

Neiman Timber Company Comments

on the BHNF North Sands Project

Neiman Timber Company generally supports the stated the Purpose and Need of the project.

Issue Statements

We recommend that the effects of catastrophic wildfire resulting from each alternative needs to be analyzed. The EA states the need to reduce the “uncharacteristically high fire hazard.” since there is significant wildland urban interface in this project area, especially on the north end. Although it is noted in the Purpose and Need, we do not believe the environmental impacts have been fully analyzed without addressing the impacts of catastrophic wildfire will have on the ecosystem and threats to public safety and private property.

Commercial Management

We do not believe that neither the modified proposed action or the alternative action will meet the purpose and need due to dropping commercial harvests on steep slopes. Commercially treating only approximately 20% of the project area will not be adequate.

We recommend that the Forest Service include a detailed table outlining the number of acres being treated commercially, non-commercially, and through prescribed burning, along with the estimated volume to be harvested. We also request the estimated cost of the non-commercial treatments be disclosed to the public.

Neiman requests the 5,932 acres of steep-slope harvesting from what was outlined in the Scoping Document, be included in the proposed action. It is important for specialists to recognize that thousands of acres of steep-slope on the BHNF, previously excluded, can be successfully harvested using existing timber harvesting equipment. These acres should not be Whole Tree Yarding Required, giving flexibility to treat those acres with the most cost effective tool.

We urge you to reconsider this decision, as accurately and fully completing the analysis is crucial. Future conditions and funding will change, potentially allowing for the continued implementation of steep slope harvesting as an effective hazardous fuels reduction treatment. The impacts of treatments on steep slopes should be evaluated in the broader context of the potential impacts of extreme wildfire on these same areas. Soil loss following a wildfire far exceeds the disturbance caused by heavy equipment. We need only look to the recent Fish Fire to see what the costs (ecologically and monetarily) are to deciding to not treat steep slopes in this area.

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To ensure full transparency with the public and stakeholders, we request a comparative analysis of the decrease in wildfire severity risk between the original proposed action and the modified proposed action.

Prescribed Burning

We recommend adding project design criteria requiring all stands or areas planned for prescribed burning to be pretreated either commercially or non-commercially. This is particularly important because prescribed burning is not highly selective.

There have been numerous cases in the Black Hills where prescribed burns intended to reduce dead and downed fuels have instead resulted in high overstory mortality. This, in turn, has led to an increase in dead and downed trees, ultimately worsening fuel loading. We believe that well-defined silvicultural prescriptions should be established for all prescribed burns and summarized in the EA

Prescribed burning can have significant negative impacts if not properly planned and executed. Even under ideal conditions, the risk to designated leave trees is significantly higher with prescribed burning than with mechanical treatments. This concern also applies when the Forest Service attempts to use prescribed burning to thin regeneration.

This concern has already been addressed by BHNF Supervisor Mark Van Every in a white paper he wrote for the forest on February 15, 2018. This letter addressed mortality limits for prescribed burning following a failed prescribed burn in 2016 that resulted in high overstory mortality. The direction included the following limits:

Mortality Limits

- Mortality limits should not exceed 5% in timber that is 7" dbh or greater in the suitable base.
- Mortality limits for timber less than 7" dbh, inside the suitable base will be determined based on approved silvicultural prescription.
- Mortality limits for all diameter classes outside of the suitable base will be determined based on approved silvicultural prescription.
- Determination of operable/inoperable ground should be made in consultation with Industry.

In addition, all approved Prescribed Fire Plans must be signed by a certified silviculturist and existing burn plans already approved should be amended to include the mortality limits identified above."

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Neiman offers the following recommendations regarding prescribed burning:

- **Mortality limits** must conform to the February 15, 2018, BHNF letter regarding prescribed fire mortality.
- There should be **zero mortality** of trees over 16.0" DBH in old-growth stands and goshawk nesting habitat.
- Prescribed burning should not cause any stand currently meeting the **Mehl definition of old growth** to lose that designation due to the loss of trees 16.0" DBH and greater, the creation of openings, or both.
- **Pretreatment of "doghair" stands** within prescribed burn units should be required to reduce the likelihood of killing trees 7.0" DBH or greater or creating large openings.

Old Growth Pine and Management

According to the Forest Service publication FS-1215c – June 2024, "Mature and Old-Growth Forests: Analysis of Threats on Lands Managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management", "Currently, wildfire, ... is the leading threat to mature and old-growth forests, followed by insects and disease". We are disappointed that the proposed project would only slightly reduce the percentage of high to very high fire hazard in MA 3.7 from 83 to 78 percent and we are also disappointed that the EA does not contain any analysis of mountain pine beetle risk. We recommend that you analyze opportunities to reduce the percentage of high to very high fire hazard and high mountain pine beetle risk within MA 3.7

Old Growth – Existing Conditions and Proposal

The proposed action for several stands with heavy understory is broadcast burning, with the expected result of decreasing ladder fuels and creating small openings. We are concerned that broadcast burning in these stands, without significant pre-treatment, will result in high overstory mortality. We recommend including specific details about prescribed burn objectives and necessary pre-treatment measures in the EA.

Two of the stands are described as "goshawk nest area stands, protected per Forest Plan Standard 3108," implying that no treatment is allowed under the forest plan. However, Forest Plan Standard 3108 does permit vegetation management activities within nest areas to "maintain or enhance the stand's value for goshawk."

- This statement must be modified to consider whether vegetation management could "maintain or enhance the stand's value for goshawk" by reducing the potential for a crown fire.

Neiman Timber Company Comments on the BHNH North Sands Project

Conclusion

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to comment on the North Sands Project. If the project is going to truly meet the purpose and need, then reducing stand densities of sawtimber on steep slopes will be necessary. The agency needs to start analyzing the consequences of catastrophic wildfire to the environment if stand densities are not reduced on the landscape.

Sincerely,

Paul Pierson

Paul Pierson
Neiman Timber Company