

NEWS RELEASE

USDA
Forest Service

Clearwater National Forest

12730 Highway 12
Orofino, ID 83544

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Comment being accepted on Middle-Black Project

Public comment is now being accepted on a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that describes options to manage national forest lands in the North Fork Clearwater River drainage.

The Middle-Black DEIS analyzes 156,500 acres in the **Middle** North Fork and Upper North Fork (**Black** Canyon) area. The area was chosen after a thorough assessment of conditions in the entire North Fork Clearwater River drainage.

According to District Ranger Doug Gober, the Forest Service is concerned about conditions in the Middle-Black area. "The condition of the land is out of sync with what would have occurred naturally," he explained. "This DEIS proposes activities that would push the lands toward a more natural state."

In the early 1900s, widespread, intense wildfires swept through the Middle-Black area, eliminating vast expanses of trees and brush from the mountainsides. Over time, the trees and brush have re-grown; however, they are primarily the same age and do not provide the diversity required by many animal species.

In addition, the types and mix of vegetation has changed. Blister rust, a fungal disease of white pine, was also introduced in the early 1900s. It decimated stands of western white pine, the dominant tree species in the area. Douglas fir, grand fir, and lodgepole pine now populate the mountainsides. Spotted knapweed and hawkweed are spreading, choking out native vegetation.

The Middle-Black area has also been altered by years of successful fire suppression, road building, logging, and a variety of human-caused factors.

Gober said the DEIS presents a strategy for correcting these problems that is based on principles of ecosystem management. Using comparisons between existing and historical conditions, land managers have identified methods to: 1) allow fire to resume a more active role in shaping the landscape, 2) diversify the ages and types of vegetation in the area, 3) control noxious weeds, 4) restore watersheds and improve fish habitat.

These methods are packaged into four alternatives. Each alternative would employ mechanical, biological, and chemical methods for treating approximately 2,300 acres of weeds. Sixty-one miles of road would be decommissioned, while another 56 miles would be stabilized. Ten undersized culverts would be replaced with larger ones that would permit fish passage, making another 22 miles of stream available as fish habitat. Some old shrub fields would be rejuvenated through the cutting of shrubs, while others would be burned and replanted with young trees.

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Comment being accepted on Middle-Black Project (continued)

According to Gober, the alternatives vary by methods used to diversify the predominantly “middle-aged” forest with areas of “young forest” that include the mix of tree species that once covered the area. They were developed in response to issues and concerns sent to the Forest Service early in the analysis process.

In summary:

- Alternative 1 is the “**no action**” alternative and a basis for comparing others.
- Alternative 2 (**Timber Harvest as Primary Tool**) would use timber harvest followed by prescribed fire as the primary management tool in both developed and roadless areas. Prescribed fire alone would be used to treat areas not feasible for timber harvest.
- Alternative 3 (**No Active Management within Roadless Areas**) would avoid active management—harvest or prescribed fire—in roadless areas. An even mix of timber harvest and prescribed fire would be concentrated on developed portions of the analysis area.
- Alternative 4 (**Prescribed Burning Only in Roadless**) would use prescribed fire as the only tool in roadless areas and timber harvest as the management tool in developed areas.
- Alternative 5 (**No Burning of Commercial Size Trees**) would not burn commercial size trees within the analysis area. Like alternatives 3 and 4, timber harvest would occur only in developed areas.

“We view this as a starting point from which we can have a dialog with the public,” Gober stated. “We have not identified a “preferred” alternative because we sincerely want to hear the public’s ideas regarding these proposals.”

While the project has been proposed in conjunction with the Clearwater Elk Initiative, a cooperative effort to improve elk habitat in the area, Gober explained that the Middle-Black DEIS is about more than elk. “Yes, it will improve elk habitat,” he said, “but that would be a byproduct of doing the right things for the ecosystem. The proposed treatments will benefit a variety of other animals that depend upon young forests for habitat.”

Gober emphasized that this proposal is only the first step in restoring the area to a more natural condition. “It took 60-90 years for these conditions to develop. We can’t completely fix them with one project.”

Public comments will be accepted through January 28, 2002. For more information about the proposal, contact Gober at the North Fork Ranger District, 12730 Highway 12, Orofino, ID 83544. The phone number is (208)476-4541.

Information is also available on the Clearwater National Forest’s website at www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater/middleblack.

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