

comments will become a matter of public record.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Star Fire Restoration; Eldorado National Forest, Placer County, CA

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Star Fire burned 16,800 acres in August and September, 2001, on the Tahoe and Eldorado National Forests. Of the total fire, approximately 2,416 acres burned on the Georgetown Ranger District of the Eldorado National Forest. The USDA, Forest Service, Eldorado National Forest will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on a proposal to treat approximately 1650 acres of fire killed and damaged trees in the Star Fire burned area. The fire area is identified in the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment as old forest emphasis and general forest. The purpose of the project is to enhance the development of old forest conditions over the long term by reducing fuel accumulation and fire hazard, increasing the ability to suppress future wildfire, increasing ground cover to protect soil productivity and improve watershed condition, and recovering the value of wood products to fund reforestation and restoration. The proposed action is also designed to contribute to snag and log needs of wildlife, improve aquatic habitats and stream channel function, and provide for public and forest worker safety. It is believed that watershed condition and the probability of growing old forest conditions over the long term will be improved by this project.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope and implementation of this proposal should be received by January 4, 2002.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to Patricia Ferrell, Project Leader, Eldorado National Forest, 100 Forni Road, Placerville, CA 95667.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Questions and comments about this EIS should be directed to Patricia Ferrell, at the above address, or call her at 530-642-5146.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The fire caused extensive tree mortality. Field

examination indicates that 71% of the project area currently exhibits >75% stand mortality by basal area, 2% of the project area is unburned, 20% of the project area is non forest (rock and barren areas) and plantations, and 7% of the project area currently exhibits 75% mortality by basal area. Additional mortality is likely to become evident next spring and summer as more crowns begin to brown and bark beetles become established. As a result of the fire, much of the project area has reverted from mid to late seral forest conditions to early seral forest. Establishment of old forest requires survival and growth of individual trees and forested stands over the next 250+ years without the occurrence of another stand replacing fire. Preventing another stand replacing fire involves a combination of recurring fuel treatments to modify fire behavior, and effective suppression. Removal of dead trees will reduce future fuel accumulation, improve the ability to effectively suppress future wildfires, and increase the ability to maintain low fuel conditions through prescribed fire. The process of removing dead trees would maintain soil productivity for tree growth by immediately increasing effective ground cover (limbs, twigs, and small boles) to reduce soil erosion. The proposed action would remove dead trees using ground based, skyline, and helicopter logging methods. Trees posing a safety hazard to the public and forest workers would be removed along maintenance level 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 roads. Roads would be reconstructed to facilitate tree removal and improve watershed condition. Slash and small dead trees would be treated to provide ground cover and reduce long term fuel loading. Protection would be applied to sensitive plants, wildlife species, and cultural resources.

The proposed action is consistent with the 1989 Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Record of Decision (2001).

The decision to be made is whether to adopt and implement the proposed action, an alternative to the proposed action, or take no action to remove fire killed and damaged trees in the project area.

Other alternatives will be developed based on significant issues identified during the scoping process for the environmental impact statement. All alternatives will need to respond to the specific condition of providing benefits equal to or better than the current condition. Alternatives being considered at this time include: (1) No Action and (2) the Proposed Action.

Public participation will be especially important at several points during the analysis. The Forest Service will be seeking information, comments, and assistance from the Federal, State, and local agencies and other individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. To facilitate public participation information about the proposed action is being mailed to all who have expressed interest in the proposed action based on publication in the Eldorado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Action and notification of the public scoping period will be published in the Mountain Democrat, Placerville, CA.

Comments submitted during the scoping process should be in writing and should be specific to the proposed action. The comments should describe as clearly and completely as possible any issues the commenter has with the proposal. The scoping process includes:

- (a) Identifying potential issues;
- (b) Identifying issues to be analyzed in depth.
- (c) Eliminating nonsignificant issues or those previously covered by a relevant previous environmental analysis;
- (d) Exploring additional alternatives;
- (e) Identifying potential environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives.

The draft EIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available for public review by January 2002. EPA will publish a notice of availability of the draft EIS in the **Federal Register**. The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days from the date the EPA notice appears in the **Federal Register**. At that time, copies of the draft EIS will be distributed to interested and affected agencies, organizations, and members of the public for their review and comment. It is very important that those interested in the management of the Eldorado National Forest participate at that time.

The Forest Service believes it is important to give reviewers notice at this early stage of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of a draft EIS 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, 533 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft EIS stage, but that are not raised until after completion of the final EIS may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*,

803f. 2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 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 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 EIS.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments on the draft EIS should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft EIS. Comments may also address the adequacy of the draft EIS 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 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 2002. In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to substantive 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 decision regarding this proposal.

John Berry, Forest Supervisor, Eldorado National Forest is the responsible official. As the responsible official he will document the decision and reasons for the decision in the Record of Decision. That decision will be subject to Forest Service appeal regulations (36 CFR Part 215).

Dated: December 19, 2001.

Susan A. Rodman,

Acting Forest Supervisor.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Interior Wetlands Environmental Impact Statement; Hiawatha National Forest, Chippewa County, MI

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to analyze and disclose the environmental impacts of proposed

land management activities, and corresponding alternatives, within the Interior Wetlands project area. The project is located on the Sault Ste. Marie Ranger District, Hiawatha National Forest, Chippewa County, Michigan, approximately 35 miles southwest of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. The project area is approximately 30,600 acres and management activities are being proposed on less than 15 percent of the area.

Jack pine stands experience a cyclical outbreak of jack pine budworm. Older trees are more susceptible to defoliation which can lead to mortality and dead tops. In the Interior Wetlands project area much of the jack pine is more than 60 years old. The jack pine in the project area experienced budworm defoliation during the 1991/1992 outbreak and is showing some defoliation during the outbreak that began in 2001. The Forest Service is evaluating the options available to develop a more evenly distributed age-class and to improve the vigor of jack pine stands in order to minimize the impacts of budworm defoliation. In addition to proposing jack pine salvage and regeneration in Interior Wetlands, the Forest Service evaluated some other management opportunities within the entire project area to implement the Hiawatha National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 1986). The proposed action includes salvage and regeneration of jack pine, timber harvesting and regeneration of other species, changes to the transportation system, changes to the old growth system, timber stand improvement projects, and wildlife and fisheries habitat improvement projects.

Overall guidance of land management activities on the Hiawatha National Forest is provided by the Forest Plan. In order to meet the objectives and desired future conditions set forth in the Forest Plan, the following purpose and need has been identified for the Interior Wetlands project area: (1) Reduce the impacts of the jack pine budworm by creating a more evenly distributed age-class structure (which also improves habitat for sandhill crane, merlin, northern harrier, and other species), improving vigor, and increasing growth rates in jack pine stands. (2) Regenerate older aspen and mixed balsam fir/ aspen/paper birch stands to maintain these forest types; provide habitat for white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare, and other species; improve vigor, and increase growth rates. (3) Regenerate older black spruce stands to improve vigor and to increase growth rates. (4) Remove some trees in some jack pine, aspen, balsam fir/aspen/

paper birch, northern hardwoods, paper birch, black spruce, red pine, white pine, and cedar to either concentrate growth on the remaining trees or to provide space for new trees to become established. (5) Provide useable wood products to local markets and improve timber age-class distribution, vigor, and growth rates on merchantable stems to ensure a more even flow of wood products in the future. (6) Prepare areas where jack pine and black spruce are being regenerated by reducing the slash and exposing mineral soil for a seedbed. (7) Manage an efficient transportation system through construction, reconstruction, maintenance, and decommissioning of roads. (8) Improve the quality and survival of some white pine stems damaged by white pine weevil and blister rust. (9) Evaluate stands currently in the old growth system and other stands to determine if there is a different arrangement of stands that could provide better existing old growth characteristics and better placement across the landscape. (10) Adjust wildlife opening system by creating openings or maintaining existing openings by removing woody encroachment to provide habitat for sandhill crane, black bear, ruffed grouse, and other species. (11) Improve fish habitat (primarily brook trout) by adding log bank cover and placing spawning gravel. (12) Design projects and/or develop mitigation measures, as appropriate, to minimize impacts to the resources to acceptable levels defined by laws, regulations, or policies.

A roads analysis for the project area will be conducted in conjunction with the EIS. The roads analysis is not a decision document but is necessary to make an informed decision. At a minimum, the roads analysis will identify: needed and unneeded roads; road associated environmental and public safety risks; site-specific priorities and opportunities for road improvements and decommissioning; areas of special sensitivity, unique resource values, or both; and any other information that may be needed to support project-level decisions. Adjacent landowners, citizens groups, State, local, and Tribal governments, and other Federal agencies are invited to comment on the transportation system.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will analyze the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental effects of the alternatives. Past, present, and projected activities on National Forest system lands will be considered. The DEIS will disclose the analysis of site-specific mitigation measures and their effectiveness. The DEIS is expected