

July 24, 2024

Notice of Objection: Environmental Assessment Draft Record of Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project

Attn: Andrew K. Johnson
USDA Forest Supervisor Bighorn National Forest

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a Notice of Objection to the Draft Record of Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project. This objection is submitted by Craig Cope, Commentor to the Scoping.

The proposed actions for riparian, beaver dam analogs and meadow encroachment are worth implementing. However, I have serious concerns about the following actions. But first an image about saving the forest.



“And see this ring right here, Jimmy? ...
That’s another time when the old fellow
miraculously survived some big forest fire.”

I object to this project for the following reasons outlined by resource area:

1. Timber cutting concerns.
2. WUI treatment area concerns
3. Roads

Timber cutting concerns:

In 1990 the Bighorn NF settled a regeneration lawsuit, *Sierra Club v. Cargill*, Civil Action No. 89-F-1242 concerning the length of time permitted for regeneration of timber cuts. The BNF agreed to a five-year regeneration standard as mandated in the National Forest Management Act. This action was documented in Amendment #7 to the 1985 BNF Forest Plan. The settlement of the lawsuit established upper and lower elevation limits for future timber harvesting. The upper limit was set at 9200 feet. The lower limit was set at 7400 feet for north and east slopes and at 7900 feet for south and west slopes. In review of the timber cut maps there are units above the 9200 feet elevation near Munkres Pass. In Elgin Park unit 400 is below the 7900-foot elevation and a south slope. These cut units need to be removed from the proposal.

It also established that clear cuts were to be no more than eight trees wide. The proposed timber harvest harkens back to the 1960’s and 70’s. The BNF was doing large clearcuts of hundreds of acres as were other NFs in

Wyoming. This led to the 1971 “Forest Management in Wyoming” report due to the public’s concern about clearcutting. One example in the report was on Caribou Mesa. Large clear cuts in the 1970’s did not show regeneration until the 1980’s. A 1983 update “New Directions in Management” to the 1971 report documented this slow regeneration. Over ten years was needed before adequate regeneration was achieved. The current proposal appears to be reverting to this level of clearcutting.

Amendment #7 stated “The Bighorn National Forest will continue to sell no more than 7MMBF of sawtimber annually per the May 9, 1990, amended judgement by the Federal Court of the District of Colorado” signed by Forest Supervisor Lloyd D. Todd, November 18, 1991. In further support of that ASQ, the 2005 plan established an attainable volume of 7.3 Million Board Feet (MMBF). This EA described a much greater volume for the ASQ at 27,183 CCF. This analysis fails to state that volume is an absolute maximum. A citation from the 2005 LRMP Final Revised Plan, “annual ASQ is 27,183 CCF (11.2 MMBF). Because monitoring has shown that the ‘ceiling’ for timber output (ASQ) was not achieved during the first round of Forest Plans, the Revised Plan includes a Total Sale Program Quantity (TSPQ) of 18,931 CCF (7.3 MMBF). TSPQ is the Forest interdisciplinary team’s estimate of what the actual timber output will be considering past experience and anticipated budgets.”

The clearcuts surrounding Doyle Campground will most certainly lead to blow down within the CG. A good example of this is the recent cutting near Tie Hack CG and the ensuing blowdown occurring in the CG. These cut units will also obliterate the ATV trails TR 147, 143, and 148.



1 Example of potential blowdown resulting from timber cutting near a Campground. This picture is of Tie Hack CG after the cutting of unit just west of the CG.

Mistletoe Infestations: From the Purpose Need- “Chronic long-term impacts from dwarf mistletoe, rust fungus diseases, and overcrowding have left much of the lodgepole forest in a condition highly susceptible to large scale mountain pine beetle infestation and mortality.”

Picture of FR 506 regeneration.



2 Residual overstory potentially infecting the under story with dwarf mistletoe. Partial cutting in Lodgepole pine.

The presence of the overstory in this picture would lead to the spread of dwarf mistletoe into the regeneration present. This is contrary to the premise of reducing the spread of dwarf mistletoe stated in the analysis. Additionally, the continued push to justify cutting to reduce the possibility of large-scale mountain pine beetle infestation and mortality is not supported by Dr. Knight's 2005 report for the BNF's revised LRMP. Dr. Knight's report is not listed in the references. That is unfortunate but contradicts the theme and direction supporting timber cutting proposed in this document.



3 Precommercial thinning post treatment, Forest Road 391. The area is now inaccessible to humans or wildlife.

Finally timber sale analyses used to include in the Purpose and Need that timber cutting supported local dependent industry. Recent analyses do not include that in the Purpose and Need. It purports to provide wood fiber for the nation. While true to an exceedingly small percentage of total wood fiber needs of the nation, removing this timber and hauling it to Montana or South Dakota does little to nothing for the local economy.

WUI concerns:

The continued use of the 1/3-mile distance from a structure does not appear in any USDA Forest Service for Wildland Urban Interface research. Jack Cohen's research on this subject clearly states that mitigation work only needs to be conducted up to 200 feet from a structure. The 200 feet maximum distance is also in the Firewise.org recommendations. USDA Forest Service is a partner to the Firewise effort. The continued push for the 1/3-mile distance is perplexing. This longer distance does increase the acreage treated. The assumption must be that funding for fire mitigation is based on acres treated.

Many of the identified areas are not suitable for treatment. Examples include:

Sheep Mountain Lookout (44° 11' 29" N, 107° 0' 16" W) as it is in the alpine above timber line and was not impacted by the 1994 Sheep Mountain Wildfire which burned directly towards it.

Sheep Mountain Electronic Site (44° 11' 25" N, 107° 0' 8" W) the building is a prefabricated masonry or stone exterior. Highly unlikely to burn.

Muddy Guard Station (44° 9' 34" N, 106° 54' 45" W) the building sets in the middle of a meadow. Mowing the grass around the building would suffice for mitigation.

Pole Creek Cow Camp (44° 12' 3" N, 106° 56' 27" W) this camp sits at the edge of a wet meadow on its southern side. Historically wildfires on the BNF burn to the northeast on the hot dry southern winds. Examples of this pattern of wildfire are Duck Creek Burn, Lost Fire and Gilead. This area if treated out to 1/3-mile would impact the Pole Creek Nordic Trails. Follow Cohen's and Firewise directions showing that 200 feet is adequate for structure protection.

Pole Creek WYDOT camp (44° 13' 2" N, 106° 55' 24" W) as detailed for the cow camp. The same rationale should be applied.

Crazy Woman CG (44° 9' 59" N, 106° 55' 12" W) was decommissioned over 15 years ago. There are no improvements there. Eliminate this from any WUI mitigation.

Esponda Cabin (44° 5' 7" N, 106° 59' 23" W) there was a recent fire to the southwest of this off forest cabin. There does not appear to be a need for any further mitigation.

Doyle/Taylor creek exterior Forest boundary. These are entirely unnecessary if the 200-foot distance shown by Cohen's research to be adequate for mitigation were used. The intrusion into the roadless area is not necessary. Including these as proposed WUI treatments appears to be about maximizing funding to the BNF.

Roads:

No new Level 1 roads period. The 2005 plan and the 2015 Transportation Analysis Report both highlighted that the BNF has more roads than can be maintained to standards as I detailed in my comments. Roads serve as vectors for noxious weed infestations and corridors for human use. The BNF statistics show that most fires are human caused so creating more avenues for access will only increase the risk of wildfire. One of the stated purposes of this project is to reduce the occurrence of wildfire. The document states there is no reduction in road mileage since some roads are closed while others are open. The BNF fails to take the opportunity to reduce the risks by not reducing the total mileage of open roads.

Temporary haul roads: In review of the lack of proper closure of these types of roads in the Buffalo Municipal Watershed, the BNF needs to insure this does not happen in this project. The BMW temporary road closure standards in the EA were, "After their use, temporary roads would be removed from use by ripping to a depth of 8 inches and placing slash, rocks, or both on the roadbed for the first 100 feet." As this picture details a few rocks do not appear to meet the intent for adequate closure. The BNF should also return to the BMW and close the temporary roads as detailed in the EA.



4 Temporary Road to timber cutting unit near Tie Hack CG.

Additionally, Forest Road 382, Trigger Lake Road was illegally upgraded contrary to the BMW analysis. FDR 382 from US 16 to Cloud Peak Wilderness boundary is classified as a Level 2 system road. It is now a surfaced road of at least a Level 3 category. The BMW EA did not disclose the change of road maintenance levels for FDR 382. In fact, as stated no change of road management standards was outlined in the EA. Surfacing is not needed for log trucks to haul out the timber. Any current Level 2 roads in this analysis need to remain at their current maintenance level.



5 Forest Road 382 prior to upgrading activity for the BMW project.



6 Forest Road 382 after undisclosed upgrades completed.

Regards,

/s/ Craig Cope

Craig Cope
Concerned Citizen