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Comments: As a local Red Canyon resident and Crook County volunteer firefighter living adjacent to the project area I am in favor of the proposed thinning of the forest via mechanical and manual fuel reduction, management of oak shrubs, and tree planting to obtain the reported benefits. Further, the burning of slash piles in winter during snow conditions is also acceptable. However, I am adamantly opposed to the "prescribed fire" method of thinning the forest due to the heightened potential for wildfire.

While the Forest Service has conducted numerous successful prescribed burns in several states, some have turned into wildfires. In 2022 a Forest Service prescribed burn started the largest wildfire in New Mexico's recorded history. In 2021, the state of Oregon, Fremont-Winema National Forest, suffered the effects of the Meadow wildfire. These are just two cases among others where prescribed burns got out of control. Wind and dry conditions no doubt increase the potential for prescribed burns to become uncontrolled.

With regard to dry conditions, multiple agencies of the federal government have pointed to the severe drought conditions of northeast Wyoming. As of April 4, 2024 the U.S. Drought Monitor shows northeast Wyoming to be in a severe drought condition, https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/. The U.S. Drought monitor is a partnership that includes the USDA, US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The Bureau of Land Management, Newcastle Field Office, has issued Fire Prevention Order BLM-WY-080-2024-01 which includes Stage 1 fire restrictions: "Due to dry conditions and high fire danger, the Bureau of Land Management Newcastle Field Office is implementing fire restrictions for all BLM-administered public lands within the boundaries of Crook, Weston and Niobrara County beginning March 22nd, 2024." https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2024-03/Newcastle%20FO%20Stage%201%20Fire%20Prevention%20Order_Mar_2024_CRK_3.20.2024_0.pdf

Crook County is currently under a Stage 1 fire ban as of March 6. As reported in the Sundance Times, Fire Warden Charlie Harrison is quoted as saying that more Wyoming acres burned in February than in the entirety of 2023.

Drought conditions that recently have been recognized are not likely to change quickly. According to NOAA, "Drought is a deficiency in precipitation over an extended period, usually a season or more, resulting in a water shortage causing adverse impacts on vegetation, animals, and/or people." (https://www.noaa.gov/explainers/drought-in-america-slow-moving-far-reaching).

Given the severe drought conditions of northeast Wyoming as testified by multiple government agencies including the USDA, it would seem highly prudent to postpone any consideration of prescribed burn to another time.