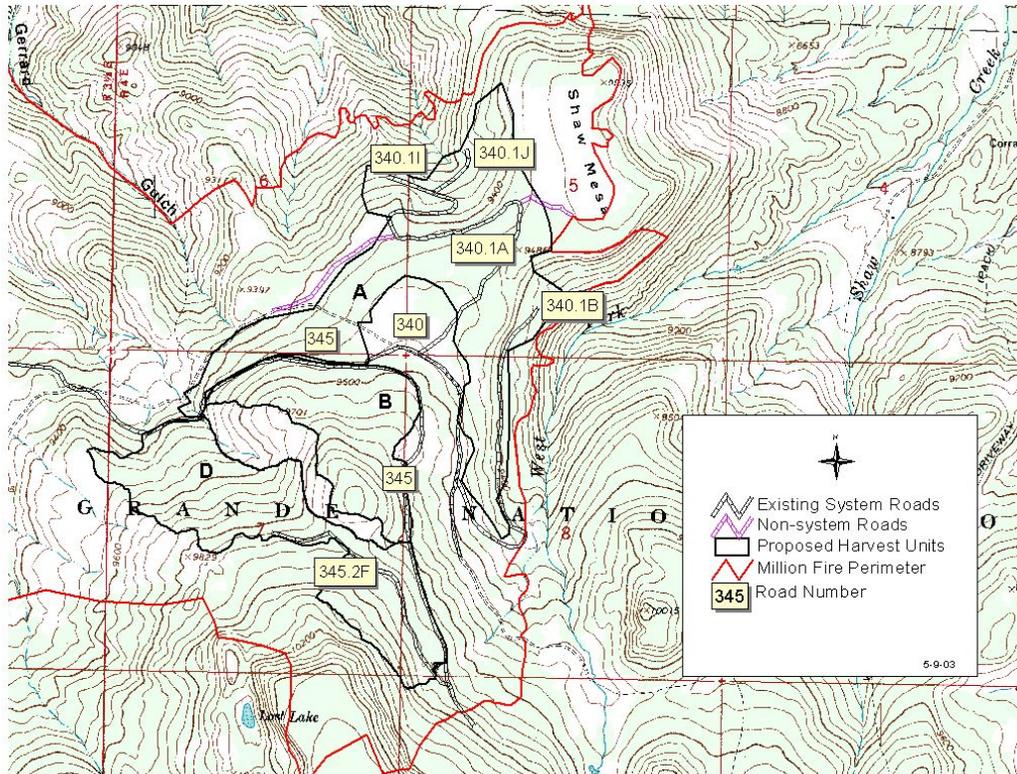


Figure 1.4-2. Project Area Map



1.5 Forest Plan Management-Area Prescriptions

Lands within the Rio Grande National Forest are managed for a particular emphasis or theme known as a Management-area Prescription (MAP). Each MAP in the Forest Plan has a description of the physical setting for the area, a description of the desired future conditions for the area, and a list of the Standards and Guidelines that apply to the area. The Million Fire Salvage Project Analysis Area resides within MAP 5.41 – Deer and Elk Winter Range and MAP 5.11-General Forest and Intermingled Rangelands. See Map 2 in the Map Section for MAP.

MAP 5.41 represents 468 acres of the project area.

MAP 5.11 represents 155 acres of the project area.

MAP 5.41 – Deer and Elk Winter Range: The intent of this prescription is to manage the area to supply adequate amounts of quality forage, cover, and solitude for deer, elk and other species while on winter range. These areas consist of both forested and non-forested habitats, generally in the lower-elevation fringes of the Forest. Vegetation will be maintained to sustain healthy plant communities. In winter, human activities will be managed so that deer and elk can effectively use the area. These areas are included in the Suitable timber base, with resource constraints (Forest Plan p. IV-29).

MAP 5.11 – General Forest and Intermingled Rangelands: The intent of this prescription is to allow a variety of management options, such as livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, dispersed recreation, exploration and/or development of minerals and energy resources, and timber harvest. These areas are characterized by forest and grassland communities, and managed with a multiple-use emphasis to achieve a variety of goals. When timber harvest is employed to achieve management goals, a full range of silvicultural prescriptions may be employed. The area has a well-developed transportation system. Visitors can expect to see managed but natural appearing stands of trees. Recently cut areas will show tree stumps, slash, skid trails, and soil disturbance (Forest Plan p. IV-25).

1.6 Decisions to be Made Based on this Analysis

There are two decisions that will be addressed as part of this Environmental Assessment (EA). The decisions are:

- 1) *Should fire-damaged trees within the Project Area be salvaged at this time?*
- 2) *Which alternative is preferred to meet the stated purpose of and need for the proposed action (Section 1.2).*

The District Ranger will describe the findings, decisions made and the rationale behind those decisions in the Decision Notice that will accompany the Environmental Assessment for this project.

1.7 The Key Issues Associated with the Proposed Action

Key environmental issues have been identified by Forest Service Resource Specialists, through contact/discussion (scoping) with other agencies and the general public. The public, State, and other Federal Agencies have been notified that salvage harvest

management is being evaluated within the Million Fire Salvage Analysis Area. In addition, a scoping letter was sent to potentially concerned organizations or individuals. Letters received assist in identifying key issues to be analyzed in this document, and to develop alternatives and mitigation measures. These letters were filed at the Divide Ranger District in Del Norte, Colorado.

Three key issues were identified for this project, using input from the general public, other agencies, and Forest Service specialists. The key issues, along with the unit of measure of each issue, are presented below:

□ Key Issue 1 – Economics, Loss of timber merchantability:

The economic effects of the salvage of timber.

Unit of Measure: Quicksilver.

□ Key Issue 2 – Watershed Health:

The effect of salvage logging on water quality and yield in relation to increased runoff, peak flow, and stream channel stability.

Unit of Measure: Runoff, erosion rates, sedimentation rate.

□ Key Issue 3 – Soil Health:

The effects of salvage logging on soil productivity and soil health, particularly related to erosion, compaction, and nutrients.

Unit of Measure: Acres treated, slope classes, tons of erosion, probability of erosion, probability of runoff, erosion rates during and after logging.

1.8 Other Issues

The Interdisciplinary Team reviewed the Forest Plan and public comments in order to develop a broader list of issues, concerns, and opportunities associated with the proposed action. The issues listed here will be addressed in the analysis but are not considered key criteria in the analysis. These issues, along with the rationale on why they are not key to the analysis, are presented below:

1) The effects of this project on lynx. This area is likely to contain dispersal habitat for the re-introduced lynx population. *Rationale: The Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation (BA/BE) will identify any impacts of the proposed action on lynx habitat. Mitigation and monitoring identified in the BA/BE will be followed and incorporated into project design should an action alternative be selected.*

2) The effects of the removal of damaged trees on the maintenance of adequate snags for cavity nesting birds. *Rationale: We will meet or exceed the minimum Standard and Guidelines in the Forest Plan for snag retention in the proposed project area. Less than 7% of the burned area on Forest Service Lands will be affected by the proposed salvage project.*

3) The effects of new road construction or reconstruction. *Rationale:* No new roads will be built to facilitate harvest. All roads needed are currently in place. Minor road maintenance will be necessary.

4) The effects of utilizing old roads and skid trails to minimize impacts. *Rationale:* Old roads and skid trails will be used, when possible, to minimize impacts.

5) The effects of the possible increase in noxious weeds. *Rationale:* The proposed action will include mitigation measures to limit the spread of noxious weeds. Skidding and mechanical harvesting equipment will be washed prior to entering the sale area, to remove noxious weed seeds and plant parts.

6) The effects of this proposal on fuelwood sources for the public. *Rationale:* The Ranger District wood products program will create fuel wood gathering opportunities for the public. The Forest Service is mandated to provide large and small sale opportunities to the public.

7) The effects of livestock grazing on the project area. *Rationale:* Livestock grazing will not be allowed in the project area for at least two years.

8) The effects of reforestation on the harvested areas. *Rationale:* It is expected that aspen regeneration will reoccupy much of the harvest areas. Regeneration surveys will be conducted after harvesting to determine if tree planting is needed in the harvest areas.

9) The effects of potential bark beetle infestations in live and injured trees within and adjacent to the harvest areas. *Rationale:* To reduce potential bark beetle breakouts, mitigation measures will be initiated to monitor beetle populations. Beetle traps would be placed in strategic locations to monitor beetle numbers. Yearly monitoring of green trees in the area would identify potential beetle outbreaks. Limited harvest and/or felling and treatment of infected trees would be implemented.

10) The effects of requiring an EA or EIS to analyze this proposed project. *Rationale:* A National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) significance determination was completed and an EA was deemed to be acceptable. A Finding of No Significant Impacts (FONSI) describes the level of analysis required. See the Decision Notice and FONSI attached to this document. During analysis, if other issues become significant, then an EIS may be required.

11) The effects of implementing a restoration alternative. *Rationale:* A passive Restoration Alternative without timber salvage does not meet the stated purpose of and need for the proposed action in Section 1.2.

12) The Forest Service determination that it may permanently damage the soil on 15% of an activity area and still meet NFMA and planning regulations is arbitrary.

Rationale: The Soil Management Handbook, FSH 2509.18-91-1 clearly establishes the direction and rationale for the Nationally accepted 15% standard. Any reconsideration of this direction is beyond the scope of this project proposal.

13) When an activity area reaches 15% detrimentally impacted soils, tree growth outside the skid trail or impacted area is affected.

Rationale: The 15% threshold is based on direction contained in Soil Management Handbook and Region 2 Supplement, FSH 2509.18-91-1. The establishment of the 15% factor is clearly based on available research and current technology... ” as described in Section 2.05 #2. Any reconsideration of this direction is beyond the scope of this project proposal.

14) The effects of this project on the water supply of the Town of Norwood.

Rationale: The town of Norwood is not located near the Rio Grande National Forest. This issue is beyond the scope of this analysis.

15) How trees with crown scorching will be chosen to harvest or leave. *Rationale: Marking guidelines are described in Section 3.4.*

16) The effects of the proposed project on old-growth forests. *Rationale: Old-growth issues are analyzed in Section 3.8.*

17) How cumulative effects will be addressed. *Rationale: Cumulative effects are analyzed in Chapter 3.*

18) The effects of the Beschta Report on implementing the proposed project.

Rationale: The Beschta Report, Beschta et al. (1995) was referenced in several scoping letters and is considered in this EA. Although the Beschta Report discusses some important topics related to post-fire salvage, the report is a commentary paper, is not site specific, and lacks comprehensive literature citations (Everett 1995) (McIver and Starr 2000).

19) The effects of salvage logging on rehabilitation projects. *Rationale: The proposed salvage project was designed to limit the affects of salvage logging on post-fire rehabilitation projects, such as mulching, seeding, erosion control devices, etc. Straw mulching will be conducted along Road 345 in the proposed salvage area. If salvage operations affect the mulching effort, mitigation measures would require mulching the impacted areas.*

20) The effects of salvage logging on short and long-term wildlife habitat and species viability, particularly MIS, TES, and snag-dependant species. *Rationale: The Forest Service is procedurally required to analyze MIS and TES species. The BE/BA will address the viability issue. Also, the effects on short and long-term wildlife habitat are analyzed in the EA.*

21) The Forest Service must consider snowmobile impacts to vegetation and soil productivity, which have been explained to the Forest Service by Hammer (2002). *Rationale: Most of the proposed project occurs within Management Prescription 5.41 -- Deer and Elk Winter Range, which specifically restricts snowmobile use to designated roads and trails. Therefore, this issue was not given detailed consideration.*

1.9 Public Review and Comment

The Forest has completed the initial public notification for the Million Fire Salvage Timber Sale using the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) document mailed out four times each year, by mailing letters to potentially concerned citizens and organizations, and publishing a legal notice in the Valley Courier. A public comment period corresponding with the release of the scoping letter and legal notice for the Million Fire Salvage Sale was completed between November 26, 2002 and January 3, 2003. A legal notice was published in the Valley Courier on November 26, 2002 to solicit comments from interested parties. Responses were received from seven groups and individuals. The EA for Comment was released June 27, 2003. Four responses were received from the public on the EA for comment.

1.10 Changes from the EA for Comment

Changes from the EA for Comment include the following. Chapter 5 contains the public comments received on the EA for Comment and responses to those comments. Minor changes were made to Chapters 1, 2, 3 and Appendices 2, 3, and 4 to provide clarity or improve readability and to respond to public comment. Appendix 5 was removed and information included in the MIS section of Chapter 3. The information from Appendix 5 is located in Chapter 3. Minor typographical corrections and wording clarifications were made as needed.

Literature Cited:

- Beschta, R.L. et al. 1995. Wildfire and salvage logging: recommendations for ecologically sound post-fire salvage logging and other post-fire treatments on Federal lands in the West. Oregon State University. 14 p.
- Everett, R. 1995. Letter dated August 16 to John Lowe. Review of Beschta document. 8 p. USDA. Pacific Northwest Research Station.
- McIver J.D. and L. Starr. 2000. Environmental Effects of Post-fire Logging: Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography. USDA, Pacific Northwest Research Station PNW-GTR-486.
- USDA Forest Service. 1996. Revised Land and Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement, Record of Decision, as amended. Rio Grande National Forest, CO.