

epidemic levels. The large beetle populations are responding to the homogenous landscape-level forest conditions. The high density of older, large-diameter lodgepole pine across this landscape provides ideal conditions for rapid spread of mountain pine beetle. Epidemic mountain pine beetle populations can be a natural component of lodgepole pine dominated ecosystems, however, such high levels can kill 50–70% of the mature lodgepole pine over vast areas. High mortality in the lodgepole pine in the Vail Valley would be detrimental to scenic quality, recreational opportunities and wildlife habitat in this highly valued area. As the dead trees begin to fall, the ability to maintain acceptable fuel loads within the wildland/urban interface is also compromised.

There is a need to modify the mountain pine beetle activity in this important setting. Manipulating lodgepole pine stand conditions in critical areas by creating a mosaic of forested ages, a variety of tree densities and sizes and increasing the aspen component will work toward managing future mountain pine beetle risk and wildland fuel hazard. There is also a need to maintain acceptable fuel loads in the wildland/urban interface by removing dead, dying, and high-risk trees while they have some economic value to offset the treatment cost.

Much of the shrublands in the Vail Valley are outside their historic range of variability due to fire suppression. This has resulted in homogenous, over-mature shrublands that pose a risk of higher intensity fires due to the buildup of hazardous fuels.

Creating a mosaic of age and structural classes in the shrublands will reduce the intensity and severity of wildfires and their detrimental effects to these mountain communities, such as higher risk to firefighters, loss of homes, and landslides.

The Project proposes to use a variety of techniques to improve stand structure and species diversity and consequently the health of the forest, while protecting the heritage, recreation, visual, watershed and wildlife resources.

The Proposed Action

Through this proposed action, the White River National Forest intends to:

Manage the lodgepole pine stands in the Vail Valley south of I-70 for future mountain pine beetle (MPB) risk and wildland fuel hazard by increasing structural and species diversity using vegetation treatments. Approximately 1215 acres of vegetation management are proposed.

- 871 acres of lodgepole pine stands will be thinned to leave approximately 50–70% of the basal area. This will open up the stands to increased sun and wind to disrupt the MPB broods. In areas where the dbh is 10–11 inches or greater, small patch cuts will be made to remove the primary MPB host trees.

- 344 acres of aspen within the lodgepole pine stands will be enhanced in the wildland/urban interface for forested fuel breaks and for MPB flight interruption. For patches of aspen, the pine will be removed within the aspen and for 1–2 tree lengths around the patch. This area is within an inventoried roadless area as identified by the 2002 White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

Manage the shrublands and aspen stands north of I-70 to move them toward their historic range of variability. Mechanical vegetation treatments and prescribed fire will create a mosaic of age and structural classes in order to reduce the intensity and severity of wildfires in the wildland/urban interface. Approximately 1884 acres of vegetation management are proposed.

- 905 acres of shrublands will be broadcast burned. This will change the fuel types to reduce future potential wildfire intensity and aid firefighters in wildfire suppression.

- 521 acres in the Eagle's Nest Wilderness will be broadcast burned to maintain and improve aspen stands, reducing future potential wildfire intensity and rate of spread. This will create a forested fuel break between conifer stands and the town of Vail and will help facilitate wildland fire use should a wildfire start in the wilderness area.

- 231 acres within the wildland/urban interface and outside the Eagle's Nest Wilderness will be treated to maintain and improve aspen stands, reducing future potential wildfire intensity and rate of spread. Dead trees will be cut, piled and burned. The area will then be broadcast burned. This will create a forested fuel break between conifer stands and the town of Vail and will help facilitate wildland fire use should a wildfire start in the wilderness area.

- 227 acres within the wildland/urban interface will be treated to maintain and improve aspen stands, reducing future potential wildfire intensity and rate of spread. All conifers will be cut and aspen will be patch-cut, piled and burned within 200' of private land. This will create a forested fuel break between conifer stands and the town of Vail.

Project Design and Mitigation Measures

All proposed treatments and activities would follow the standards and guidelines found in the Revised White River Land and Resource Management Plan—2002.

Roadless

No road construction or commercial timber harvest is proposed in the inventoried roadless areas designated by the Revised Forest Plan.

Preliminary Issues

Issues identified to date include: impacts of timber harvesting and prescribed burning on visual quality in a recreation setting; the impacts of timber harvesting and prescribed burning on water quality; the impacts of prescribed burning in a wilderness area; impacts of vegetation management in an inventoried roadless area; potential impacts to heritage resources; potential spread of noxious weeds; air quality impacts from burning; and effects on threatened, endangered, sensitive and management indicator species.

Possible Alternatives

Possible alternatives to the proposed action may include no burning within the Eagle's Nest Wilderness area, no vegetation management within the inventoried roadless area, or a combination of the activities described above.

Involving the Public

Pursuant to Part 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219.10(g), the Forest Supervisor for the White River National Forest gives notice of the agency's intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for the Vail Valley Forest Health Project described above. The Forest Service is seeking information, comments, and assistance from individuals, organizations and federal, state, and local agencies that may be interested in or affected by the proposed action (36 CFR 219.6).

Public participation will be solicited by notifying in person and/or by mail known interested and affected publics. A legal notice and news releases will be used to give the public general notice. Public participation activities will include requests for written comments and an open house to be held at a local venue. The public is invited to help identify issues and define the range of alternatives to be considered in the environmental impact statement.

A reasonable range of alternatives will be evaluated and reasons will be given for eliminating some alternatives from detailed study. A "non-action alternative" is required, meaning that