

## PUBLIC SCOPING NOTICE

### Rattlesnake Canyon Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

#### USDA Forest Service, Shoshone National Forest Wapiti Ranger District Park County

Dear Interested Party:

The public comment period for the Rattlesnake Canyon Stewardship Project<sup>1</sup> is now open. The purpose of this comment period is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful participation before the Responsible Official makes a decision. This letter includes information about the proposed action and how you can submit substantive comments.

The goal of stewardship contracting is to assist in enhancing and restoring landscapes wherever such projects are undertaken to better implement the National Fire Plan and the President's Healthy Forests Initiative.

The Wapiti Ranger District, Shoshone National Forest is proposing to conduct vegetation treatments to meet forest health, fuel reduction and public safety objectives. The 54-acre project area includes mechanical treatments located in proximity to Forest Service road 402 in the Rattlesnake Creek drainage, beginning approximately 20 miles northwest of Cody, Wyoming. The legal description is T54N, R104W, Section 33 (*see* Figure 1-Vicinity Map).

#### **Proposed Action**

To accomplish the hazardous fuels reduction objectives, the project would include a maximum of 54 acres of mechanical treatment. Stewardship contracting<sup>2</sup> is being proposed to implement the project. The table below lists the acres by treatment type. These are estimated figures and the final acreages, boundary lines, and specific actions may change after further planning, evaluation and review of public comments in response to this letter. Implementation could begin as early as September 2004.

**Project Planning.** Project design includes protection of threatened, endangered and sensitive species habitat through mitigation and implementation of appropriate Best Management Practices, avoidance of all known historic and prehistoric sites, compatibility with Forest Plan management area direction, and other applicable design features identified from scoping input. Mechanical treatment is being considered and may be modified as planning progresses. Your comments and any concerns will help refine the proposed action and any additional project design features needed for environmental protection.

Mechanical treatment would be performed in the vicinity of the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and structures on private land. This treatment would be done to remove hazard trees and reduce fuels in proximity to the Forest boundary.

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<sup>1</sup> Stewardship Project-The Omnibus Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2003 has authorized the USFS and the BLM to undertake "stewardship end results contracting projects" to help achieve the President's vision of the Healthy Forests Initiative. They offer a way to do more work in the wildland urban interface and on environmental restoration projects in forest and rangelands, watersheds and wildlife habitat. This authority will be an important new part of the National Fire Plan and has advantages over traditional management tools.

<sup>2</sup> Stewardship Contracts-Allows federal land managers to offer long-term contracts for periods of up to ten years, to reduce management costs by exchanging goods for services, and to select local contractors on a best value basis.

- The available administrative tools that may be used to implement this project, include, but are not limited to saw-timber or firewood sales, service contracts, or stewardship contracts.
- All access for treatment would use existing roads or temporary roads, as needed. If needed, temporary roads would be closed and obliterated after use. No new permanent roads or infrastructure would be required.
- Seasonal and daily timing restrictions would be used for hauling operations around the Mooncrest Ranch as needed.
- Small conifers may be cut to decrease conifer encroachment into meadows.

### **Purpose and Need**

**Project Purpose** – The purpose of the proposed action is to reduce hazardous fuels and/or create a fuelbreak adjacent to the Mooncrest Ranch and improve the overall health and age-class diversity of vegetation within the project area.

Standing dead and down woody fuels have increased, and fuel conditions in the Rattlesnake Creek drainage are different than from historic fuel conditions due to beetle infestations, past fire suppression, and drought. Under current conditions, fires would burn faster with more intensity than historic fires. There is a high potential for wildfire to escape from National Forest System land onto private land and vice versa. A large stand-replacement wildfire in this particular area would have adverse effects on National Forest System lands, adjacent private land, and big game winter range habitat.

**Need for the Project** – The following opportunities were identified, which support the need for the proposed action:

Need for restoration activities to improve landscape conditions:

- Improve the health and vigor of vegetation types. Forest health is below desired conditions, as existing stands in the drainage are declining due to age, drought, and disease and beetle infestation. The current drought conditions, and insects and disease on the Forest have caused accelerated mortality in the Rattlesnake Creek drainage.
- Reduce hazardous fuels and the spread of wildfire caused by insects, diseases and other forest pests. Current conditions have lead to an outbreak of Douglas-fir and spruce beetles in stands surrounding of the Mooncrest Ranch. Dense stands of mixed conifers exist near structures located on the ranch and contribute to the hazardous fuels and increased risk of uncontrollable wildfire.

### **Need to reduce fuels that pose risks to communities and ecosystem values:**

- Need to reduce hazardous fuels and the spread of wildfire. A high potential for wildfire to spread exists; there is a need to reduce the risk of fire escaping onto adjacent private land and developments or from private lands onto public lands.

- Need to provide cost-effective fire protection to minimize the combined costs of fire suppression and damages; and prevent loss of human life.

### **Forest Plan – Management Areas**

The majority of the proposed action is located on lands identified in the Shoshone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (amended) as Management Area 2B. Management Area 2B provides for rural and roaded natural recreation opportunities. Motorized and non-motorized recreation activities such as driving for pleasure, viewing scenery, picnicking, fishing, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing are possible. Conventional use of highway-type vehicles is provided for in design and construction of roads. Motorized travel may be prohibited or restricted to designated routes to protect physical and biological resources.

### **Scoping and Public Involvement**

We are proposing this project subject to the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 and Stewardship Contracting. This notice is the public's opportunity to identify and submit issues and concerns they feel the Forest Service should address related to this project. Comments must be timely and substantive. This means that comments must be within the scope of, are specific to, and have a direct relationship to the proposed action. They must include a supporting reason that I should consider in making a decision. If you have information pertinent and specific to the proposed action, we welcome your participation.

The interdisciplinary team, consisting of resource specialists, conducted an initial review of the proposal and identified that the project's scope is such that the project can be evaluated pursuant to Categorical Exclusion 31.2(10) (Hazardous Fuels Reduction). Based on the comments from the public, state, and/or Federal agencies, the interdisciplinary team may include possible project design features to minimize effects of the proposed action. At this time, no effects to any extraordinary circumstances have been identified and we plan to document this decision in a nonappealable Decision Memo.

### **Contact**

The public should submit any issues and/or comments related to this project in writing to: Marty Sharp, NEPA Coordinator, North Zone/Wapiti Ranger District, 203A Yellowstone Ave., Cody, WY 82414, by email at [comments-rocky-mountain-shoshone-wapiti@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-rocky-mountain-shoshone-wapiti@fs.fed.us) or faxed to (307) 578-1202. Please refer to "Rattlesnake Canyon Fuels Reduction" in the subject line of emailed or faxed responses. Email attachments must be in Microsoft Word, WordPerfect or plain text format. Your comments would be most helpful if received before July 30, 2004.

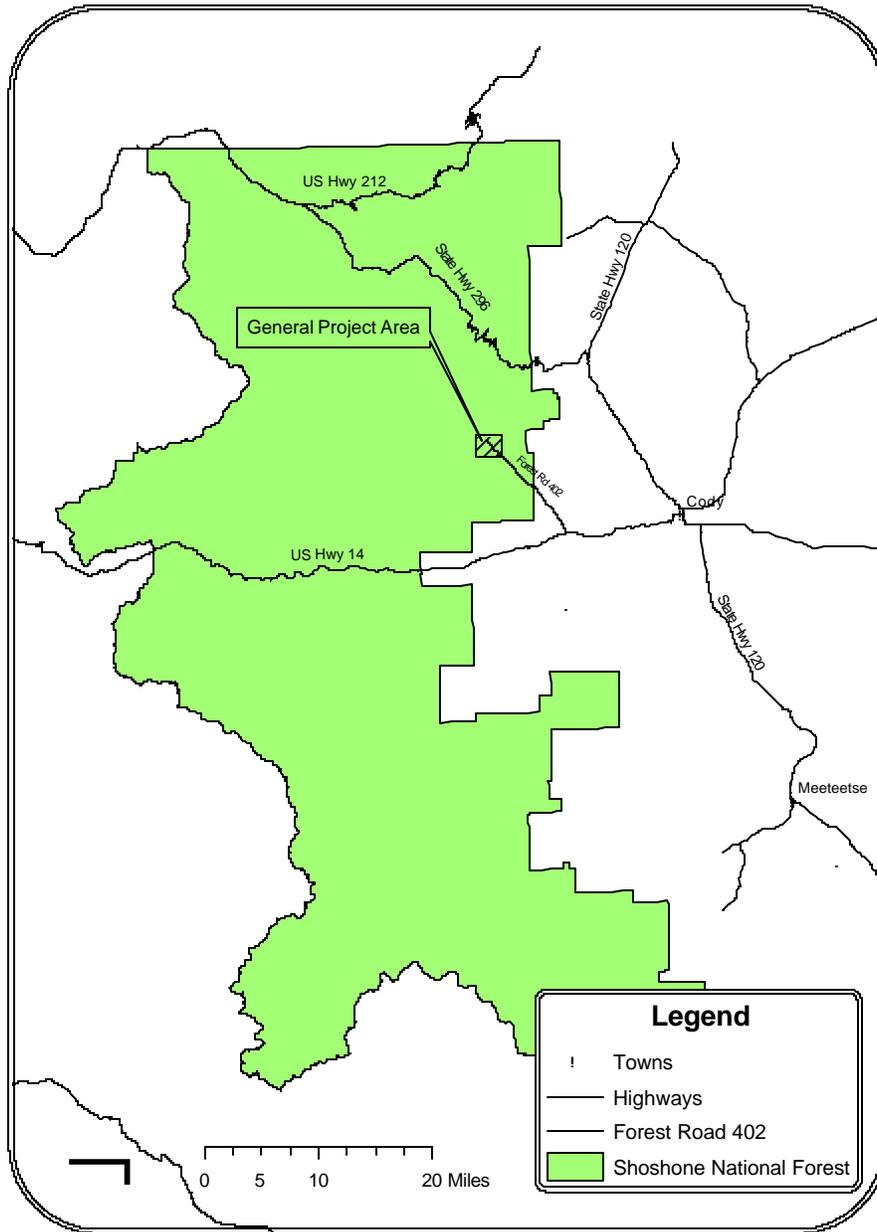
Questions related to the proposed action should be directed to Monte Barker, North Zone Wildlife Biologist, Wapiti Ranger District, telephone (307) 527-6921.

Sincerely,

*/s/David R. Myers 6/18/04*

DAVID R. MYERS  
District Ranger

**Figure 1. Vicinity map and general location for Rattlesnake Canyon Fuels Reduction Project.**



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