

## **HORSETHIEF HAZARD FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT**

### **PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:**

The Billings Field Office and Eastern Montana Fire Zone have begun a hazardous fuels reduction project in a wildland-urban interface area west of Roundup, Montana. The area is overstocked with ponderosa pine and juniper and a fire start there would present a risk to life and property. Between 50 and 100 structures are located near the area selected for treatment. The project area contains about 10,300 BLM acres, of which 3,000 are forested. The forested areas are being treated mechanically and with prescribed fire.

### **ISSUES:**

This project is one of the Departments of Interior and Agriculture's "test drive" projects of new guidance issued December 9, 2002, regarding the preparation of environmental assessments (EA) for forest-health projects. It is also a Healthy Forest Initiative project.

The Environmental Assessment for the project was completed in June 2003 and submitted to the White House Council on Environmental Quality for review. Public comment and review period began July 17 and ended August 20, 2003.

The cooperative project involves area landowners, rural fire departments, county government, industry, and the BLM. The BLM and other agencies have funds available to assist landowners with fuel reduction efforts and to help rural fire departments purchase equipment.

The first phase of the project has been completed on 405 acres using a combination of machine methods and hand crew cutting and piling. IDIQ (indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity) contracts, which included some local contractors, were used to accomplish the machine work. Fire suppression crews completed the hand cutting and piling. These activities reduced the fire hazard to the surrounding homes and approximately 75 buildings. The timber was cut to a specified spacing. The cut materials were placed in decks and sold as saw logs, pulp and firewood. Machine and hand slash piles are curing and will be burned during the winter when snow depths are sufficient. Timely moisture has allowed the treatment area to establish growth and increase plant vigor.

Preparation of the next treatment area, consisting of about 440 acres, is underway with layout and tree marking complete. Treatment will consist of a combination of machine and hand cutting/piling activities.

A 100-acre parcel of untreated fuels in an adjacent treatment unit has been opened to firewood permits. Firewood permits are sold to facilitate the removal dead and down woody materials in this unit to reduce fire potential and benefit local residents.

In order to maintain the conditions created by the proposed treatment, the area will need to be retreated in 10-20 years.

### **MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:**

In addition to the Horsethief project, Montana BLM will continue to identify projects to implement the Healthy Forest Initiative in collaboration with other federal agencies, state, tribal and local governments, interest groups, local fire organizations, private landowners, and permittees.

### **BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:**

Through public comment and community meetings, most residents have indicated support of the project and have expressed an interest in reducing fuels on their adjacent private property.

Some Horsethief area residents are opposed to the project because they don't want the "natural state" of the area disturbed or because they question whether the project will be effective in protecting private property if private landowners don't also implement fuels reduction projects.

### **CONTACT:**

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