



U.S. Department
of Agriculture, Forest Service



Bighorn National Forest
April 2014

Notice of Proposed Action

Crater Ridge Vegetation Management Project

Medicine Wheel/Paintrock Ranger District, Bighorn National Forest
Sheridan County, Wyoming

Comments Sought on Proposed Action

The Medicine Wheel/Paintrock Ranger District of the Bighorn National Forest welcomes your comments on its proposal to manage forest vegetation in the Crater Ridge area (see map on page 7). The proposed action includes commercial timber harvest on approximately 1,000 acres of Engelmann spruce, lodgepole pine, and subalpine fir. Additional actions being proposed as part of the timber harvest activities include road maintenance, drainage structure installation, road closures, and road decommissioning. Your comments on the information provided below will help us fine-tune the proposed action and identify issues and concerns related to it.

The purpose of the public comment period is to identify issues and concerns related to the proposed action. District Ranger David Hogen has determined that the scoping period is the most effective timing for the 30-day comment period on the proposed action (36 CFR 218.24).

This project is subject to comments under 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B. Only those who submit timely, project-specific, written comments during the public comment period will be eligible to file an objection. The Forest Service will accept comments on this proposal for 30 days following publication of the legal notice in the Casper Star Tribune. The legal notice is expected to be published on April 25, 2014. **This will be the only comment period offered.** The *Comment Process* section on page 5 of this document contains additional information about submitting comments.

Background / Purpose and Need for Action

A decision notice and finding of no significant impact for this project were signed by District Ranger David Hogen on September 24, 2013. Two appeals per 36 CFR 215 were subsequently submitted, and the decision was remanded by the appeal deciding officer. This proposed action is similar to the September 24 decision; however, it includes reforestation actions such as fill-in planting (see bottom of page 3 for more information).

The Crater Ridge vegetation management project area encompasses approximately 4,600 acres of the Medicine Wheel/Paintrock Ranger District on the Bighorn National Forest (see map on page 7). It is located in the Crater Ridge area, near the headwaters of the Little Big-

horn River between the Cub Creek and Mann Creek drainages. The legal description of the project area is Township 57 North, Range 90 West, sections 7, 8, 17, and 18 and Township 57 North, Range 91 West, sections 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

Approximately 1,200 acres of the project area are within the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RACR) boundary. The project area also has 3.3 miles of existing road within the RACR boundary. The roadless characteristics of the area have been substantially altered by the existing 3.3 miles of road and the previous (1989 to 1995) Crater Ridge timber sale.

The primary purpose of the Crater Ridge Vegetation Management Project is to improve forest health and resilience in lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, and subalpine fir stands by improving species diversity and managing stand densities. This would be accomplished by commercially harvesting timber.

Currently the project area has more subalpine fir relative to other species in the stands. Thinning the density of the stands would favor Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine which are more shade intolerant than subalpine fir. Establishing more spruce and pine would increase species diversity, size, and age and increase resilience to natural disturbances. This meets the following 2005 *Bighorn National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan* (forest plan) direction:

“Design management practices that maintain a mosaic of vegetative composition and structure emulating natural processes, patterns, scale, effect, and distribution of community types, age, and structure classes” (forest plan chapter 1, goal 1, objective 1c, strategy 1).

“Forest vegetation on suited lands is managed to provide an even distribution of age classes” (forest plan chapter 2, management area 5.11 desired condition for vegetation/habitat).

“Openings in the forest canopy are created to provide for a wide range of structural stages as well as for the production of wood fiber” (forest plan chapter 2, management area 5.11 desired condition for timber).

Another purpose of the project is to offer commercial forest products from the Bighorn National Forest to meet the following direction in the forest plan:

“Annually offer a reliable level of forest products (sawtimber, posts and poles, Christmas trees, and fuelwood) on Forest lands.” (forest plan chapter 1, goal 2, objective 2c, timber strategy 1f)

There is an opportunity to increase elk security by closing part of Forest Service road (FSR) 112 in the project area. The proposed action would close the last three miles of FSR 112 to summer motorized travel (see Table 2 and the map on page 7), which would increase the acres of elk security. This is consistent with the following forest plan direction:

“Maintain or increase the amount of elk (MIS) security areas at the forestwide scale. Current level is 47% of potential. Assess availability of security areas at the geographic area scale and incorporate security area analysis into travel and vegetation project management decisions to increase availability, where feasible.” (forest plan chapter 1, goal 1, objective 1b, strategy 6)

The Proposed Action

Vegetation management activities in the Crater Ridge area would include approximately 1,000 acres of commercial timber harvest (trees 8 inches in diameter and larger) in lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, and subalpine fir stands (see the map on page 7). Products other than large-diameter logs would be made available, including posts and poles.

The following harvest methods are proposed: group selection, single tree selection, and shelterwood (see Table 1). Definitions of each treatment are listed below the table. Harvested trees would be whole-tree skidded to landings. Residual slash at the landings would be burned within two years of harvest unit completion. Any incidental tree tops and limbs left in the woods would be lopped and scattered to a depth of less than 24 inches. Timber sales are expected to be offered for sale in 2016.

Table 1. Proposed timber treatments by unit for the Crater Ridge vegetation management project.

| Unit Number | Approx. Acres | Proposed Treatments |
|-------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 50 | Group selection |
| 2 | 112 | Single tree selection |
| 3 | 45 | Shelterwood |
| 4 | 46 | Shelterwood |
| 5 | 124 | Group selection |
| 6 | 110 | Single tree selection |
| 7 | 320 | Group selection |
| 8 | 102 | Single tree selection |

In **group selection** units, 20% of the stand would be removed, leaving approximately 2-acre openings. The goal is to open the stand to establish regeneration of Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine.

Single-tree selection would remove 25% of the stand density. The smallest diameter to be removed would be 5 inches. The goal is to have smaller diameter trees per acre than large-diameter trees. Any tree larger than 24 inches in diameter would be removed.

In the units with **shelterwood thinning**, trees in commercial size classes (5 inches and larger) would be thinned. The goal of shelterwood thinning is establishing more Engelmann spruce and lodgepole seedlings while improving the growth and vigor of the stand. This thinning would also target diseased and insect-infested trees.

For the units receiving group and individual tree selection treatments and the units receiving shelterwood seed cut treatments, steps will be taken to assure regeneration. These steps include actions designed to maximize the probability of seedling establishment, such as, but not limited to, retaining coarse woody debris; preparing an adequate seed bed; and using unit orientation, shape, and size to optimize shading. In addition, post-sale regeneration surveys will be conducted and fill-in planting will be prescribed, if needed, to meet regeneration establishment requirements.

The primary transportation system is in place for the vegetation treatments; no new permanent roads are proposed. The existing roads and proposed actions are described in Table 2. A portion (the last three miles) of FSR 112 would be closed to summer motorized travel (see Table 2 and the map on page 7).

Approximately 5 miles of temporary roads are proposed for construction to access units. Locations would be approved by the Forest Service and decommissioned (effectively closed) when no longer needed for project work. Roads would be decommissioned by removing culvert(s), ripping to a depth of 8 inches, scattering wood/rock debris onto the road for a sight distance, and applying seed as needed.

No new temporary roads would be constructed in the project area within the 2001 RACR boundary. The same temporary roads used during the previous Crater Ridge timber sale (1989 to 1995) would be used for this project.

Table 2. Proposed actions for existing Forest Service roads under the Crater Ridge vegetation management project.

| Road # and Name | Miles | Proposed Action |
|----------------------------|--------------|--|
| 108 – Crater Ridge | 4.5 | The first 1.9 miles of this road are currently open and would remain open after its use on this project. After use, the section from the gate (milepost 1.9) to the stock tank (milepost 2.8) would remain closed by use of the road closure gate. The last 3.2 miles would be decommissioned. |
| 112 – Crater Ridge Springs | 4.0 | The entire length of this road is currently open. This road would require reconditioning with heavier maintenance and the installation of additional drainage structures. Between milepost 0.5 and 0.6, the road would also require covering the protruding rocks with dirt. If the portion of this road from its junction with FSR 042111 onward is utilized, it would require reconstruction – clearing, excavation, and construction of drainage structures. After its use for this sale, the first mile of FSR 112 would remain open (see map). A gate would be installed at that point, closing the last three miles to summer motorized travel. Closing the road at this point would increase elk security by 976 acres. |
| 043114 – Cub Creek Spur D | 1.4 | This road is currently closed with a gate. After its use, the first 1.1 miles would remain closed by use of the existing gate. The last 0.3 mile portion of this road would be decommissioned. |
| 043113 – Cub Creek Spur B | 0.7 | This road is currently closed with a gate. After its use, the first 0.5 mile portion of the road would remain closed by use of the existing gate. The last 0.3 mile portion of this road would be decommissioned. |
| 043112 | 0.3 | The existing gate would be removed, and the road would be decommissioned. |
| 042111 – Deb Lane | 1.0 | After its use, the last 0.4 miles of this road would be decommissioned. The entire road would be closed if a gate is installed on FSR 112. |

Comment Process and Eligibility to Object

We encourage your substantive comments on this proposed action. This is your opportunity to identify additional information and management opportunities that may be incorporated into the proposed action, including supporting reasons the responsible official should consider in reaching a decision. Substantive comments are within the scope of, and specific to, the project and have a direct relationship to the proposed action.

Your comments will help us complete an environmental assessment. The assessment will be used to determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact. If there is no potential for significant impacts, that finding, along with the environmental assessment and a decision notice, will be released.

The proposed project is subject to 36 CFR 218 – project-level, pre-decisional administrative review process. Because the proposed project is an activity implementing a land management plan and not authorized under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA), it is subject to 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B only. Only individuals or organizations who submit timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection (36 CFR 218.5(a)).

We will accept written comments concerning this action for thirty calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the Casper Star Tribune. This comment period coincides with public scoping and will be the only comment period offered. The expected publication date is April 25, 2014, and it is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this analysis. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

Written comments must be submitted to the responsible official: David Hogen, Medicine Wheel/Paintrock District Ranger, 604 E. Main, Lovell, WY 82431; phone 307-548-6541; fax 307-548-5316. You may also hand-deliver your comments to the above address during normal business hours from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Acrobat (.pdf), and Word (.doc) to Comments-Bighorn@fs.fed.us. Please put “Comments: Crater Ridge Vegetation Management Project” in the subject line. Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required.

Comments submitted by individuals or organizations must have evidence of timely submission, as defined by 36 CFR 218.25(a)(4), and meet the following requirements outlined in 36 CFR 218.25(a)(3):

- Name and postal address (email recommended but not required).
- Title of the proposed project or activity.
- Specific written comments (as defined in 36 CFR 218.2) regarding the proposed project, along with supporting reasons.

- Signature or other verification of identity upon request and identification of the individual or entity who authored the comments. For comments listing multiple entities or multiple individuals, a signature or other means of verification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent each entity and for each individual in the case of multiple names. A scanned signature or other means of verifying the identity of the individual or entity representative may be used for electronically submitted comments.
- Individual members of an entity must submit their own comments to establish personal eligibility; comments received on behalf of an entity are considered as those of the entity only.

Comments received and the names and addresses of those who comment will be part of the public record for this project; they will be available for public inspection and released, if requested, under the Freedom of Information Act.

For more information, please contact Bernie Bornong (interdisciplinary team lead) 307-674-2685 or David Hogen (district ranger) at 307-548-6541.

Figure 1. Crater Ridge vegetation management project map.



