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Date: 03/11/2015

Dear Friend of the Ashley,

The Ashley National Forest is seeking comments on the Flaming Gorge Bighorn Sheep Habitat Improvement Project. The project would involve lop and scatter of vegetation along area of Red Canyon above the Flaming Gorge Reservoir, as well as limited prescribed burning.

Project Background and History

This project originally began in 2007 and was much larger in size and scope with a purpose of improving habitat for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. In order to achieve this purpose, various actions were proposed on both sides of Red Canyon that involved vegetation treatment in the form of lop and scatter cutting as well as prescribed fire. In 2008 and again in 2010, a scoping letter was sent out to the interested parties and individuals. As of the 2010 scoping letter, there were 26 treatment units which encompassed about 6,500 acres. The project was originally designed to be completed as an environmental assessment (EA). Since 2010, due to a variety of reasons, the project was put on hold. Recently, the project has been completely redesigned with a substantially smaller footprint, and is now about 1500 acres in size. There are 12 treatment areas that contain subunits, and there is reliance on lop and scatter as the form of treatment with a reduced use of prescribed fire.

The modification of the project was a result of both public input as well as staff considerations. Some of the comments received during the two earlier scoping periods had concerns about visual quality along the Red Canyon and how the visual quality would be impacted from prescribed fire. Those comments were taken into consideration and as a result, there is very little use of prescribed fire proposed for this project. Additionally, staff input highlighted the importance of the area from an historic and archeologic perspective, as well as considerations related to soil and water quality. This input helped to reshape the size of the project, reducing the total project area by approximately 77 percent of what was originally proposed. Staff recommendations also led to more focus on using traditional vegetation management techniques such as lop and scatter with much less emphasis on prescribed fire.

Purpose and Need for the Proposal

The project area includes shrub and coniferous forest vegetation types, with scattered but increasing numbers of conifer species. These vegetation types provide habitat for a variety of grass- and shrub-dependent species. They also provide good quality habitat for bighorn sheep. However, as the number and size of the young conifers increase, habitat values for bighorn sheep continue to decrease. Removing conifers will maintain the proposed treatment units as grass and shrub vegetation types.



disruption of the historical fire regime has contributed to the encroachment of conifers into grass and shrub vegetation types and canopy thickness in pinyon/juniper and Douglas-fir stands along Flaming Gorge Reservoir and Carter Creek Canyon. This has resulted in the gradual displacement of grass and shrub vegetation types which are important foraging and lambing areas for bighorn sheep. Grass and shrub vegetation types also provide bighorn sheep areas where predators are more easily detected and avoided.

Consequently, this project is designed to:

- Maintain and improve habitat for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*);
- Be in compliance with the objectives of the Regional Foresters plan to prevent bighorn sheep from being listed under the ESA; and
- Maintain and improve habitat diversity and stand structure in grass and shrub vegetation types.

These objectives would be accomplished by removing conifers that are encroaching into shrub and grassland vegetation types along the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and Carter Creek Canyon.

Proposed Action

The proposed action would treat vegetation with approximately 1415 acres of lop and scatter cutting and about 86 acres of combined prescribed burning in combination with lop and scatter cutting. Table 1 and the attached map provide a detailed description and illustration of the proposed action.

Lop and Scatter Cutting: Lop and scatter cutting by hand crews would be utilized to remove conifer trees. The following lop and scatter cutting prescription methods would be applied to treatment polygons as individually assigned in Table 1:

LS-1: Lop and scatter of conifer vegetation through crew hand cutting; cutting debris left on-site with heights not to exceed 24 inches above ground surface.

LS-2: Lop and scatter of conifer as described in **LS-1** with varied silvicultural designed Douglas-fir and Ponderosa Pine avoidance areas.

LS-3: Lop and scatter of conifer as described in **LS-1** to also include silvicultural designed selected Douglas-fir cutting.

LS-4: Lop and scatter of conifer as described in **LS-1** to also include silvicultural designed pinyon-juniper old-growth stand thinning.

Prescribed Fire: Prescribed fire would be applied in 2 treatment units. Lop and scatter cutting as described in **LS-1** may also be applied to these prescribed sites. Cutting applications may be used to prepare sites for burning, assist in burn control, complete a site habitat structure objective, or improve timber stand conditions. Burn ignition may employ water craft, helicopter, or ground crew systems to be determined by fire program managers. The following prescription methods would be applied to treatment polygons as individually assigned in Table 1:

RX-1 & LS-2: Prescription burns in pinyon-juniper with Douglas-fir and Ponderosa Pine stand avoidance; will include silviculture treatment designs. This application would be applied to 1 treatment area (unit 6A) approximating 50 acres in size. **LS-2** may also be applied as prescribed to meet polygon treatment objectives.

RX-2 & LS-1: Prescription fire would be applied to all vegetation cover types proximal to the target area. This application would be applied to 1 treatment area (unit 10B) approximating 45 acres in size. **LS-1** may also be applied as prescribed to meet polygon treatment objectives.

The proposed action would be accomplished with incremental projects completed each year over a relatively long period with the following intent:

- Individual site treatments could continue throughout an approximate 20-year span.
- Dependent upon variables of fire behavior and individual burn year conditions, the objective is to achieve a sufficient habitat-altering burn determined at the bighorn eye level. The intent is to open at least 30 percent of the identified acres within the treatment polygon; recognizing that condition variables could create a 100 percent burn at any of the four given prescribed burn sites.
- Treatments would be designed to provide an adequate level of open reservoir shoreline habitat to facilitate bighorn visual security within each polygon. This would consist of a minimum 150-yard, continuous open shoreline per polygon target to enable vertical canyon elevation connectivity to the water line.
- Treated sites may be reseeded with appropriate seed mixes consistent with habitat objectives and land type requirements.

Table 1 – Proposed Action Treatment Methods

Treatment Unit/ Subunit Number	Area	Unit Acres	Forest Plan Management Area	Vegetation Type ¹	Treatment Method ²
1	<u>Carter Creek</u>		N1	P-J	LS-1
1A		94	N1		
1B		162	N1		
1C		52	N1		
1D		25	N1		
2	<u>Upper Carter Creek</u>	45	N1	PIPO/PSME	LS-2
3	<u>Dowd Mountain</u>		N1	PMSE	
3A		35	N1		LS-3
3B		97	N1		LS-3
3C		129	N1		LS-3
4	<u>Carter Creek Mouth</u>		N1		

¹ Vegetation Types: *PJ* = pinyon - juniper, *PSME* = Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), *CEMO* = birch leaf mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus montanus*), and *PIPO* = Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*).

² Proposed Treatment Methods:

LS-1 = Lop & Scatter conifer crew hand cutting; debris left at ground heights of ≤ 24".

LS-2 = As in *LS-1* with varied silvicultural designed *PSME* & *PIPO* avoidance.

LS-3 = As in *LS-1* to include silvicultural designed selected Doug Fir cutting.

LS-4 = As in *LS-1* and designed silvicultural pinyon-juniper old growth thinning or openings.

RX-1 = Prescription burns in *P-J* with Doug Fir stand avoidance.

RX-2 = Prescription burns, all vegetation types.

Treatment Unit/ Subunit Number	Area	Unit Acres	Forest Plan Management Area	Vegetation Type ¹	Treatment Method ²
4A		107	N1	PSME	LS-2
4B		38	N1	PSME	LS-3
6	<u>Dowd Overlook</u>		N1		
6A	<i>North</i>	45	N1	PJ/PSME	RX-1&LS-2
6B	<i>South Upper</i>	49	N1	CEMO	LS-1
6C	<i>South Lower</i>	54	N1	PJ/PSME	LS-1
7	<u>Hide Out – South</u>	46	N1	PJ	LS-4
8	<u>Hide Out – North</u>	108	N1	PJ	LS-4
9	<u>Gooseneck</u>		N1		LS-3
9A		128	N1	CEMO/PSME	
9B		18	N1	PSME/PJ	
9C		6	N1	PSME/PJ	
9D		20	N1	PSME/PJ	
9E		8	N1	PSME/PJ	
9F		25	N1	CEMO	
10	<u>Skull Creek</u>		N1		
10A	<i>Skull Creek</i>	14	N1	PJ	LS-4
10B	<i>Gold Point</i>	41	N1	PJ	RX-2&LS-1
12	North Skull Creek	89	N1 & R	PJ	LS-1
13	<u>Bear Mountain Thumb – Boat Camp</u>	41	N1	PSME/PJ	LS-2
14	<u>Bear Mountain – Sawmill Draw</u>	25	N1	PIPO/PJ	LS-2
- -	Total	1501	- -	- -	- -

Project Location

The project is located along the Green River corridor of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir in Daggett County, Utah. Treatment units are located on the north and south side of the canyon south of Bear Mountain. They are bordered on the west by Hideout Canyon and on the east by Gold Point. Table 2 below provides the legal location of the treatment units, and the attached map illustrates the project location.

Table 2 - Legal Description for Treatment Units in the Project Area

Unit	Township and Range	Section
1A	T2N R21E	30 NW1/4
1B	T2N R20E	25 SW1/4, 36 NW1/4
1C	T2N R20E	26 SW1/4
1D	T2N R20E	27 SE1/4, 34 NW1/4
2	T2N R20E	33 NE1/4, 34 NW1/4
3A	T2N R21E	19 SE1/4
3B	T2N R21E	19 SW1/4
3C	T2N R21E, T2N R21E	19 SW1/4 19, 24 SE1/4
4A	T2N R21E	19 SE1/4, 30 NE1/4
4B	T2N R21E	20 SW1/4
6A	T2N R20E	13 SW1/4
6B, 6C	T2N R20E	24 NW1/4, NW1/4
7	T2N R20E	13 SW1/4, SW1/4
8	T2N R20E	14 NE1/4
9A	T2N R21E	22 SW1/4
9B, 9C	T2N R21E	23 SW1/4
9D, 9E	T2N R21E	14 SW1/4
9F	T2N R21E	14 SE1/4
10A	T2N R21E	14 NE1/4
10B	T2N R21E	13 NW1/4
12	T2N R21E	12 NW1/4, 11 SE1/4
13	T2N R21E	15 NW1/4
14	T2N R21E	16 SE1/4

Forest Plan Direction

This project must be consistent with the Ashley's Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). The proposed project area is located within two Management Areas (MAs): "n1" – "NRA Existing Situation", and "r" – Wildlife. Management Area prescriptions for MAs "n1" and "r" are on described on pages IV-10 to 11, and IV 12 to 13, respectively. Goals, objectives, standards and guidelines for wildlife management are described on pages IV-28 to 31. Specific direction for the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area is provided in Appendix A of the Forest Plan on pages A1-A42. This project is consistent with the Ashley's Forest Plan.

Authority

This proposal may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement under a category of activity that allows for wildlife habitat improvement (36 CFR 220.6 (e)(6)). Specifically this category states the following:

"Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction. Examples include but are not limited to:

- (i) Girdling trees to create snags;*
- (ii) Thinning or brush control to improve growth or to reduce fire hazard including the opening of an existing road to a dense timber stand;*
- (iii) Prescribed burning to control understory hardwoods in stands of southern pine; and*
- (iv) Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor."*

At this time, I anticipate that a Decision Memo will be used to document the decision regarding this project proposal.

Public Involvement

I encourage you to review this project and submit any comments that you may have. To ensure that I have an opportunity to consider your comments when making a decision, your comments would be most helpful if they are received within 30 days from the date of this letter.

In light of recent legislation (Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 and the Agricultural Act of 2014), the Forest Service will no longer offer notice, comment and appeal opportunities for categorically excluded projects pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215.

The Forest Service continues to offer public involvement opportunities for categorically excluded projects as provided for in the agency's NEPA Procedures, see 36 CFR 220.4(d) (SOPA) and 36 CFR 220.4(e) and 220.6(c) (scoping).

Please address your comments to: Rowdy Muir, Flaming Gorge District Ranger; P.O. Box 279 Manila, Utah 84046. Office hours, for those who wish to hand deliver or provide oral comments, are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. MST, Monday -Friday (except Federal holidays). Oral comments can be provided at the above listed office, or by telephone at (435) 781-5260 during those hours. Alternatively, comments may be submitted by facsimile at (435) 781-5295 or by e-mail at: comments-intermtn-ashley @fs.fed.us (please put "Comments on The Flaming Gorge Bighorn Sheep Habitat Improvement Project" in the subject line).

Copies of the decision will be mailed to those who request it and those who comment on the project. More information is also available on the Forest's website:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ashley/landmanagement/projects>.

If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact LeAnn S. Colburn, Interdisciplinary Team Leader and Forest Environmental Coordinator at (435) 781-5163, or Dave Olsen, Wildlife Biologist at (435) 781-5181.

Sincerely,


for ROWDY MUIR
District Ranger

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