Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Pikes Peak Ranger District of the Pike and San Isabel National Forest proposes to treat approximately 21,100 acres within the 100,000 acre Catamount Project Area to move the montane forest ecosystem towards its historic conditions. The treatments would result in reducing wildfire hazards and improving the health of the forest. The 21,100 acres of treatment contain Ponderosa pine, Limber pine, Douglas-fir, Aspen and Oak shrublands (Figure 1). Specific actions would be dependent on site-specific conditions and the vegetation type, however, actions would include thinning, created openings and prescribed burning. A combination of mechanical harvesting equipment and hand treatment would be used. No new systems roads would be constructed, however some temporary roads would be used.

1.2 DECISION

I have decided to implement the Alternative B - Proposed Action in the Environmental Assessment (EA). This decision was made following review of the EA, supporting materials referenced by the EA, and additional information contained in the Decision Notice.

INFORMATION RELEVANT TO MY DECISION

The following are the key pieces of information that relate to my decision.

The Catamount Forest Health and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project would create more sustainable forest conditions that are more resilient to fire, and insects and diseases while providing for diverse wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, sustainable watershed conditions and increased public safety. The objectives of the project are to modify vegetation within the project area in order to reduce fuels for wildfires. The purposes of this project are:

1. To reduce the risk that a wildfire would negatively affect the municipal watershed reserves for the cities of Colorado Springs, Green Mountain Falls, Cascade, Chipita Park and Manitou Springs.
2. To reduce fuels and associated risk of extreme fire behavior in the Wildland Urban Interface.
3. To improve forest health, vigor, and resistance to fire, insects and disease.
4. To reduce the risk of severe flooding and sedimentation for the protection of public safety, water system infrastructure, and other natural and developed resources.
Figure 1. Catamount Priority Treatment Areas
This project is needed because of the high potential for catastrophic wildfires to occur in the area. There are hundreds of homes, critical watersheds and significant associated infrastructure at risk in, adjacent to and near the project area. The steadily increasing population and associated development in the area will proportionately increase this risk in the future. Tree thinning, prescribed burning, and/or other fuel reduction methods can significantly reduce the hazard of intense fires.

Further, the need for the proposed project is driven by the deteriorating forest conditions. Historic fire suppression has created forests that are more susceptible to a large-scale, high intensity wildfire, as well as insect epidemics. The need to reduce forest fuels has been clearly demonstrated by the recent large-scale, high intensity fires occurring across the western United States and on the Front Range of Colorado.

The Pikes Peak region, not unlike many other Front Range areas, is challenged with a mosaic of forest conditions outside of their historic range of variability causing concern for the increased potential of catastrophic wildfires in the area. The compounding effects of historical logging intensity, large stand replacing fires during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and aggressive fire suppression efforts has resulted in unnatural forest conditions. The juxtaposition of the current forest conditions on Pikes Peak with local water, recreation, and other natural and developed resources are of great concern as wildfires have increased by number of incidents, intensity, and acres burned across the state of Colorado.

The watersheds in the project area are critical community resources as they are the source of their domestic water supply. For example, Colorado Springs Utilities’ local raw water system operation relies predominantly on Pikes Peak as a source water supply from the native yields, storage, and receiving point for the Blue River System water. This water supply is critical to specific water treatment plants, from both a quantity and quality perspective, as well as for compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act and meeting consumer demands.

The Hayman Fire, as well as several other recent fires on the Pike and San Isabel National Forests have destroyed homes, infrastructure and other property on private and public lands; seriously damaged critical watersheds; imperiled fish and wildlife habitat; and reduced recreational opportunities. Subsequent run-off from severe thunderstorms during the monsoon season over the fire-denuded areas have eroded soils, causing flooding, destroyed homes, damaged highways and various other facilities as well as degraded fisheries.

A landscape assessment of the Catamount area was completed in 2008 (USDA Forest Service 2008) that has defined some of the issues and provided valuable preliminary analyses. The Pikes Peak Watershed Assessment (JW Associates 2009) provides an analysis of the hazards of wildfire to water supply watersheds in the Catamount Project Area. These documents and others provide the basis for the environmental consequences presented in the EA.
Reasons for My Decision

**Substantive Comments on the EA**
There were no substantive comments received during the objection period.

**Key Issues**
The key issues are improvement of watershed protection, forest restoration and wildlife. These issues are directly addressed by the Alternative B - Proposed Action.

**Public Involvement**
The public involvement effort is documented in the EA (page 6).

**Alternatives Considered**
Alternative B - Proposed Action was the only action alternative considered. Alternative A was the no action alternative.

1.3 *Finding of No Significant Impact*

I have determined that these actions will not significantly affect the quality of the biological, physical or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors and the effects analysis documented in the EA, in light of the following factors listed in 40 CFR 1508.27.

**Context**
The EA contains effects analyses that provide appropriate context for this project. Significance was evaluated in terms of both short and long-term effects, and several scales were used.

**Intensity**

**Environmental Impacts**
I find there are no significant impacts due to this project. Some short-term, less than significant effects have been identified in the EA. However, all the proposed actions would pose minimal, short-term impacts to the area. The actions would create a more sustainable, long-term environment.

**Public health or safety**
I find there are no adverse effects on public health and safety. This project would reduce fuels and associated risk of extreme fire behavior in the Wildland Urban Interface, reducing hazards to public health and safety.
Unique characteristics of the area
I find there are no significant effects on unique characteristics such as historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers. Forest lands would not be adversely affected and there are no prime farmlands or wild and scenic rivers in the activity areas.

Controversy
This project is not controversial. No substantive comments were received during the objection period.

Uncertainty
I find the effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

Precedent
This decision does not set a precedent for future decisions. This type of project has been accomplished before throughout this region and the western United States.

Cumulative impact
This action does not represent potential cumulative adverse impacts when considered in combination with other past or reasonably foreseeable actions. All activities together are not expected to have a cumulatively significant impact (see EA Chapter 3).

Properties on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places; Significant resources
I find the action will have no adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places because no known listings are present in the areas affected by this project.
I find the action will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because the treatment areas will be surveyed and analyzed. Based upon that survey and analysis, any significant resources will be avoided or appropriate mitigation will be applied that will be approved by the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office.

Endangered or threatened species
I find the action will not adversely affect any federally listed or proposed endangered or threatened species or Forest Service listed sensitive species or their critical habitat (see Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation).

Legal requirements for environmental protection
I find the action is consistent with federal, state, and local laws and requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Pike/San Isabel Land and Resource Management Plan (EA Chapter 3).
Based on the above, I find that there are no significant impacts; therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.
FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY
The proposed action is consistent with the Pike/San Isabel Land and Resource Management Plan.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS
I find that my decision is consistent with the wide variety of laws, regulations, and policies that guide management of National Forest System lands. These include but are not limited to:

Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act
The selected alternative is in compliance with the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act
The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) provisions have been followed as required by 40 CFR 1500. The EA considered a reasonable range of alternatives, including the required No Action alternative. It also disclosed the expected impacts of each alternative and discussed the identified issues and concerns. This Decision Notice describes the decision I have made and my rationale for the decision.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act
This EA has been prepared under the policies of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) and is in compliance with it.

Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds
There are no significant floodplains or municipal watersheds that would trigger a positive finding for extraordinary circumstances under this criterion.

Endangered Species Act
The analysis and decision meets all requirements of the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

National Historic Preservation Act
The selected alternative complies with the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). If previously unidentified sites are identified during the implementation of the project, measures will be taken to assure full compliance with the NHPA and the Memorandum of Understanding with the Colorado State Historical Preservation Officers.

Clean Air Act
Implementation of the proposed design features (EA Chapter 2) will allow the proposed activity to be in compliance with state and federal air quality regulations and laws.

Clean Water Act
Implementation of the proposed design features (EA Chapter 2) will allow the proposed activity to be in compliance with state and federal water quality regulations and laws.
National Forest Management Act

The selected alternative is in compliance with the National Forest Management Act (36 CFR 219.27).

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision is not subject to appeal under 36 CFR Part 215 because it was prepared under the HFRA regulations. The 30-day objection period was completed on November 29, 2010, and no objections were received. Therefore, this decision will be implemented beginning February 15, 2011.

Signature and Date

Brent Botts, District Ranger
Pikes Peak Ranger District
Pike and San Isabel National Forests
Responsible Official

Feb 14, 2011

References
