

Dated: July 11, 2003.

Roberto Salazar,

Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Dixie National Forest, Utah, Duck Creek Fuels Treatment Analysis

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

SUMMARY: The USDA Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to implement fuels treatments in the Duck Creek area, within the Cedar City Ranger District, Dixie National Forest, Utah. A Notice of Intent for this project was published in the **Federal Register** May 23, 2002. This Notice of Intent is a revision to change the dates of the EIS and minor corrections of acreages. The agency gives notice of the full environmental analysis and decision-making process that will occur on the proposal so that interested and affected people may become aware of how they can participate in the process and contribute to the final decision.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of the analysis must be received within thirty days after publication of this Notice Of Intent in the **Federal Register**. The draft environmental impact statement is expected in September, 2003. The final environmental impact statement is expected in December, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to: Duck Creek Fuels Treatment Analysis Coordinator, Cedar City Ranger District, Dixie National Forest, 1789 Wedgewood, Cedar City, Utah 84720.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Duck Creek Fuels Treatment Analysis Coordinator, Cedar City Ranger District, Dixie National Forest, 1789 Wedgewood, P.O. Box 627, Cedar City, Utah 84720.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The proposed treatments will implement direction in the National Fire Plan, a USDA/USDI effort to reduce impacts of wildfires on people and resources. In August, 2000 President Clinton directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to reduce the impacts of wildland fires on rural communities. The Secretaries subsequently developed the National Fire Plan. This direction was followed by congressionally-

approved plans that funded "hazardous fuel reduction" near urban interface areas.

The National Fire Plan directs Federal agencies within USDA/USDI to engage states and local communities in reducing forest fuels, using a variety of fuel reduction treatments (mechanical, prescribed fire and intensive manual treatment). Hazardous fuel reduction is a critical investment necessary to reduce fire risk and fire suppression costs into the future and is focused on areas near communities and interface areas that the States have judged to be in harm's way of a wildfire.

The analysis area of 25,741 acres of National Forest System lands is located thirty miles east of Cedar City, Utah. The analysis area includes six tracts of private lands which are surrounded by National Forest lands. The tracts are subdivided into residential lots and contain an estimated 1,900 homes and 10 businesses. The specific subdivisions are as follows:

Subdivision	Legal location (approximate) Salt Lake Base Meridian
1. Meadow View Heights.	T38S R7W Sec 6.
2. Mirror Lake	T38S R7W Sec 5, 8.
3. Movie Ranch	T38S R7W Sec 7.
4. Movie Ranch South.	T38S R7W Sec 7.
5. Color Country	T38S R7W Sec 8, 17.
6. Timber Trails	T38S R7W Sec 7, 17, 18.
7. Ponderosa Villa	T38S R7W Sec 16.
8. Strawberry Valley	T38S R7W Sec 20, 21.
9. Swains Creek	T38S R7W Sec 26, 2.
10. Blackman Hill	T38S R7W Sec 26, 27.
11. Harris Springs	T38S R7W Sec 26.
12. Swains Creek Pines.	T38S R7W Sec 33, 34.
13. Ponderosa Ranch	T38S R7W Sec 24; T38S R6W Sec 19.
14. Zion View Mtn Estates.	T38S R8W Sec 2.
15. Duck Creek Pines	T38S R7W Sec 7.

The private lands were designated an "urban interface community at risk from wildfires on National Forest lands" by the Chief of the Forest Service (**Federal Register** / Vol. 66, No. 160 / Friday, August 17, 2001 / Notices). This designation meant that Federal funds from the National Fire Plan could be spent to reduce fuels on National Forest lands adjacent to the private lands.

Historic prevention and suppression of wildfire has resulted in ever-increasing accumulations of forest fuels. These buildups of forest fuels increase the risk of high intensity fires to the National Forest and to large private

subdivisions within the forest boundary. The extensive development and high recreation use have also increased the threat of human-caused fires. A high intensity fire occurring within this area would cause significant damage to property and natural resources. Reducing the risk of wildfires in these areas would provide the best opportunity to protect National Forest lands and adjacent private properties. The Forest Service has determined that the fuels treatment objectives will be met without harvesting trees over nine inches in diameter.

Purpose and Need for Action. The purpose of this project is to modify existing, high fuel loads that influence fire behavior in National Forest lands adjacent to private lands in the Duck Creek area. There is a need to reduce minute, hour, ten-hour and hundred-hour fuels adjacent to private property and in the defensible fire space zone. There is a need to change the structure and composition of the fuels throughout the project area, especially in aspen-dominated sites. There is a need to change the characteristics of the residual trees by removing ladder fuels from the ground to eight feet high. Changing these fuels characteristics and reducing the fuel loads would help reduce the risk of property damage and allow sufficient time for firefighters to directly attack and control a wildfire before housing and other developments are threatened or destroyed. The fuel elements that need to be treated are as follows:

Element 1—Ground Fuels Reduction. Current fuel loads adjacent to private lands range from 20–50 tons per acre. The desired condition of the area immediately surrounding the subdivisions, Defensible Fire Space (DFS), is to have fuel loads reduced to 5–10 tons per acre, a level that would not sustain a high intensity wildfire.

The current fuel loads range from 20–50 tons per acre in the general forest area outside of the DFS. Reducing the fuel loads in the general forest area to 10–15 tons per acre would slow the spread of fire and would reduce the potential for a fire to spread into the crowns of the trees.

Element 2—Ladder Fuels Reduction. Lower branches and small trees currently extend from the ground upward, creating the ladder a fire would climb to reach higher crowns. Ladder fuels have increased dramatically as ponderosa pine trees with small crowns and few lower branches have been replaced by fir and spruce that have large crowns and branches extending to the ground. Fire suppression has also resulted in a dense understory of young

trees that contribute to the fire ladder. The desired condition within the DFS is to effectively prevent a ground fire from climbing into upper tree crowns.

Element 3—Retention of Fire Tolerant Species. Aspen is naturally regenerated by wildfire, and therefore is considered a fire-tolerant species. Aspen stands within the watershed are being encroached upon by tree species such as spruce and fir, which are fire intolerant species. Stands with a high density of aspen act as natural firebreaks or areas where fire activity is slowed. Aspen is a short-lived species that requires disturbance in order to regenerate; without disturbance, these stands will eventually be taken over by conifers, eliminating the aspen from the area. Conifer encroachment increases fire susceptibility and fire behavior within these stands. Maintaining aspen stands would help slow the spread of fires that may occur. The desired condition is to regenerate and maintain aspen stands.

Proposed Action: The Forest Service proposes to treat fuels in timber stands located in Kane County, Utah, Salt Lake Base Meridian, T38S R8W, T38S R7W, T39S R8W, T39S R7W and T38S R6W. The specific fuels treatments are as follows:

1. **Defensible fire space treatments.** Establish a defensible fire space (DFS) in National Forest lands from 500'–2000' wide immediately surrounding private lands with subdivisions. The area to be treated in the DFS is approximately 2,724 acres. To reduce the risk of a wildfire reaching or spreading through tree crowns within the DFS, intensive fuels removal treatments will be conducted by cutting all conifer trees under nine inches in diameter and pruning limbs under eight feet high on conifer trees to reduce ladder fuels. Limbs, existing ground fuels and slash will be disposed of by piling/burning or chipping.

2. **Mixed conifer treatments.** Reduce fuel loads and favor the establishment of ponderosa pine on approximately 7,352 acres of mixed conifer stands in National Forest lands south and west of the private subdivisions. Mixed conifer stands have major components of ponderosa pine, white fir and Douglas-fir with minor components of subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce and Colorado blue spruce. Fuel loads will be reduced by cutting white fir, Douglas-fir, subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce and Colorado blue spruce trees under nine inches in diameter. Limbs, existing ground fuels and slash will be disposed of by piling/burning or chipping.

3. **Spruce/fir treatments.** Reduce fuel loads on approximately 947 acres of spruce/fir conifer stands in National

Forest lands south and west of the private subdivisions. Spruce/fir stands have major components of Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir with minor components of ponderosa pine, Colorado blue spruce, Douglas-fir and white fir. Fuel loads will be reduced by cutting subalpine fir, white fir and Douglas-fir under nine inches in diameter. Engelmann spruce, Colorado blue spruce and ponderosa pine trees under nine inches in diameter will be retained in this area in order to maintain a spruce component into the future. Limbs, existing ground fuels and slash will be disposed of by piling/burning or chipping.

4. **Aspen treatments.** Regenerate and maintain stands dominated by aspen in approximately 2,366 acres of National Forest lands south and west of the private subdivisions by cutting Engelmann spruce, Colorado blue spruce, subalpine fir and white fir trees under nine inches in diameter and underburning fuels. Slash will be pulled away from mature (over 18" diameter) ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir trees to provide partial protection from prescribed fire. Aspen, a short-lived species that acts to slow the spread of wildfire, requires periodic disturbance to induce new growth. Underburning will result in stimulating and regenerating the aspen. A prescribed fire plan will be developed prior to underburning. The plan will outline appropriate burning conditions and fire control methods to be implemented to insure the prescribed fire is confined to the area to be treated.

Fuels and slash piling may be done by machine, except where Forest Plan standards for soils or slope dictate otherwise. Piles will be burned. The transportation system required to treat or remove fuels is in place. No new roads would be constructed with this project. Riparian areas along perennial streams would be protected with a 300-foot no-treatment buffer along the edges. Riparian areas along ephemeral streams would be thinned, but piling and burning would occur at least 50 feet away from the channel. No treatment would occur within 100 feet of springs in order to protect water sources, soils that are wet and sensitive to compaction, and riparian habitat. The project will be implemented in accordance with direction in the Dixie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

Possible Alternatives: Three or more alternatives will be considered in the analysis.

No action. Under this alternative, the proposed fuels treatments will not be completed. The current forest fuels

conditions would not be substantially changed and natural processes would continue. This alternative will be fully evaluated and described.

Proposed Action (as described above).

Additional Alternatives—Additional alternatives may be developed in response to issues and resource conditions evaluated through the analysis.

Responsible Official: The responsible official for this EIS and the Record of Decision is: Robert A. Russell, Forest Supervisor, Dixie National Forest, 1789 Wedgewood, PO Box 627, Cedar City, Utah 84720–0627; FAX: (435) 865–3791.

Nature of Decision To Be Made: The Responsible Official will decide whether forest fuels treatment would be conducted to reduce risks from wildfires to the National Forest and to private lands held within the National Forest; and, if so, what extent and types of treatments should be done.

Scoping Process: Public participation was initiated through scoping in October, 2001. A scoping notice was sent to 2,796 individuals and organizations who are potentially affected parties and those currently on the Dixie National Forest mailing list that have expressed interest in natural resource projects. Two public meetings were held (October 27, November 1). Comments and issues were received in response to these public contacts.

Scoping will continue. Public participation is especially important during scoping and review of the draft EIS. Individuals, organizations, federal, state, and local agencies who are interested in or affected by the decision are invited to participate in the scoping process. This information will be used in the preparation of the draft EIS.

Preliminary Issues. The following issues were identified through public scoping and internal resource analyses:

1. The proposed fuels treatments would reduce travel corridors for big game (e.g. elk and deer) and birds and small mammals (e.g. turkey, grouse, red squirrels and flying squirrels) by substantially fragmenting habitat throughout the project area.

2. The proposed fuels treatments would remove understory trees and limbs, which are used by juvenile goshawks within nest areas and flammulated owls as roosting habitat.

3. The proposed fuels treatments would create openings in the forest and increase sight distance from the homes within the subdivision into the forest. This would change the visuals/aesthetics of the area by reducing or eliminating the "vegetative screening" that many residents value.

4. Older stands of aspen would be regenerated and replaced by younger stands of aspen, reducing and/or changing the aesthetic value of these stands. Older trees with large, white boles would be replaced by thickets of seedlings and saplings in the short term. Fall color viewing would also be impacted.

5. The proposed fuels treatments would remove young trees and seedlings from the spruce/fir stands, resulting in the eventual loss of the timber stand due to lack of regeneration.

6. The proposed fuels treatments are too costly to implement.

7. The proposed fuels treatment would reduce or eliminate understory vegetation that serves as a barrier to off-road motorized vehicles, especially by ATV's (All Terrain Vehicles).

Comments Requested. Comments will continue to be received and considered throughout the analysis process.

Comments received in response to this notice and through scoping, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record of this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR parts 215 or 217. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within a specified number of days.

Early Notice of Importance of Public Participation in Subsequent Environmental Review: A draft environmental impact statement will be prepared for comment. The draft EIS is expected to be filed with the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and to be available for public review. At that time the EPA will publish a notice of availability of the draft EIS in the **Federal Register**. The comment period for the draft environmental impact statement will be forty-five days from the date the EPA's notice of availability

appears in the **Federal Register**.

Comments on the draft EIS should be as specific as possible and may address the adequacy of the statement or the merits of the alternatives discussed (Reviewers may wish to refer to the *Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act* at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points).

The Forest Service believes, at this early stage, it is important to give reviewers notice of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of draft environmental impact statements must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewers' position and contentions. *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could have been raised at the draft environmental impact statement stage but that are not raised until after completion of the final environmental impact statement may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*, (9th Circuit, 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc. v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the 45-day comment period so that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at the time it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the final environmental impact statement.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns about the proposed action, comments on the draft environmental impact statement should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the statement or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement. Reviewers may wish to refer to the *Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act* at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to substantive comments and responses received during the comment period that pertain to the environmental consequences discussed in the draft EIS and applicable laws, regulations, and policies considered in making a

decision regarding the proposal. The Responsible Official will document the decision and rationale for the decision in a Record of Decision. The final EIS is scheduled for completion in January, 2003. The decision will be subject to review under Forest Service Appeal Regulations.

Dated: July 8, 2003.

Robert A. Russell,

Forest Supervisor, Dixie National Forest.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Notice of Proposed Changes to Section IV of the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) of the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Indiana

AGENCY: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

ACTION: Notice of availability of proposed changes in Section IV of the FOTG of the NRCS in Indiana for review and comment.

SUMMARY: It is the intention of NRCS in Indiana to issue three revised conservation practice standards in Section IV of the FOTG. The revised standards are: Critical Area Planting (342), Structure for Water Control (587), and Terrace (600). These practices may be used in conservation systems that treat highly erodible land and/or wetlands.

DATES: Comments will be received for a 30-day period commencing with this date of publication.

ADDRESSES: Address all requests and comments to Jane E. Hardisty, State Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), 6013 Lakeside Blvd., Indianapolis, Indiana 46278. Copies of this standard will be made available upon written request. You may submit your electronic requests and comments to darrell.brown@in.usda.gov.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Jane E. Hardisty, 317-290-3200.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Section 343 of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 states that after enactment of the law, revisions made to NRCS state technical guides used to carry out highly erodible land and wetland provisions of the law, shall be made available for public review and comment. For the next 30 days, the NRCS in Indiana will receive comments relative to the proposed