

**Notice of Proposed Action
Opportunity to Provide Scoping Comments
Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project
Mt. Hough Ranger District
Plumas National Forest
Plumas County, California**



Hazardous down fuels when ignited, will likely torch as flames exceeding four feet combust tree crowns.



Meadows are shrinking in size as trees encroach, once sustained by wildfires that naturally retarded growth of conifers, hardwoods and brush

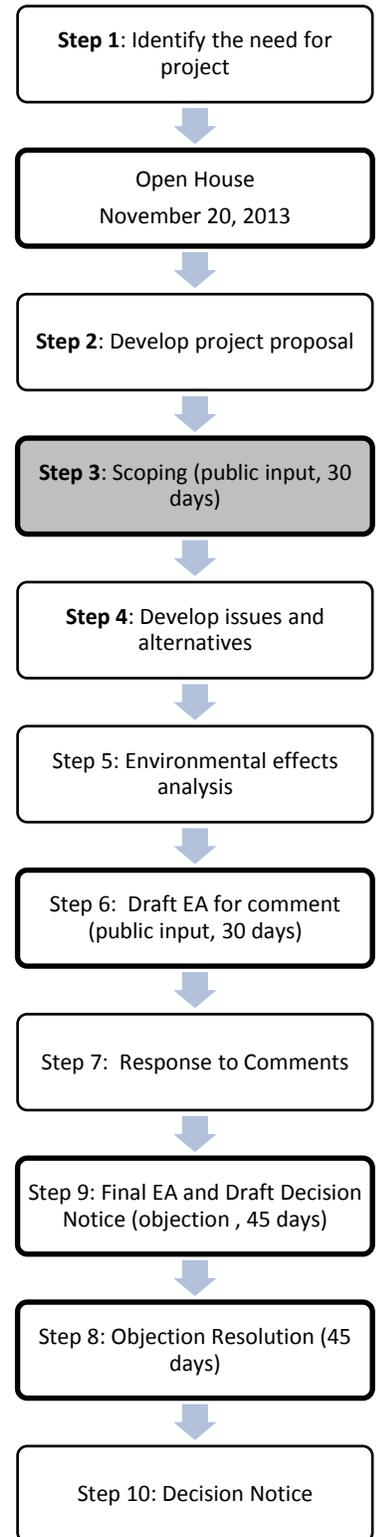


The Mt. Hough Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest invites and encourages interested parties to make comments during the development of this project. The District has recently developed a proposed action. These activities include the reduction of hazardous fuels; re-introduction of fire; improvement of forest health; re-alignment of forest structure and species composition to an eastside pine dominated forest; enhancement of water quality and riparian and aquatic species habitat; and reduction of invasive plant infestations. The public is encouraged to take part in the environmental analysis process for the Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project by submitting **written** comments.

Where is this project in the Forest Service NEPA process?

NEPA (short for the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969) guides the Forest Service decision-making process and provides opportunities for interested parties to give their ideas about resource management. Input during the scoping period (step 3 in diagram to right) is important in helping the Forest Service identify resource needs which will shape the alternatives that are evaluated and lead to the formation of a decision.

The Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project is under the provisions of the Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP) (USDA 1988) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) FSEIS and ROD (USDA 2004a, 2004b). Public notice, comment and administrative review for this project is governed by 36 CFR 218 Subpart B regulations that provide for a pre-decisional objection process for projects documented in a Record of Decision or Decision Notice. The diagram to the right shows the steps of the NEPA process for this proposed project. The box highlighted in grey indicates where the attached proposed action is in that process. Boxes with a thicker, bold outline are public involvement opportunities offered during the planning process.



Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project

Plumas National Forest Mt. Hough Ranger District

As you review and consider the proposed land management action, we encourage you to let us know if you have any suggestions, comments, or concerns – we want to hear them all. Are we missing something? Tell us. Know that we are single-mindedly dedicated to responsible conservation, collaboration and applying the best available science along with local knowledge. The feedback we get from our community members has an enormous impact on how we develop and implement projects, so please know your input is important to us. We read every email and letter sent to us.

The Wildcat Project Team

The Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project aims to reduce hazardous fuels; re-introduce fire, eradicate noxious weeds by spraying individual plants with herbicide and improve forest health by re-alignment towards an eastside pine dominated forest mixed with resilient conifer forest, aspen and meadows. In order to enhance water quality, restoration watershed activities target enhancing riparian and aquatic species habitat by road obliteration, decommissioning roads and repairing water drafting sites. The implementation of project activities may employ stewardship contracting and are planned to commence in 2015 and be completed before 2022. The Mt. Hough Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest (PNF) proposes to implement activities approximately 6 air miles from Janesville and 25 miles from Greenville, X County, California.



Proposed activities are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Summary of treatments proposed under the Wildcat Project.

Treatment Type	Approximate Acres or Miles in Existing Units
Mechanical thin and biomass treatment (ground based)	2571 acres
Mechanical thin without biomass treatment (ground-based)	292 acres
Prescribed fire (as a primary or follow-up treatment)	102 acres of primary treatment
	2,862 acres of potential follow-up treatment
Hand thin, pile, chip, and/or pile burn	213 acres 2862 acres (if market for biomass unavailable)
Eastside pine re-alignment	1,777 acres
Mixed conifer (wildlife habitat improvement)	741 acres
Aspen stand enhancement	336 acres
Semi-primitive non-motorized Mechanical thin and biomass treatment and prescribed burn (along edge of area)	177 acres
Semi-primitive non-motorized Hand Thin and prescribed burn	11 acres
Grapple Pile (reduce fuel loading of old down material when needed)	Maximum of 1,751 acres
Plant (Eastside pine when needed)	Maximum of 1,700 acres
Non-system, temporary road construction Reconstruction	2 mile
	11 miles
Road maintenance	30 miles

Treatment Type	Approximate Acres or Miles in Existing Units
Road Reconstruction	
New Road Construction	No new construction
NFS road decommissioning	0.72 miles
Non-system road decommissioning	6.1 miles
Water drafting sites (Reconstruction)	6 sites
Invasive Weed Treatments (herbicide use on individual plants)	26 acres

The legal description of the proposed project encompasses all or portions of T27N R12E Sections 1-3, 10-12, 14 and 15; T27N R13E Section 6; T28N R12E Sections 13-16, 21-24, 25, 28, 34-36; and T28N R13E Sections 30 and 31, Mount Diablo Base Meridian (MDBM). A portion of the project area is within the Antelope Lake Recreation Area and the Thompson Peak Semi-primitive Non-motorized area.

A Forest Service interdisciplinary team (IDT) developed four primary objectives for the Wildcat Project based on site-specific resource concerns identified in the June 2005 Diamond Landscape Assessment, Moonlight Strategic Fire Restoration Plan, relevant laws, and Forest Service direction. These objectives led to the development of a proposed alternative consisting of specific treatments and activities within the Wildcat Project area needed to shift existing conditions toward desired future conditions.

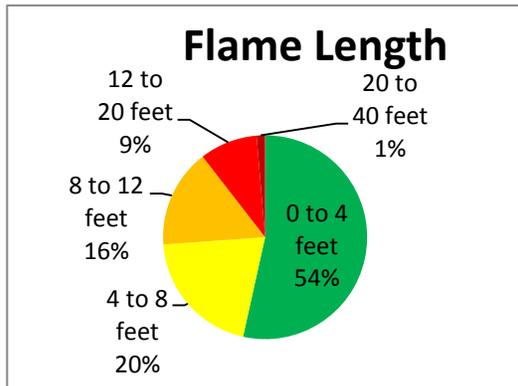
Listed below are the project objectives, underlying purpose of and need for taking action, legislation and policy direction for the objectives, and measurement indicators. These measurement indicators are used to quantify and describe whether the proposed action and other alternatives would meet project objectives.

Purpose 1: Reduce hazardous fuel accumulations

Objective 1: Modify fire behavior to restore fire adaptive ecosystems while reducing threats from large, high-severity wildfires to communities, and habitat for wildlife and sensitive plant species (USDA 2004a, p. 34). The purpose of the Wildcat Project to maintain and restore

fire resilient, healthy forest conditions as a step toward achieving ecologically sustainable landscape, particularly in light of climate change and uncertain future environmental conditions.

Need for Action: There is a need for reducing forest stand densities and canopy cover to promote 4 feet or less flame lengths under 90th percentile weather conditions in the Wildcat project area,



in order to lower the probability of high-severity wildfire behavior threatening life and property, timber values, water quality, scenic landscapes, and biodiversity. Flame lengths greater than four feet tend to increase fire intensity and the likelihood of torching events and crown fire; a condition occurring of 46 percent of the project area as depicted in Figure 1. Under these conditions hand crews are ineffective and potential for resource loss and degradation are high.

Figure 1. Current flame lengths within the project area

Over the past decade, the Plumas National Forest (PNF) has experienced unprecedented high severity wildfire events burning roughly 170,000 acres of National Forest System lands (NFSL), representing nearly 12 percent of the PNF land base. The western boundary of the Wildcat Project area lies within the 2007, Moonlight and Antelope Complex fires, which burned over 54,000 acres featuring stand-replacing fire behavior impacting about 20 California spotted owl protected activity centers (PACs) and their associated home range core areas (HRCAs).

The Plumas County Fire Safe Council identified nearby Greenville and Janesville as communities at risk to wildfire in 2005. Also at-risk, are the 3 spotted owl PACs and associated HRCAs and 3 Northern goshawk PACs territories within the Wildcat Project area. Overstocked forest conditions and concentrations of hazardous woody fuels, in combination with the increased risk of human-caused fire ignitions and the existing natural resources and facilities at risk, make the Wildcat Project area a high concern for fuel reduction treatments.

Desired Condition: Open, multi-storied forest stands dominated by large, fire-adapted trees. Tree crowns sufficiently spaced vertically and horizontally to lower the probability of crown fire initiation and spread under high fire weather conditions. During high fire weather conditions, the size and severity of wildfires would be reduced (USDA 2004a). Within treated stands, surface fuels would be light enough to burn with flame lengths less than four feet under high fire weather conditions. Rate of fire spread would be decreased and production rates for fire line construction improved to allow fire management personnel greater safety and efficiency in suppression efforts.

Higher intensity fuels treatments would be strategically located around critical wildlife habitat to create open stand conditions that provide protection from high-severity fire. Within critical habitat areas, lower intensity treatments would reduce surface and ladder fuels, while maintaining important habitat characteristics and structure.

Purpose 2: Improve forest health

Objective: Modify forest structure and species composition to promote shade intolerant species (including Jeffrey and ponderosa pine and aspen), enhance open canopy conditions and create healthy uneven-aged, multistoried, disturbance resilient conditions.

Need for Action: There is a need for increasing open canopy conditions (generally less than 40%) and creating gaps and retaining clumps to increase structural diversity, and the regeneration and survival of shade-intolerant tree species. The current landscape within the Wildcat Project area is dominated by homogeneous mid-to-late seral closed canopy forests, which make up approximately 75% of the forested area. These forests are characterized by high-density stands with an average of 60 percent canopy closure comprised mostly of small to medium sized, shade-tolerant trees (usually true fir) and lack horizontal and vertical heterogeneity. Across the project area, densities average over 400 trees per acre, and total basal area averages 200 square feet per acre. These dense stands of shade-tolerant trees outcompete desired shade-intolerant species (including Jeffrey and ponderosa pine) for sunlight, water, and nutrients. This situation reduces tree vigor and stresses forest stands, making them more susceptible to insects, disease, drought, and high-severity stand-replacing fire.

Due to past management activities, including long-established fire suppression, stands have become overly dense with shade tolerant species. White fir comprises on average more than half of the basal area, and the large majority (>75%) of trees per acre. Large pine trees exist in the overstory, but little pine regeneration has occurred. Low light conditions perpetuate the regeneration and growth of shade-tolerant species. The closed canopy, homogeneous stand structure across the project area decreases structural diversity and landscape-level resilience particularly considering that precipitation levels within the area are more characteristic of drier eastside pine forest types than the more mesic Sierran mixed conifer forests further west (Safford 2013).

Existing aspen clones within the landscape exhibit signs of stress and reduced vigor. Low densities of young, vigorous aspen and a lack of larger overstory aspen characterize many of the current stands. Conifer encroachment, lack of frequent fire, and animal browsing are primary factors contributing to the declining health of aspen stands. Conifers within aspen stands increase shade and duff layers, reducing sunlight penetration to the ground and bare mineral soils, which are essential for aspen regeneration and growth. As fire-adapted species, aspen regeneration is reduced as a result of current fire management policies. Stands range in size from a fraction of an acre to a few acres. Cattle grazing has added to natural browsing pressure to reduce young aspen health and growth.

Along the edge of the Thompson Peak Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized area within the Retention Visual Quality Objectives the area is similar to adjacent lands. Dense stands with diseased and low vigor trees. Densities are similar to the eastside pine descriptions. Currently visual quality is decreased due to the lack of large trees, diverse spacing and restricted viewing because of dense stands of small trees. These locations have high density of diseased, low vigor trees. Our direction states to meet a Retention Visual Quality Objective and provide adequate treatment of damage from catastrophic events. In addition to protect semi primitive recreation values use appropriate special cutting methods to harvest timber for salvage purposes (LRMP page 4-89).

Desired Condition: A heterogeneous landscape comprised of different seral stages and tree species in various ranges of density and canopy cover would be resilient to disturbance. Species composition to primarily fire-adapted shade intolerant species, and open canopy conditions would dominate the landscape. Desired stand structure would vary according to topographic location, such as aspect, slope position, and site quality, creating high levels of horizontal and vertical diversity at the stand and landscape-scale. North facing slopes, true fir and dry mixed conifer stands would contain more shade tolerant species and higher canopy cover, while south facing slopes and east side pine stands would be primarily shade intolerant species with open canopy. Desired forest attributes include uneven-aged, multi-storied stands dominated by legacy structures composed of large, fire-adapted trees.

Stand densities would generally be low, characteristic of active-fire ecosystems, especially on south-facing slopes and near ridge tops. Basal area should generally range from 40 to 100 on average within eastside pine stands, and 100 to 140 on average with mixed conifer and true fir stands. True fir stands would generally have more trees. Densities should generally range from 30-80 trees per acre. Low density stands reduce the amount of inter-tree competition which leads to the growth and development of larger trees that are healthier and more resilient to insects, disease, drought and fire. Disease and insect infection centers would be reduced to endemic levels and the creation of new centers would be prevented. In addition, low density stands would have open pockets of sparse canopy cover that promote the establishment and growth of fire-adapted and shade-intolerant species including ponderosa and Jeffrey pine, sugar pine, and aspen which would contribute to landscape heterogeneity and native plant species diversity. Young pine regeneration in the understory is desirable to increase structural diversity and create uneven-aged conditions. Tree densities and canopy cover would generally have been lower than in Sierran mixed conifer forests due to the lower precipitation levels and poorer site productivity, but would still have varied according to aspect. More northerly facing aspects would contain higher densities of trees with more shade-tolerant species compared to open-canopied, south-facing slopes.

Aspen stands should be large, continuous, and comprised of younger regeneration and healthy large overstory trees. Conifers would be mostly absent from the stands, as well as directly surrounding aspen to allow for clone expansion. Open canopy conditions and bare mineral soil would be created to stimulate growth and regeneration. Sprouting species will be more prevalent, primarily in moist areas, because of their ability to regenerate.

For eastside yellow pine forests and dry mixed conifer forests in the Wildcat Project desired conditions include (Safford 2013): 1) Large diameter drought and fire resistant species (i.e. pine species); 2) Lower density, open canopy (<40%) stands that are resistant to fire and promote the growth of residual trees; and 3) diverse forest structures with heterogeneous horizontal and vertical tree distributions.

Semi primitive Non- motorized area desired condition will provide lower density, diverse spacing for openings and clumps of trees. This will control the spread of root disease into the area. Large diameter trees will be maintained and pine will be retained to enhance visuals. National Forest Landscape Management Volume 2 Chapter 5 provides example for a Retention VQO to maintain large trees and an adequate stand density to maintain an open park-like appearance and restrict the growth of understory trees.

Purpose 3: Control Invasive Plants

Objective: Prevent the introduction of new invasive plants; contain and control or eradicate existing infestations of invasive plants (USDA 2004a, p. 36)

Need for Action: Three invasive plant species of high management concern have been documented within the Wildcat Project area. These species are Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), medusahead (*Elymus caput-medusae*), and barbed goatgrass (*Aegilops triuncialis*). The project area includes numerous Canada thistle infestations and small amounts of medusahead and barbed goatgrass. The infestations range in size from 10 square feet to about 7.6 acres, with the majority of the infestations occupying less than 0.25 acre. Invasive plant species pose a threat to ecological function due to their ability to displace native plant species, alter nutrient and fire cycles, decrease availability of wildlife forage, and degrade soil structure (Bossard, Randall, and Hoshovsky 2000). The ground-disturbing activities proposed for this project have the potential to spread the existing invasive plant infestations to new areas.

Canada thistle is of high management concern due to its distribution and abundance in the Wildcat Project Area. This perennial thistle spreads rapidly by producing long horizontal underground roots that give rise to aerial shoots. Due to this extensive resprouting root system, Canada thistle cannot be readily treated by mechanical methods, but the species is highly susceptible to herbicide treatment. Medusahead and barbed goatgrass are annual grasses that also spread rapidly and are difficult to control with mechanical methods. Because these species occur in a limited area within the Wildcat Project Area, an aggressive treatment plan combining mechanical and herbicide treatment could prevent further spread.

Desired Condition: Eradicate small and/or isolated infestations of invasive plants, contain and control larger established infestations, and prevent the introduction and establishment of new invasive plant infestations. (USDA 2004a, p. 36).

Purpose 4: Enhance watershed conditions including water quality and habitat for riparian and aquatic species.

Objective: Improve riparian vegetation and habitats in riparian conservation areas (RCAs), while reducing road and road related erosion and sedimentation.

Need for Action: There is a need for realigning and decommissioning improperly located and unmaintained forest roads and unclassified motorized roads and trails posing long term risks to water quality and degradation of aquatic and riparian conditions on NFS lands (MacDonald and Coe 2005). Roads intercept and change natural drainage patterns, soils are compacted, and natural rates of erosion are exceeded, especially on poorly drained roads.

During the travel management planning process (USDA 2010a, b), the routes not added to the NFS transportation network were not physically closed. These non-system routes are not maintained and many of them are adversely impacting watershed conditions; these routes should be closed or obliterated. Unneeded system roads have been identified as impacting water quality and riparian conditions through a travel management analysis. Existing non-system and NFS routes in the Wildcat Project Area cross streams and are in Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs). Also water sources or drafting sites used to support transportation and fire suppression in the area have the potential to detrimentally impact watershed condition where they do not meet current best management practice (BMP) standards.

Drainage structures on several sections of NFS roads in the area were either originally poorly designed or are currently in disrepair. These sections require reconstruction to be brought up to BMP standards.

Desired Condition: Provide a transportation system to meet project and future resource management needs and provide for safe public access and travel, while reducing adverse water quality and ecological impacts associated with the transportation system. In the RCAs, natural flow patterns infiltrate water, distribute flood flows, minimize erosion, and sustain desired habitat diversity. The physical structure and condition of stream banks and shorelines minimizes erosion and sustains desired habitat, including riparian vegetation communities that support unique understory plant assemblages and associated species such as neotropical migrant songbirds.

A map of the activities follows this section in Figure 2. for your review.

Legal Compliance

This proposed action has been designed to meet the standards and guidelines for land management activities described in the Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP) (USDA 1988) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) FSEIS and ROD (USDA 2004a, 2004b). This project is being planned under authorization of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (section 428) directed the Forest Service to provide for a pre-decisional

objection process for projects documented in a Record of Decision or Decision Notice. The interdisciplinary team process for identifying road system needs and roads with resource damage includes a roads analysis consistent with legal requirements (36 CFR 212 Subpart A—Administration of the Forest Transportation System, 16 U.S.C. 551, 23 U.S.C. 205).

Project Schedule

The Forest Service is planning to release the draft Wildcat Fuels Reduction and Vegetation Management Project Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared to disclose public involvement efforts and comments submitted during Scoping, issues and alternatives being considered in detail and their predicted environmental effects for public review and another 30 day comment period beginning in June 2014. The Forest Service is planning to release this draft EA and the final EA to those who have submitted comments and to those who have requested to be included on the project mailing list.

The final EA along with the draft decision notice (DN) will be circulated for 45 days during the objection period expected to start in September 2014, with a decision in January 2015 followed by implementation as early as February 2015.

Possible Alternatives

In addition to the proposed action, a no action alternative will be analyzed. Additional alternatives may be developed and analyzed during the environmental analysis process.

Responsible Official

Earl Ford, Forest Supervisor, P.O. Box 11500, 159 Lawrence Street, Quincy, CA 95971, is the Responsible Official.

Nature of Decision to be Made

The Responsible Official will decide to implement this proposal, implement an alternative that moves the area towards the desired condition, or not to implement any project at this time.

Comments Requested

The Forest Service is currently seeking information, comments, and assistance from state and local governments, tribes, and other individuals or organizations that may be interested in, or affected by, the proposed management activities. The public is encouraged to take part in the environmental analysis process for the Wildcat Project by submitting specific **written** scoping comments. In order for your scoping comments to be incorporated most effectively, we would appreciate receiving them by **February 21, 2014**.

Your specific written scoping comments should be forwarded to Earl Ford, c/o Elaine Verduyck, Project Leader, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971, (530) 283-7651. Comments may be (1) mailed; (2) hand delivered between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., weekdays; (3) faxed to (530) 283-1821; or (4) electronically mailed to comments-pacificsouthwest-plumas-mthough@fs.fed.us. Please indicate the name "**Wildcat Fuel Reduction and Vegetation Management Project**" on the subject line of your email. Comments submitted electronically must be in rich text format (.rtf), plain text format (.txt.), portable document format (.pdf), or Word (.doc or .docx).

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, are part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide

the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

If you have questions or need additional information about this proposal or the comment procedures, please contact Elaine Vercruyssen, Project Leader at (530) 283-7651 or evercruyssen@fs.fed.us.

Specific written comments may be:

- **Mailed** to the attention of Earl Ford, c/o Elaine Vercruyssen, Project Leader, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971
- **Hand delivered** weekdays between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. (PST) at the above address
- **Faxed** to (530) 283-1821
- **Electronically mailed to:**
comments-pacificsouthwest-plumas-mthugh@fs.fed.us

Comments submitted electronically must be in Word (.doc or .docx), portable document format (.pdf), plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or an email message.

Figure 2 Proposed Action

