Goose Creek Fuel Break Project

Scoping Document: Purpose and Need and Proposed Action

Purpose and Need

Wildfires have been growing in size, duration, and destructivity over the past 20 years. Growing wildfire risk is due to accumulating fuels, a warming climate, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface. The risk has reached crisis proportions in the West, calling for decisive action to protect people and communities and improve forest health and resilience. It will take a paradigm shift in land management across jurisdictional boundaries to reduce risk and restore fire-adapted landscapes. In response, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service is establishing a strategy for working with partners to dramatically increase fuels and forest health treatments by up to four times current treatment levels in the West. This strategy can be viewed at "Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A New Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience to America's Forest."

Part of the strategy to respond to the wildfire crisis, is to quickly and responsibly reduce the amount of vegetative fuels available to wildfires in strategic areas. Congress has given the Forest Service the authority through a categorical exclusion to proactively manage fuels by creating fuel breaks (Bipartisan Infrastructure Law in Sec 40806) as well as in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and has urged Agencies to use these authorities to help in this wildfire crisis. Fuel breaks (Figure 1) are needed to slow fire spread by providing an area of less extreme fire behavior from which firefighters can respond to wildfires, thus aiding in wildfire suppression. Proactive fuels management, such as implementing these fuel breaks, increases wildland firefighters' chances of success in controlling a wildfire that poses a threat to communities, private lands, and other values at risk.

Fuels Break Categorical Exclusion

As previously noted, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law established the new Fuels Break Categorical Exclusion (CE) as follows:

> *SEC. 40806. Establishment Of Fuel Breaks in Forests and Other Wildland Vegetation Establishes a Categorical Exclusion for fuel breaks up to 1,000 feet in width, not more than 3,000 acres of treatments and located primarily in — the wildland-urban interface or a public drinking water source area; if located outside the wildland-urban interface or a public drinking water source area, an area within Condition Class 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Group I, II, or III that contains very high wildfire hazard potential; or an insect or disease area designated by the Secretary concerned as of the date of enactment of this Act. No new road construction is allowed, but temporary road construction is and temporary roads cannot be open*

for more than 3 years.

The Goose Creek project is proposed for analysis under the Categorical Exclusion because it includes fewer than 3,000 acres (1,975 acres as shown in Table 1) of fuel breaks that are less than 1,000 feet in width, and it would be located primarily in the wildland-urban interface (as defined by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and/or the Gallatin and Park County Community Wildfire Protection Plans) for local communities as required by the Fuels Break Categorical Exclusion. No new permanent road construction is proposed, but short temporary roads may be constructed to access and remove trees. These temporary roads would be open for less than 3 years.



Figure 1: Previously completed fuels break along road showing removal of ladder fuels and retention of some overstory trees.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to create and maintain fuel breaks in the Goose Creek and Bear Canyon areas as shown in the project map. Each year across the nation, fuel breaks are placed in response to an active wildfire. This proposed action will get ahead of those active wildfires, so that the Forest Service can take a more environmentally sound approach than is allowed during the emergency of an actual wildfire. While these fuel breaks are proposed to help mitigate some of the effects identified in the wildfire crisis, the sense of urgency in putting these fuel breaks in place is

real. This summer, across the Northern Region of the Forest Service, Forests are already using proposed fuel breaks to protect values at risk. Mechanical, hand thinning, and prescribed burning may be used to reduce the vegetative fuel loads in the identified fuel break locations in the Goose Creek area (see the Project Map). Both commercial and non-commercial treatments may be used to reduce surface fuels, ladder fuels, and tree densities up to 1,000 feet in width along existing roads and trails. Proposed activities are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of proposed activities

Proposed vegetation treatments	Acres
Mechanical Fuels Thinning	502
Non-Commercial Mechanical or Hand Thinning	307
Hand Treatment only (mitigation for resource concerns)	1,166
Prescribed Burning*	Up to 1,975*
Total Acres Treated to Reduce Vegetative Fuels	**1,975**

*Prescribed burning may be applied as a secondary treatment to any unit in the project area. The total acreage will not be expanded.

Proposed Vegetation Treatment Descriptions

The objective of these treatments is to reduce fuel loads by removing some overstory trees to increase the distance between canopies, which also creates space for new trees to grow (Figure 2). Overstory tree retention would be variable but largely only scattered trees would remain in the overstory. Mastication, chipping, slashing, piling, or scattering of non-merchantable trees and brush would occur followed by pile burning or broadcast prescribed burning to reduce the fuel loading. Created openings would reduce surface and ladder fuels.

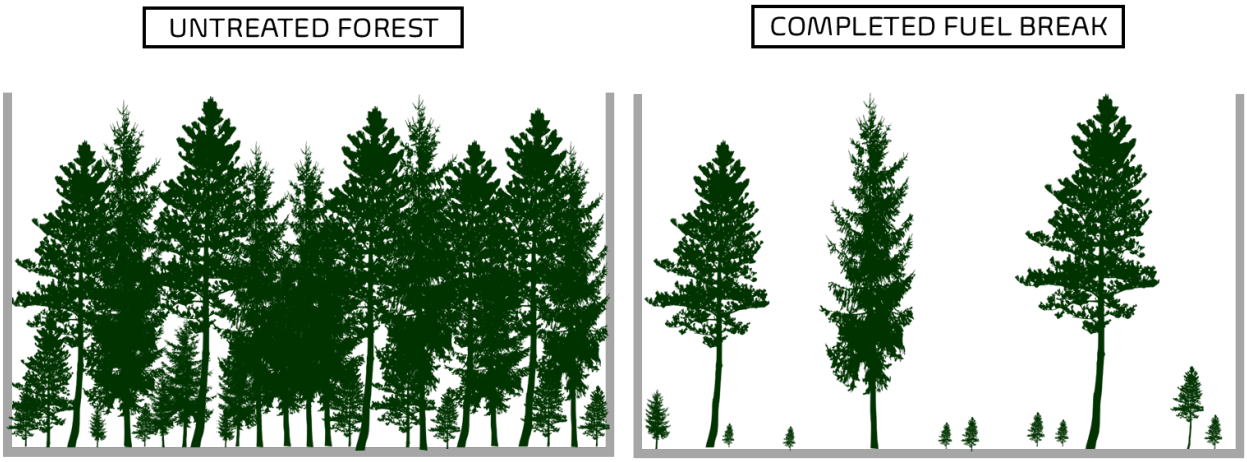


Figure 2: (Left) A depiction of a typical fuels condition prior to fuel break installation. (Right) A depiction of a completed fuel break with well-spaced large trees and a decrease in ladder fuels.

Mechanical Fuels Thinning and Non-Commercial Mechanical/Hand Thinning: The primary objective is to reduce vegetative fuels (surface and/or ladder) within a treatment area. These treatments are intended to facilitate fire remaining near the ground and not readily spread into tree crowns if a wildfire was to occur. It should also create an area that is advantageous for firefighters to take a stand against a progressing wildfire. An additional benefit would be increased tree spacing

for the remaining trees to help maintain or improve current and future stand health, growth, and species composition. Equipment may be used in these units to meet fuels reduction objectives. The primary difference between "mechanical fuels thinning" and "non-commercial mechanical/hand thinning" is the potential to provide commercial products. Please see Table 2 for the differences in the proposed thinning treatments.

Table 2. Difference between Thinning Treatments

Mechanical Fuels Thinning	Non-Commercial Mechanical/Hand Thinning
Proposed thinning treatments to reduce fuels **where commercial products may be cut and/or removed** from the unit.	Proposed thinning treatments to reduce fuels by mechanical or hand treatment but are **not intended to produce any commercial products.**
A portion of the commercial size trees may be felled and removed (hauled) from the site using mechanical equipment and transport. If not economical or desired to remove commercial value, trees may alternatively be used for firewood gathering and/or burned to reduce fuel loading. Trees/brush/activity fuels of non-commercial value may be cut, felled, masticated, scattered, piled and/or burned to reduce fuel loading.	A portion of the trees/brush would be cut, felled, masticated, scattered, piled and/or burned to reduce fuel loading.

Both treatments will allow for the remaining live trees to have more growing space, light, nutrients, and water to facilitate more rapid development into larger trees with improved resilience to disturbances such as insect, disease, and future fire. Initial implementation may take approximately 10 years, and follow-up non-commercial treatments may be needed into the future to meet the purpose and need and maintain desired fuel conditions.

Hand Treatment Only: Hand treatment is proposed for fuels reduction purposes where no ground disturbance equipment would be allowed to meet the objectives of the non-commercial thinning treatment description previously described.

Prescribed Burning: This method is proposed for fuels reduction purposes as a secondary treatment following thinning. Treatment may include slashing of trees and shrubs, followed by hand or aerial ignition of prescribed fire. These prescribed burns would be low to moderate intensity to enhance or create openings; reduce understory brush, grass, forb, and small tree components; and reduce overall fire hazards by decreasing these fuel types.

National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 Approach

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