

Notices

Federal Register

Vol. 68, No. 41

Monday, March 3, 2003

This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Mission Brush, Bonners Ferry Ranger District, Idaho Panhandle National Forests; Boundary County, ID

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

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

SUMMARY: The Bonners Ferry Ranger District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests is proposing rehabilitation of the vegetation in the Brush Creek and Mission Creek watersheds, identified as the Mission Brush project area. These watersheds are located 14 and 19 miles, respectively, north of Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Priorities are treatment of stands of off-site Ponderosa pine and dry sites, and taking steps to begin restoring the diversity that was found historically in mixed conifer stands. The project, as proposed, will provide additional benefits to the water resources and result in some reduction of fuels adjacent to private property in a portion of the project area. The USDA Forest Service will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to disclose the potential environmental effects of implementing vegetative and aquatic restoration activities on National Forest System lands within the project area.

DATES: Comments, suggestions, or requests to be placed on the project mailing list, should be received on or before April 1, 2003. The draft environmental impact statement is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and available for public review in April 2002.

ADDRESSES: Submit written comments and suggestions on the proposal or requests to be placed on the project mailing list to Doug Nishek, Project Team Leader, Bonners Ferry Ranger District, Route 4, Box 4860, Bonners

Ferry, Idaho 83805-9764, e-mail address: dnishek@fs.fed.us.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Doug Nishek, project leader, Bonners Ferry Ranger District, (208) 267-5561, e-mail address: dnishek@fs.fed.us.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The purpose and need for this project is derived from the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP), the Northern Region Overview and the Kootenai River basin Geographic Assessment (GA). Findings from these studies document the dense, insect- and disease-prone state of the dry-site ecosystems across the Idaho Panhandle National Forests and the Kootenai River basin. These large-scale analyses describe the changes these ecosystems have undergone over the past century, such as a significant loss in the once-dominant western white pine in northern Idaho. Current conditions are causing concern due to increased wildfire hazard and potential for severe fires. Site-specific information indicates these conditions are present in Mission Creek and Brush Creek watersheds.

Initial assessment identified insect and disease problems placing stands at a high risk of serious losses through tree mortality and the resulting changes in habitat structure. The same is true for stands planted with off-site Ponderosa pine following wildfire in 1945. Lodgepole pine stands are at high risk of mountain pine beetle infestation. Western white pine is no longer a key component of these forests.

Objectives of this project are two-fold, as follows: On dry sites begin restoration of historical vegetative conditions that favored development of large, open-grown stands of ponderosa pine and western larch; and, in the mixed conifer and subalpine forests increase size, species, and age-class diversity through treatments to begin returning western white pine to its historical role and treating lodgepole pine stands at high risk to insects. The management activities would reduce fuel loadings and potential for severe fires on National Forest System lands adjacent to private property in the western portion of the Mission Creek drainage. Water quality and aquatic resources would benefit from reconstruction of portions of roads to

reduce the amount of sediment entering streams. There will also be opportunities to improve recreation facilities in the Brush Lake area.

Preliminary issues include forest health, water quality, timber supply and demand, wildlife, fish, and plant species.

The Forest Service will consider a range of alternatives, including the "no action" alternative, under which there would be no change from current management of the area. Additional alternatives will represent a range of strategies to accomplish the goals of this project. The Forest Plan provides guidance for management objectives within the potentially affected area through its goals, objectives, standards and guidelines, and management area direction. Inland Native Fish Strategy guidelines (USDA Forest Service, 1995) supersede Forest Plan guidelines established for riparian areas.

The first public notice of proposed management activities in this area was made in July 1997 for a project identified as Mission Round Prairie environmental assessment (EA). At that time the Forest Service was assessing the conditions and proposing treatments in a larger area that also included Round Prairie Creek, Gillon Creek and Hellroaring Creek watersheds. The Mission Brush project will analyze management strategies in the watersheds identified as high priority through that initial assessment. Based on scoping and changes in Agency direction the Forest Service believes an EIS is the appropriate level of documentation. Members of the public are encouraged to visit with Forest Service officials during the analysis and prior to the decision. Comments provided by the public and other agencies will be used to develop strategies for management of natural resources in the project area. Comments received during the earlier scoping and analysis for the Mission Round Prairie EA will be considered during the environmental analysis for this EIS and will be a part of the public record. People, organizations and agencies on the Mission Round Prairie mailing list will be included in the Mission Brush EIS mailing list. The Forest Service is also seeking information, comments, and assistance from federal, state and local agencies and other individuals or