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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Salvage Harvest Due to 1998 Storm Damage, Daniel Boone National Forest, McCreary and Pulaski Counties, KY

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 disclose the environmental effect of removing trees damaged by a severe snowstorm that occurred in February 1998, and severe wind storms that occurred in April and May 1998. The areas under consideration for this proposal include approximately 3400 acres on the Stearns and Somerest Ranger Districts within the Daniel Boone National Forest. Pine trees that will be removed include trees that are downed; trees that have 50% or more of the live crown missing or damaged; uprooted trees; or leaning and root sprung trees. Hardwood trees that will be removed include trees that are downed, uprooted, leaning and root sprung. Other damaged standing trees may be removed for public safety or logging access.

The proposed method of removal is to use salvage timber sales which may include the use of helicopter, cable yarding, and ground skidding methods. Skidding methods may use motorized equipment or animals.

Connected actions include construction of temporary roads, maintenance of existing roads, and erosion control measures to minimize soil movement.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of this analysis should be received by August 31, 1998.

ADDRESSES: Submit written comments to Michael B. Kluempke, Daniel Boone National Forest, 761 South Laurel Road, London, KY 40744.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Myra Williamson, Silviculturist, Stearns Ranger District, Daniel Boone National Forest, P.O. Box 429, US Highway 27 North, Whitley City, KY 42653, or by calling (606) 376-5323.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL: The Forest Supervisor for the Daniel Boone National Forest, located at 1700 Bypass Road, Winchester, KY 40391, is the Responsible Official for this action.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

A. Need for the Proposal

On February 3, 1998, a snow storm dropped approximately two feet of heavy, wet snow across the southern half of the Forest. On April 16, 1998, a tornado, along with strong straight-line winds, hit the Stearns Ranger District. On May 31, 1998, a windstorm hit both the Stearns and Somerest Ranger Districts.

The February snowstorm impacted a significant portion of the 191,000 acres of National Forest System lands on the Stearns and Somerest Districts. Most impact occurred within the ridgetop forest stands. The most heavily impacted stands were composed primarily of Virginia pine, most of which suffered broken stems, were uprooted or were severely bent over. Hardwoods and shortleaf pine trees were generally uprooted, or suffered some crown damage.

When the April and May windstorms swept through the western and southern parts of the Somerset and Stearns Districts they damaged approximately 3,000 acres of hardwood and hardwood-pine forest. Some of these areas were also affected by the snowstorm. Within the the damaged areas, most of the larger diameter trees were uprooted, while others were twisted, snapped, lifted (resulting in root damage), or bent. In the western part of the Stearns District these windstorms have left entire hillsides where all or most of the trees have been leveled.

The storm damage has resulted in a substantial increase in fuel loading over the entire area. This is due to the large amount of foliage, twigs, limbs and stems of damaged and fallen trees greatly increasing the fuels available for wildfire.

The extent of the fire hazards created by additional fuel loading is dependent on the dispersion and the arrangement of fuels. Heavy fuel accumulations may

occur adjacent to what would normally be an effective location for control lines. The height of fuels could create a ladder for fire to enter into the crowns of trees and increase the rate of spread.

This vertical and horizontal arrangement of fuels needs to be disrupted. The increased fuel loading, when dry, would increase wildfire intensity and is a severe impediment of fireline construction and control of fires.

Because the National Forest land ownership pattern in the areas affected by the storm events is highly variable, conditions on one ownership tend to also have indirect effects upon conditions of other ownership. The excessive fuel loads currently in the forest increases the potential for severe wildfires to spread to private lands.

A large portion of the project area is within the tentative Habitat Management Area for the Red-cockaded woodpecker. In order to recover this species, as well as other rare fire-associated plants and animals, active management is needed to create and maintain pine and pine-hardwood forest types. The current condition of many of these proposed treatment areas inhibits the use of prescribed fire and stand regeneration activities that are necessary to create and maintain habitat for these species.

Many of the proposed treatment areas have been heavily used in the past by the general public for various recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and bird watching. The high number of down trees criss-crossed on the forest floor present serious obstacles to foot travel, and trees left hanging or leaning pose safety risks to users of the general forest.

B. Purpose

The purpose of this action is to allow for the timely removal of damaged trees within heavily storm-damaged areas of the Daniel Boone National Forest to meet the following general objectives:

1. Reduce current fuel loads and modify their arrangement where they present a wildfire hazard to the life and property on adjacent private land.

2. Reduce current fuel loads and modify their arrangement to minimize damage to Forest resources that may result from a catastrophic wildfire.

3. To restore the ability to manage these areas towards the objectives outlined in the Forest Land and

Resource Management Plan (FLRMP) for Management Areas 7 and 9.

4. To provide for the safety of forest users and employees within the project area.

The Daniel Boone National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (FLRMP) provides overall guidance for management activities in the affected area where the storm damage has occurred. Approximately 100 acres are located in Management Area 9. The remaining acres are located in Management Area 7. Forest wide management goals include (FLRMP IV-1,2):

1. Protect and enhance habitat for all threatened and endangered species and strive towards increasing population levels to facilitate removal from T&E status.
2. Manage the Forest in a manner that is sensitive to economic feasibility.
3. Provide a diversity of plant and animal communities.
4. Protect, maintain and/or improve soil productivity and water quality.
5. Provide the habitat requirements of the management indicator species.

The general management direction for Management Area 7 (FLRMP IV-119) includes the following requirements:

1. Optimize growing potential for yellow and white pine, and upland and cove hardwoods;
2. Provide a moderate to high degree of wildlife habitat diversity; and
3. Provide a broad range of undeveloped recreation opportunities.

The general management direction for Management Area 9 is to protect and maintain the scenic quality of the area while providing dispersed recreation opportunities and enhance wildlife (FLRMP IV-135).

Salvage timber sales are proposed to meet these objectives in the most timely and efficient manner. The use of salvage timber sales will allow the objectives to be accomplished in a short time frame. Because the recoverable economic value of forest products from storm damaged trees will decrease significantly over time as a result of deterioration, it is imperative that the material be removed in the most efficient and timely manner possible.

C. Proposed Scoping Process

Public participation is an important part of the analysis. The scoping period associated with this Notice of Intent will be thirty (30) days in length, beginning the day after publication of this notice. In addition to this scoping, the public may visit Forest Service officials at any time during the analysis and prior to the decision.

The Daniel Boone National Forest is seeking information, comments, and assistance from Federal, State and local agencies and other individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. Comments submitted during the scoping process should be in writing. They should be specific to the action being proposed and should describe as clearly and completely as possible any issues the commentor has with the proposal. This input will be used in preparation of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The scoping process includes:

1. Identifying potential issues.
2. Identifying issues to be analyzed in depth.
3. Eliminating nonsignificant issues or those which have been covered by a relevant previous environmental analysis.
4. Exploring additional alternatives.
5. Identifying potential environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives.

D. Preliminary Issues Identified to Date Include

1. Removal of damaged trees and associated activities may affect threatened, endangered, and sensitive plant and animal species and associated habitat.
2. Ground disturbing activities associated with the proposed action may cause soil movement and increase stream sedimentation which may affect soil productivity and water quality.
3. The proposed action may impact the scenic quality adjacent to Rock Creek, a State Wild River, Marsh Creek, a proposed Federal Wild and/or Recreational River, and within Natural Arch Scenic Area.

E. Possible Alternatives Identified to Date Include

1. No Action: This alternative will serve as a baseline for comparison of alternatives. This alternative will be fully developed and analyzed.
2. Proposed Action: As described above, this alternative will remove trees damaged in three storms. The proposed method of removal is to use salvage timber sales which may include the use of helicopters, cable yarding, ground skidding methods, or animals.

F. Estimated Data for DEIS and FEIS

The DEIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency and to be available for public comment by November 1998. At that time, the Environmental Protection Agency will publish a notice of availability of the

DEIS in the **Federal Register**. The comment period on the DEIS will be 45 days from the date the Environmental Protection Agency publishes the notice of availability in the **Federal Register**.

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 DEIS must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewer's position and contentions. *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objectives that could be raised at the DEIS stage but that are not raised until after the completion of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*, 803 F.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritage, Inc. v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334 (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 a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the FEIS.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments on the DEIS should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if the comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the DEIS 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 provision of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

After the comment period ends on the DEIS, the comments will be analyzed, considered, and responded to by the Forest Service in preparing the FEIS. The FEIS is scheduled to be completed in January 1999. The responsible official will consider the comments, responses, environmental consequences discussed in the FEIS, and applicable laws, regulations, and policies in making a decision regarding this proposed action. The responsible official will document the decision and reasons for the decision in the Record of Decision. That

decision will be subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR part 215.

Benjamin T. Worthington,

Forest Supervisor.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Big Bend Ridge Vegetation Management Project, Targhee National Forest, Fremont County, ID

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Forest Supervisor of the Targhee National Forest gives notice of the agency's intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for the Big Bend Ridge Vegetation Management Project. After conducting a Properly Functioning Condition (PFC) assessment and a Landscape Assessment, Forest Service personnel found several concerns with various ecosystems that comprise the Big Bend Ridge Project Area. These included:

- Presence of dense stands of mature Douglas-fir trees that are susceptible to insect, disease and fire outbreaks. These dense stands are losing their crowns.
- Consistent lack of Douglas-fir seedling establishment.
- Lack of rejuvenation of bigtooth and mountain maple plant communities.
- Lack of rejuvenation and the decline in seral aspen plant communities.
- Decline in potential forage values for big game.
- Increased risks associated with wildfire along the adjacent and expanding urban interface.

An interdisciplinary team developed a proposal to address these concerns. The Big Bend Ridge Vegetation Management Project proposes to:

- Commercially thin (thinning from below—larger diameter trees would be left) approximately 2,500 acres (about 9 million board feet) of densely stocked Douglas-fir stands (thinning would also regenerate seral aspen communities that occur in these treatment areas). Approximately 70% of the harvest would be done with cable or helicopter yarding methods; the remainder being done with crawler tractors or rubber-tired skidders.

- Establish a 200 acre demonstration area to test and monitor the use of prescribed fire and mechanical treatments in establishing Douglas-fir seedlings.

- Use prescribed fire and hand methods, as a demonstration project, to treat and monitor rejuvenation of 100 acres of big tooth and mountain maple plant communities.

- Use prescribed fire to rejuvenate aspen and reduce fuels and fire hazards along the wildland urban interface on 700 acres of mixed conifer and seral aspen plant communities.

- Use prescribed fire to improve 900 acres of big-game range (treatment areas would also benefit urban interface considerations).

Areas treated silviculturally, 3.3 miles of non-system road reconstruction and 3 miles of non-system road construction. Big Bend Ridge Project Area is located 5 miles north of Ashton, Idaho and contains 30,000 acres of National Forest lands on the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District. Alternatives to this proposal, including No-Action, will be developed by an interdisciplinary team to respond to significant issues generated during the scoping process. A more detailed description of the proposed action is available from the Ashton/Island Park Ranger District; see address below.

DATES: Send written comments and suggestions on the issues concerning the proposed action by August 31, 1998.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to Adrienne Keller, District Ranger, Ashton/Island Park Ranger District, P.O. Box 858, Ashton, ID 83420.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Melissa Jenkins, phone (208) 558-7301 or Duane Monte, phone (208) 624-3151—Interdisciplinary Team Leaders.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Revised Forest Plan (RFP) for the Targhee National Forest was approved in 1997. Management direction for the Big Bend Ridge Project Area is primarily for timber management with emphasis on big game security (Management Prescriptions 5.1.4[a] & 5.2.4[c]). Management on the remainder of the project area is governed by prescriptions 2.2—Research Natural Areas; 2.8.3—Aquatic Influence Zone; 5.1[c]—Timber Management; and 5.2.1—Visual Quality Improvement.

Initial public involvement will include mailing a project description and maps to interested parties to solicit comments on the proposal. Preliminary issues include: Access management, elk security/vulnerability, visuals, urban interface, and forest health.

Additional opportunity to comment on the project will occur on the draft Environmental Impact Statement (draft EIS). The draft EIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency and available for public review in mid December 1998.

The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days from the date the Environmental Protection Agency's notice of availability appears in the **Federal Register**. At the same time, copies of the draft EIS will be distributed to interested and affected agencies, organizations, tribes, and members of the public for their review and comment. It is very important that those interested in the proposed action participate at that time.

The Forest Service believes, at this early stage, it is important to give reviewers notice of several court rulings related to the 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 stage but that are 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 a time when 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 on 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 draft environmental impact 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.

The final EIS is scheduled to be completed in March 1999. In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to comments 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 the decisions on this proposal.