DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for the

GUARD STATION TIMBER SALE

USDA Forest Service
San Juan/Rio Grande National Forest
Mancos-Dolores Ranger District
Dolores County, Colorado

I. Introduction

An environmental assessment (EA) describing the environmental effects of a variety of vegetation management alternatives for the proposed Guard Station Timber Sale is available for review at the San Juan/Rio Grande National Forest Supervisor's Office located in Durango, Colorado, and at the Dolores Ranger District Office in Dolores, Colorado. In accordance with the National Forest Management Act and National Environmental Policy Act, a team of interdisciplinary resource specialists conducted the analysis and documented the results.

The vegetation management actions assessed are located in the Doe Canyon and Five Pine Canyon areas of the Glade landscape, east of Dove Creek, Colorado. The specific area for the proposed activity lies in T.40N., R.17W. and R.16W., and T.39N., R.17W.

The purpose of the proposed action is to help meet the goals and objectives of the San Juan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), provide for healthy ecosystems, and sustain communities. Implementation of the Forest Plan is required by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA, P.L. 93-378) and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA, P.L. 94-588).

This decision pertains only to lands currently administered by the Forest Service.

II. Scoping and Public Involvement

The scoping process for the project was designed to gather information regarding the potential environmental effects and issues surrounding the proposal. A Forest Service interdisciplinary team, various resource specialists, and members of the public provided input into the process.

A news release requesting comments and concerns was published in June, 1995. Members of the public and other government agencies were also contacted by letter informing them of the proposed action. Additional

public notification of the project occured through the San Juan NEPA Project Update published in June and September, 1995, and in January and March, 1996.

An environmental assessment document (EA) was released for public comment on March 1, 1996. The public comment period ended on April 4, 1996. Several letters of comment were received during this time period. (See Appendix G of the EA.)

III. Issues

The following issues were identified from the internal and external scoping process:

1. **Ecosystem Restoration** - The ponderosa pine zone of the analysis area has been radically altered during the 20th Century by the introduction of grazing, timber harvest activities, and fire suppression. Current conditions do not reflect the desired condition. In particular there has been a lack of periodic fire disturbance, there is a lack of late-successional stages including old growth, and the area is deficient in standing snags.

2. **Forest Health** - This is the condition of the forest as it pertains to or threatens our capability of achieving resource management objectives. Specific primary factors include risk of catastrophic loss from mountain pine beetle outbreaks and/or wildfire, and increased potential for noxious weed infestation.

3. **Effects on the Local Economy** - This issue involves a local wood products industry that is struggling to survive, a local economy that benefits from the jobs and income provided by the local wood products industry, and local county governments that rely somewhat on timber sale receipt payments from federal timber sales.

4. **Roads** - Timber harvest offers the opportunity both to create new roads and, if desired, close existing ones. Physical effects of roads on the environment, effects to wildlife and wildlife habitat, changing opportunities for roaded recreation, and Forest Plan standards and guidelines for road densities, are all elements of this issue.

5. **Wildlife** - Effects of timber harvest and burning on various species of wildlife, such as Abert's squirrels, Merriam's turkeys, sensitive wildlife species, and deer and elk, is an issue that arose in the scoping process.

See Chapter 2, Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities, of the EA.

IV. Alternatives

The No Action alternative and five action alternatives were developed in order to analyze effects and address the issues. These alternatives aredescribed and examined in detail in the Environmental Assessment.

The No Action alternative prescribes no on-the-ground timber harvest or burning activity in the project area during the current planning period.

Alternative 2 recommends the use of timber harvest and fire in a fashion that would seek to replicate pre-1870 forest conditions on a portion of the area. Low pine stocking levels, an emphasis on retaining larger-diameter trees, a reduced Gambel oak component, and vigorous and healthy grass and forb conditions, are the featured results of prescribed activities. All activites would occur in two blocks.

Alternative 3 has the same management objectives as Alternative 2 but spreads the activity out in smaller, more widely distributed units.

Alternative 4 uses fire exclusively to conduct vegetation management in the area.

Alternative 5 is a more traditional timber management alternative. It would seek to maximize long-term wood fiber production by maintaining optimum tree stocking levels.

Alternative 6 prescribes harvest and burn treatments designed to change current stand conditions to benefit wildlife.

Refer to Chapter 2, Alternatives Considered in Detail, for more thorough descriptions.

V. Decision

Based on the analysis documented in the EA, it is my decision to implement Alternative 2 with a few design components of Alternative 6. I believe that this modified alternative presents the most effective strategy for addressing the management issues and opportunities in the Guard Station analysis area.

My selected course of action proposes the following treatments:

- Conduct harvest and prescribed-burning activities in two units on approximately 1345 acres within the pine type. Make available to industry an estimated 2900 thousand board feet (MBF) of wood fiber raw material. Apportion 50% of the volume to forest stewardship purpose and 50% to timber commodity purpose (ie. meeting timber volume objectives).

- Cut no trees greater than 16" diameter breast height (DBH) [A-6 feature] within diversity guidelines, and retain all trees of species other than ponderosa pine.

- Create a clumpy distribution of leave residual trees and a diversity of size classes to obtain a variable stand structure and an uneven-aged composition.

- Conduct a late-summer prescribed burn in all treatment areas as soon as conditions allow (preferably within the first year post-harvest).

- Regenerate created openings by natural seeding and rest at least part of the treatment area from grazing for a year after harvest.

- Close all existing non-system roads within unit boundaries. Obliterate any new temporary roads needed for harvest.

- Conduct prescribed burning in the southern-most unit included in Alternatives 4 and 6. This unit lies in pinyon-juniper woodlands. No tree harvest will occur on the site. [A-6 feature]

- Leave some unlopped tops from the harvest for turkey habitat improvement. [A-6 feature]

- Create additional snags and large woody debris if post-harvest and post-burn treatment monitoring indicates minimum standards for the area have not been met. Implementation of this design feature is dependent on the availability of KV funds. [A-6 feature]

VI. Rationale for Decision

My selection of the preferred alternative (and the specific components that make it up) stemmed from an assessment of two key areas of consideration: 1) How well did the individual alternatives meet the purpose and need, and deal with the key issues? and 2) Public response to the initial environmental analysis document.

Purpose and Need/Key Issues

The purpose and need for the proposal to harvest timber and prescribe burn forest stands is to help meet the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan, provide for healthy ecosystems, and sustain communities. (See Chapter 1, Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action.)

Issue #1 (Ecosystem Restoration), Issue #2 (Forest Health), and Issue #3 (Effects on the Local Economy), were first articulated during development of the Purpose and Need. Issues #4 (Road Densities) and #5 (Wildlife) derived from actions that would address the first three issues and reflect concerns expressed during internal and external scoping.

The No Action alternative (Alternative 1) does not respond proactively to any of these elements. Leaving the entire analysis area in its current condition does little to improve the radically altered pine forest community in the area. Silvicultural practices that could reduce risk of catastrophic losses from insects or wildfire would not be applied. No raw materials would be available to the local wood products industry. Finally, adverse effects of current road densities and a certain lack of diversity in wildlife habitat are not improved by no action.

Many of these same considerations made the selection of Alternative 4 as the preferred unappealing. In particular, using fire as the sole vegetation management tool does not provide needed raw materials to local industry nor would it have dealt with the road density issue.

It could provide some silvicultural benefits but not with the flexibility that the addition of timber harvest offers.

When reviewing the full range of alternatives, it became apparent that Alternatives 2, 3, 5, and 6 were all more attractive than Alternatives 1 and 4. On an issue by issue basis, the remaining four alternatives are compared.

ISSUE 1 (Ecosystem Restoration): Alternative 5 is the weakest alternative in this area. The return of periodic fire disturbance and the development of late successional stages are not important elements of a philosophy to maximize long-term wood fiber production. Nor is the concern for a deficiency of snags.

The other three alternatives are nearly equal in respect to the ecosystem restoration issue. Differences between alternatives are primarily a consequence of number of acres treated, the size and location of treatment areas, and the degree to which snags and large down woody debris are increased.

ISSUE 2 (Forest Health): The forest health issue addresses the condition of the forest as it pertains to or threatens our capability of achieving resource management objectives. Differences between alternatives boil down to a comparison of how many total acres were treated and of those acres, how many are considered to currently be at moderate to high risk of catastrophic insect attack. This is due to the fact that Alternatives 2, 3, 5, and 6 all prescribe silvicultural treatments that called for changing forest structures sufficiently to deal with bug and catastrophic fire risk. Additional factors to weigh are improved growing conditions for vegetation ground cover following silvicultural treatments and noxious weed potential infestation and spread.

Alternative 5 treats the most acres, but Alternative 3 treats more acres in the moderate to high bug risk rating. Alternative 6 would be expected to have the least noxious weed treatment concerns followed by Alternatives 2, then 3 and 5. Alternative 5 is considered to be a bit weaker in terms of improving grass/forb/shrub conditions because in maintains a heavier canopy closure and proposes less frequent fire.

Table 4 in the Environmental Assessment summarizes this issue well. Based on that, and the weight one applies to each of the criteria, it would appear that Alternative 3 is somewhat better than Alternative 2, and both Alternatives 2 and 3 are stronger than Alternatives 5 and 6. Differences between alternatives are not great, however, because they each have their strong and weak points.

ISSUE 3 (Effects on the Local Economy): Alternatives 2 and 3 clearly provide more raw material (~2960 MBF and ~3190 MBF respectively). This is due to their relatively heavy cutting prescription as compared to Alternative 5, and the number of

acres cut is much less in Alternative 6 (thus less volume produced.)

ISSUE 4 (Road Densities): Despite the desire of the motorized recreating public to keep all roads open, negative effects of high open road densities on wildlife and the physical environment outweigh the benefits to recreation opportunities in this area. Alternatives 2 and 3 close the most non-system roads (~6 miles and ~7 miles respectively), followed closely by Alternative 6 at ~5 miles (though it requires less new temporary road construction). Alternative 5 does the least to address this issue (~1 mile).

ISSUE 5 (Wildlife): Alternative 6 was designed specifically to address this issue. Several features unique to this alternative seek to improve wildlife habitat for certain species. This alternative is most attentive to the needs of the northern goshawk (though none are currently known to inhabit the area), provides a better distribution of big game hiding cover, and calls for specific actions to improve snag and large log habitat. Alternatives 2 and 3 have about the same impacts to wildlife habitat. They are less extensive than Alternative 6 but some features are improved. Alternative 5 has potentially negative impacts to Abert squirrel habitat, big game hiding cover, Merriam's turkey nesting habitat, and northern goshawk nesting habitat.

In summary, Alternatives 2 and 3 seem to deal best with the Forest Health, Effect on Local Economies, and Road Density issues. These two alternatives respond equally to Alternative 6 on the Ecosystem Restoration Issue. While Alternative 6 appears to best address the Wildlife Issue.

Public Response to the Environmental Assessment

Of the six letters of response received during the comment period for the draft environmental assessment document, five expressed a specific preference for one of the alternatives. One respondent favored Alternative 5 primarily because it closed the least number of roads. One opposed Alternative 5 because it failed to adequately address the ecosystem restoration issue. One favored Alternative 2 as the best proposal to further the concepts in the local Ponderosa Pines Forest Partnership initiative, and one favored either Alternative 2 or 3. Finally, one recommended selection of Alternative 6 because it incorporated the most wildlife enhancement measures. (Appendix G of the Environmental Assessment has the full text of these letters.)

Summary

Given how the various alternatives addressed the purpose and need and key issues, and in light of commentors support for specific alternatives, I selected Alternative 2 as the preferred alternative with certain features from Alternative 6. (See the Decision section above.) Alternative 2 with added features appears to be the most

pragmatic approach to addressing the management challenges posed by conditions that occur in the Doe Canyon area of the Glade. The selected seeks to restore ecosystem components of ponderosa pine communities in the area, improves forest health on over 1300 acres, supplies a fair amount of raw material to the local economy, reduces open road densities both for wildlife and the physical environment, and strives to improve wildlife habitat for a variety of species.

Alternative 2 was not chosen because it would give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber. Appendix B in the environmental assessment suggests that Alternative 3 would provide the highest present net value. Table 5 in the EA indicates maximum estimated volume would be obtained if Alternative 3 was selected.

Alternative 2 takes a bold approach. All harvest actions occur on acres within two large units. Burning is recommended on a couple hundred acres in pinyon-juniper woodlands considered wildlife winter range. It deals well with public concerns and implements the concept of sustaining healthy forest ecosytems while sustaining communities.

VII. Sale Area Improvement Plan Priorities

1. Reforestation needs. (Essential KV)
2. Partial funding of prescribed burns.
3. Creation of snags.
4. Noxious weed treatments.
5. Creation of additional large log woody debris.
6. Road rehabilitation.

VIII. Compliance with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

This decision complies with the San Juan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and with the National Forest Management Act.

Forest Plan Consistency

The Guard Station Environmental Assessment is tiered to the Forest Plan for the San Juan National Forest. Chapter I of the Environmental Assessment, Purpose and Need of the Proposed Action, lists the Forest Plan goals that are pertinent to this proposal. This section also contains the Forest Plan prescription areas that the analysis area lies within, including a map.

My decision to implement Alternative 2 with modifications is consistent with the Forest Plan prescription areas affected. Activities proposed meet the goals and standards and guidelines for Management Areas 5B and 7E.

Clearcutting and Even-aged Management

This decision does not involve the use of timber harvest for even-aged management. NFMA guidelines concerning clearcutting and even-age management are not germane to this action.

Vegetative Manipulation

The seven requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27(b) for management prescriptions that involve vegetative manipulation include:

1. Be best suited to the multiple use goals for the area.

This is addressed in detail in the Rationale for Decision section of this Decision Notice.

2. Assure that lands can be adequately restocked.

Residual stand stocking will be such that a stocked stand for ecosystem restoration purposes will remain following timber harvest and burning. Chapter 2, Alternatives Described in Detail, and Appendix A: Alternative Design Criteria, discuss residual stocking level targets for the vegetation management objective. Some natural regeneration following site disturbance and opening up of the canopy is desired for a long term uneven-aged stand structure. Evidence from past disturbance in the area indicates these regeneration objectives should be easily obtained.

3. Alternative 2 has not been chosen primarily because it will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber.

See Rationale for Decision summary.

4. Be chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.

Forest health and ecosystem restoration were key issues in the Guard Station analysis. Specifically, there was concern for the entire area and a lack of late-successional forest conditions in the pine type, a predominance of dense second growth stands, and risk of catastrophic tree losses from mountain pine beetles and/or fire. This discussion can be found in Chapter 1, Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action, Chapter 2, Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities, and Chapter 3, Old Growth and Biodiversity, of the EA.

5. Avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

Chapter 4 of the EA, Other Environmental Consequences section, discusses these issues. Management requirements and mitigation measures found in Chapter 2, Features Common to All Action

Alternatives, are designed into the selected alternative for this specific purpose.

6. Provide desired effects on...wildlife habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, and other resource yields.

In the the EA, Chapter 4, Consequences by Issue, Appendix C: Biological Evaluation, and the addition of certain modifications to Alternative 2 (found in this Decision Notice), all describe how the planned timber harvest and burning resulting from this decision will provide desired effects.

7. Be practical in terms of transportation, harvesting requirements, and sale preparation and administration.

The area is accessed by existing roads. Activity is designed to be concentrated in two large units which is most efficient for logging and sale preparation. Appendix B: Economic Assessment indicates a break-even benefit/cost ratio. Assessments that Alternative 2 actions were practical were made during site visits by a timber and silviculture specialist.

IX. Finding of No Significant Impact

Analysis of the environmental consequences indicates that this is not a major Federal action with significant effects on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. This determination was made considering the following factors:

1.) The proposal conforms with the direction in the Forest Plan for the San Juan National Forest.

2.) No irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources will occur.

3.) The proposed action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, either as an individual action, or as part of the cumulative effects of other past, present, and planned actions within this area.

4.) The proposed action does not affect public health and safety.

5.) The effects of the proposed action on the human environment are not highly uncertain, nor do they involve unique or unknown risks.

6.) The proposed action is not precedent-setting. It does not establish a precedent for future actions which may have a significant effect on the environment. It does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7.) The proposed action will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The proposed action will

not cause loss or destruction of significant cultural or historic resources.

8.) The proposed action will not adversely affect endangered or threatened species or their habitat.

9.) This action complies with other federal, state, and local laws and requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

X. Implementation Date

The implementation of the selected alternative, Alternative 2, may begin 45 days after the legal notice of this decision appears in the Newspaper of Record (Durango Herald).

XI. Appeal Rights

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulation at 36 CFR 215.7. Any written appeal must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer, Elizabeth Estill, Regional Forester, Rocky Mountain Region, 740 Simms, P.O. Box 25127, Lakewood CO 80255, within 45 days from the day after notice of this decision is published in the Durango Herald, Durango, CO. Appellants are required to simultaneously send a copy of the Notice to Appeal to Calvin Joyner, Associate Forest Supervisor, at 701 Camino del Rio, Durango, CO 81301. Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14.

For additional information concerning this decision or the environmental analysis, contact Phil Kemp, Dolores Ranger District Office, P.O. Box 210, Dolores, Colorado 81323, or call (970)-882-7296.

CAL JOYNER
Associate Forest Supervisor

5/17/96
Date