

Decision Memo Torrey Rim Prescribed Burn

**USDA Forest Service
Shoshone National Forest
South Zone/Wind River District
Fremont County, Wyoming
(T.40 N, R. 106 W, Sections 4-5, 7-9, and 16-18)**

Decision

Summary of Decision

It is my decision to implement the Torrey Rim Prescribed Burn. The intent is to treat fuels and vegetation to improve bighorn sheep habitat by improving migration corridors and increasing winter range by reduce conifer encroachment in meadows, aspen stands and open grassland. The desired outcome is a vegetative mosaic of at least 40 percent burned within the target area. I considered both the input of the interdisciplinary team and the public in my decision.

This project is in conformance with the Shoshone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, the Management Area Direction, including that contained under management prescription, 8-E (Chapter III, Forest Plan). Floodplain, wetlands, prime farmlands, threatened and endangered species, and cultural resource management implications have been considered and these resources will not be adversely affected.

The planned action was evaluated pursuant to Categorical Exclusion 6(d), in Section 31.2 of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 – *Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook*: “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service Level D, FSH 7709.56). Examples include but are limited to: Reference item (d) Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor.”

Background

The area along the ridge north of Torrey Creek between Torrey Rim, a primary wintering area for bighorn sheep, and Whiskey Mountain, spring/fall range, was identified as a restricted travel route that has needed improvement as early as 1979. This restricted travel route was identified during a study conducted by Tom Thorne and others (*The Status, Mortality, and Response to Management of the Bighorn Sheep of Whiskey Mountain*) under the auspices of the Whiskey Mountain Bighorn Sheep Technical Committee (a committee established in 1969 that consists of biologists from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Bureau of Land Management, and Forest

Service). The Whiskey Mountain Bighorn Sheep Comprehensive Management Plan has also addressed this management problem... “Over 50 years of fire suppression has allowed the development of many areas of dense or over mature trees which effectively block bighorn movements and use of some suitable winter range. Judicious, properly planned, and well-managed use of prescribe fire for habitat and migration corridor management holds the greatest potential for addressing this problem.” Radio and GPS telemetry during more recent research into lamb survival in the Whiskey Mountain bighorn sheep herd has shown that the proposed treatment area is still being used for sheep movement between the winter range Torrey Rim and the spring/fall range on Whiskey Mountain. Higher than normal predation on sheep, particularly lambs (as shown by marked decreases in lamb to ewes ratios between summer and winter range) is likely occurring in this area of migration. Because bighorns rely on their vision and ability to detect predators early in open terrain and escape to more rugged habitat as a predator defense mechanism, movement through dense forested areas can compromise that defense mechanism.

Purpose and Need for Action

The primary purpose of the action is to improve bighorn sheep movement corridors and adjacent winter range habitat within the Torrey Rim area. Current conditions including dense forested habitat in traditional movement areas and adjacent winter range areas affect bighorn sheep by restricting movement, making sheep more susceptible to predation, and reducing forage availability in these movement and adjacent winter range areas. Therefore, the approved action is needed to improve habitat for the bighorn sheep.

Description of Action

Planned Action.

The project will occur on the Wind River Ranger District in Fremont County, approximately 8 miles SSE of Dubois, Wyoming. The planned action will include prescribe burning forested areas within the Glacier Addition to the Fitzpatrick Wilderness in the Torrey Rim area on the northeast side of Whiskey Mountain using ground and aerial ignition.

A project area of approximately 2,800 acres has been designated; a total of 2,000 acres is planned for prescribed burning with the intent of creating a mosaic burn within 40% of the vegetation.

Project Design

I have decided to implement the planned action as described, including specific project design features (PDFs) and mitigation measures to minimize environmental effects. PDFs are integral and critical elements of the planned action; their purpose is to reduce potential impacts and ensure that the proposed fuel reduction treatments are consistent with the management objectives for a variety of resources (e.g., fisheries, wildlife, and botanical) in the project area. Their basis includes the management direction of the Shoshone National Forest Plan, as amended to which the project is tiered, pertinent best

management practices, and the professional expertise of the interdisciplinary planning team.

Soils, topography, slope and aspect, elevation, access, recreation, wildlife and other environmental considerations are part of the PDFs for the planned action, along with additional concerns and issues identified through scoping. An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists was involved with project design, and reviewed and analyzed the planned action for compliance with the limitations for categorical exclusions, extraordinary circumstances, applicable laws and commensurate with the issues and concerns raised from the scoping, public involvement cooperation process. Specific PDFs related to this action include, but are not limited to:

- Using only existing roads to implement the project.
- Using standard fire protection measures as defined in the Shoshone National Forest Fire Management Action Plan.
- Cooperating with the Wyoming Game & Fish Department by identifying state lands within the approved prescribed burn contingency boundary.
- Notifying the State District Forester in Riverton in advance of burning to provide for interagency training to local firefighters.
- Providing for monitoring of the prescribed burn sites through Wind River District staff.

Public Involvement

Project Scoping

Scoping is to determine the scope of the issues to be addressed and to identify significant issues related to the proposed action (40 CFR 1501.7). The project proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during the scoping period January 15 to February 20, 1999, through publication in the *Dubois Frontier*, a general circulation newspaper in Dubois, Wyoming. All correspondence is retained in the project file. All comments received through scoping and public involvement processes were considered in developing the project action and which directed the analysis process. Using the comment from the public, other agencies, and tribes, the interdisciplinary team developed a list of key issues to address and activities to implement.

Public Concerns and Issues

The majority of the comments received were in favor of the proposed action. However, the following issues were raised for consideration:

- The use of prescribed burning vs. commercial harvest of timber to reduce vegetation
- Potential impacts to elk, mule deer and moose
- Visual impact associated with burned vegetation
- Need for post-treatment monitoring
- Need for an Archeological Survey

- Avoidance of White Bark Pine
- Prescribed fire escape
- Prospect of building new roads to allow mechanical removal of timber
- Impact to Wilderness
- Impact to Fisheries
- Potential for landslide complex
- Potential air quality impact to wilderness
- Need to reduce livestock grazing within the project area

All issues were given full consideration in development of the approved action. The Forest Service conducted the necessary biological evaluations, evaluated soil and landscape features, included best management practices to reduce sediment escape, incorporated measures to avoid air quality impacts and developed post-treatment monitoring. I believe that benefits of this project are numerous and that the necessary steps to mitigation and/or avoid other impacts have been incorporated into the project design.

Findings

Biological Evaluation

The biological evaluation (BE) for sensitive fish, wildlife and plant species concluded that the planned action may impact individuals or their habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species in the planning area. A biological evaluation was also completed relative to Forest Plan Management Indicator Species (MIS). It concluded that there will be no significant effect on any MIS, and this action will have no measurable effect on Forest wide population trends or viability of any species.

Other Requirements by Law

Compliance with National Direction

Since this project tiers to the National Fire Plan direction, it conforms and is compliant with the goals and objectives of the National Fire Plan and the 2002 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan, as it is identified as a fuel reduction plan which also has wildlife benefit.

Compliance with the Forest Plan

The decision to conduct prescribed burning in the project area is consistent with the Shoshone Forest Plan, as amended, as it pertains to Management Area Direction for Area 8E.

Compliance with the Wyoming Wilderness Act of 1984

Although the planned action is in the Fitzpatrick Wilderness, it occurs in the portion of the Glacier Addition to the Fitzpatrick Wilderness that was specifically addressed in The Wyoming Wilderness Act of 1984. In that act {(SEC. 201. (a) (11)} the following

language addresses the proposed action....”*Provided*, That within the area referred to in this subparagraph, occasional motorized access for administrative purposes and related activities as determined necessary by the Secretary for habitat management, trapping transporting and proper management of the area’s bighorn sheep population may be allowed;”.

Clean Air Act

The planned action will maintain air quality in the project area, surrounding air sheds, and local communities using a Smoke Management Plan. Site-specific burn plans are required for all prescribed burns and include smoke management elements (FSM 5140). The plan will identify the appropriate weather conditions for conducting the prescribed fire to maintain air quality in the area.

Clean Water Act

The planned action will comply with the Forest Plan while pursuing project objectives. Best Management Practices and other design related features will minimize sediment production during and following project implementation. In considering Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, I find that this activity does not required additional approval of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

National Historic Preservation Act/Section 106 Compliance

The Forest Archeologist and the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) reviewed this project. A site-specific cultural survey was conducted and concluded that no historic sites and/or materials eligible for the National Register would be affected by this project. The SHPO concurred with these findings.

Endangered Species Act/Consultation Requirements

Forest Service policy is to protect the habitat of federally listed proposed, candidate, threatened or endangered species from adverse modification or destruction, as well as to protect individual organisms from harm or harassment. A biological assessment was prepared to determine possible effects the proposed activity may have on threatened or endangered species. The assessment indicated that no adverse impact would occur to individual species.

Rationale For Decision

It is my decision to proceed with this project because it will result in improve habitat for bighorn sheep. I feel that without active management within the project area, an unacceptable risk to bighorn sheep survival exists due to the current vegetative condition within the project area.

I have reviewed the proposal and determined that no significant effects will occur from its implementation, including no adverse effects to actual extraordinary circumstances (FR Vol. 69, No. 108, page 33814). The effects of the action, as determined through scoping and interdisciplinary input and review by a team of resource specialists that analyzed the proposal, are not highly controversial and are similar to other actions that

have been implemented in the area. Therefore, I find the planned action can be categorically excluded from further documentation in an environmental assessment.

Administrative Review, Appeal Opportunities & Implementation

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.4 and may be implemented immediately.

Contact Person

For additional information on this decision, contact: Mark King, South Zone NEPA Coordinator, Washakie Ranger District, 333 E. Main Street, Lander, WY 82520; phone (307) 332-5460; Email jmking@fs.fed.us.

/s/ /Rick Metzger

March 8, 2004

Rick Metzger
District Ranger
Wind River Ranger District
Shoshone National Forest

Date