

**File Code:** 1950  
**Date:** October 10, 2023

Greetings Forest Stakeholders,

On behalf of the US Forest Service Pike-San Isabel National Forests and Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands Forest Supervisor the South Platte Ranger District (District) is proposing activities to restore sustainable forest conditions that are resilient to fire, insects, and diseases, while providing for diverse wildlife habitats, recreational opportunities, and sustainable watershed conditions. These activities, collectively referred to as the Lower North-South Vegetation Management project (Project), respond to the need to reduce the likelihood of largescale, high-intensity wildfires and improve resiliency of the forest to insects and disease.

The current forest conditions are the result of centuries of intense logging, large fires, and aggressive fire suppression methods. The forest structure today leads to an increased risk of high intensity wildfires, and insect/disease outbreaks in the Project area. In fact, in recent years, wildfires have increased by number of incidents, intensity, and acres burned within and near the Project area.

Targeted vegetation treatments such as tree thinning, prescribed burning, and/or other fuel reduction methods can substantially reduce the intensity of fires, improve the health of the remaining trees and increase vegetative diversity. These measures would create healthier forest conditions that are closer to a historical forest structure and better able to withstand large scale, high intensity disturbances.

The proposed action entails the treatment of up to approximately 116,600 acres within the 261,096-acre Project area, located within the foothills of the Colorado Front Range, approximately 30 miles west and southwest of Denver, Colorado. A combination of prescribed fire and mechanical and manual thinning with and without tree/vegetation removal would be utilized to achieve the desired ecological conditions. Approximately 90,000 acres within the Project area are considered roadless and are subject to the Colorado Roadless Rule (2012), which established management direction for the conservation of roadless area values and characteristics. Under the rule, tree cutting is restricted to situations that meet defined exceptions. Up to 18,500 acres of roadless areas that meet exception requirements will be treated to meet project objectives to reduce fuels.

Before the proposed action was developed, the Forest Service created a joint-collaboration group known as the Lower North-South Initiative, beginning in early 2022. A diverse group of local stakeholders convened to look at the project and develop a set of desired conditions for this



analysis area. The initiative conducted a risk assessment to determine values at risk and the importance of these values. This assessment was completed in summer 2023 and helped inform the timing and placement of treatments, when implementation is ready to begin.

Vegetation management treatments would occur to retain, develop, and enhance the following forest features: large trees, forest openings both large and small, diverse structural characteristics, understory plant diversity and forage productivity, resilience to disturbance events, and wildlife habitat diversity and connectivity. Depending on the site-specific conditions such as topography, soils, and vegetation, the following methods may be used: conventional logging equipment (i.e., harvesters and skidders), cut-to-length systems (i.e., mechanized harvesting systems that fell a tree at the stump, delimb and cut it into smaller pieces); or aerial yarding techniques (i.e., moving felled trees with the use of a suspended cable or helicopter), and/or prescribed fire. Additional details regarding the proposed action, including purpose and need and a map of the Project area, are available on the Project website (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/psicc/?project=65019>) for your review.

### **How to Comment**

Before any action is taken, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that an Environmental Assessment (EA) be developed to determine the significance of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and to consider alternative means to achieve the Project's objectives.

The Forest Service is conducting scoping to provide stakeholders an opportunity to make their concerns known and provide input on issues and alternatives to be addressed in the EA. The public is invited to participate in the scoping process by attending the following scoping meetings:

**Virtual:** October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023. 6 P.M. – 7:30 P.M. Meeting link below and available on the project website.

Link:

[https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3ameeting\\_MDIyZGY3ODYtNWRhNy00ZjYxLWlzMTUtYmUzZTlhOTY0YzE2%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22Tid%22%3a%22d8c689f-d88f-4c6d-8981-51bb778b77fb%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%22d5d7c13e-1b84-46bb-8f25-8fab782142a8%22%7d](https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3ameeting_MDIyZGY3ODYtNWRhNy00ZjYxLWlzMTUtYmUzZTlhOTY0YzE2%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22Tid%22%3a%22d8c689f-d88f-4c6d-8981-51bb778b77fb%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%22d5d7c13e-1b84-46bb-8f25-8fab782142a8%22%7d)

Call-in:

United States, Denver: +1 720-388-1959  
 United States (Toll-free): (888) 304-5229  
 Phone Conference ID: 397354743#

**In-Person:** October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023. 6 P.M. – 7:30 P.M. Elk Creek Fire Station 1. 11993 Blackfoot Road, Conifer, CO 80433

The public is also encouraged to submit comments on the Project using the “Comment/Object on Project” link on the Project website.

To be most helpful and considered in the analysis, comments concerning this action should be submitted within 30 calendar days following publication of the scoping notice.

All comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will become a part of the public record for the Project; however, you may submit your comments anonymously. Should you require special communication and/or accessibility accommodation, please contact: James Gerleman, [James.Gerleman@usda.gov](mailto:James.Gerleman@usda.gov).

The Lower North South Vegetation Management project has been approved as an authorized emergency action under Section 40807 of the 2022 [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) (also known as the Bipartisan infrastructure Law). Section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to determine that an emergency exists where implementation of emergency actions is necessary to achieve reliefs from hazards threatening human health and safety or mitigation of threats to natural resources on National Forest System land or adjacent land. Based on the risks outlined in the Forest Service’s January 2022 [Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#), Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack determined that an emergency exists on 250 high-risk fireheds in the western United States. This project falls within these designated fireheds.

Projects authorized under this emergency authority adhere to specific requirements and follow several processes as compared to non-emergency Forest Service projects. Specifically, projects authorized under this emergency authority are not subject to the pre-decisional objection process under part 218 of title 36, Code of Federal Regulations. If it is determined that the authorized emergency action requires an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement, those documents are only required to include a proposed agency action and a no action alternative and public notice shall be provided for each authorized emergency action that is determined to require an environmental assessment or environmental impact. The public will be provided an opportunity to comment during the preparation of the environmental assessment or environmental impact statement; however, the duration and format of the public comment period is not prescribed.

Thank you for your interest and participation in the management of National Forest System lands.

Sincerely,

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BRIAN BANKS  
District Ranger

cc: James Gerleman, Steven Manion, Maria Beltran, James Pitts, Jace Ratzlaff