



United States
Department of
Agriculture



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Scoping Document

Little Valley Fuels Reduction Carson Ranger District, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Washoe County, Nevada



Comments Welcome

The Carson Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest welcomes your comments on this proposal to reduce dense vegetation contributing to hazardous fuels in the Little Valley area of the Carson Ranger District (See project Vicinity Map).

The purpose of the scoping process is to solicit public comment early in the analysis.

Written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of the 36 CFR 215 Notice of Proposed Action in the Reno Gazette Journal. For detailed information on how to provide comments please refer to the "Comment Process" section of this document on page 12.

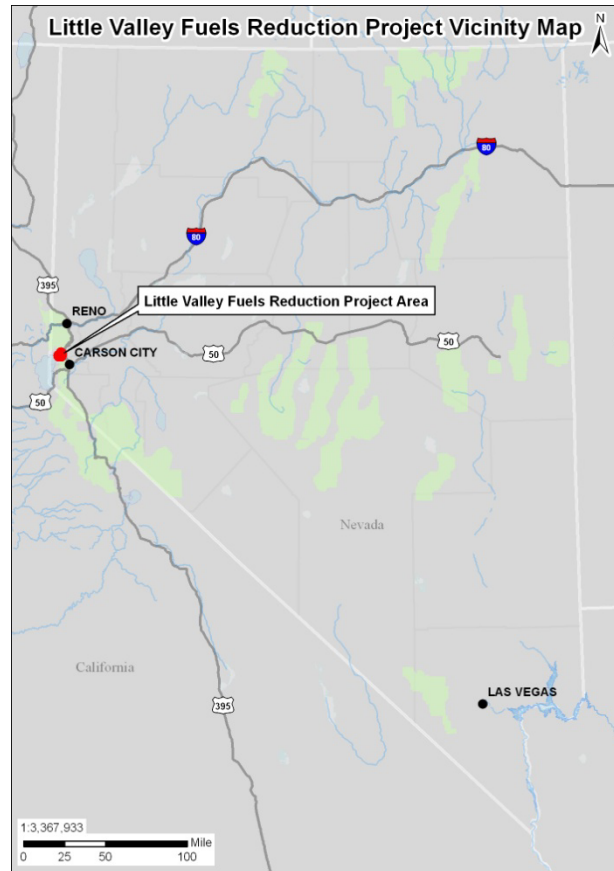
PURPOSE AND NEED

Currently in the forested areas, vegetative conditions are very dense with a disproportionate number of trees in the smaller diameter classes. Stand exam data indicates this area has an average of 1,000 trees per acre; of this approximately 900 trees are less than 8" dbh and 100 trees are greater than 8" dbh. Aspen stands are not properly functioning with conifer vegetation encroaching and shading out shade-intolerant aspen. Aspen and meadow areas are currently being reduced from encroaching conifers. This encroachment changes their use by wildlife and riparian dependent species.

Conifers encroaching into aspen and meadow areas cause these areas to be more prone to fire create the greater potential of ecologically uncharacteristic and catastrophic wildland fires. Other components, such as terrain, weather and accessibility for firefighters also contribute to fire intensity and spread. Forest stand densities that exceed the site occupancy of the area compromise stand health, increasing the risk of insect and disease incidence and insect, disease and density related mortality. Dominance of conifers into aspen and meadow areas reduce this type of available habitat and increase the risk of total loss of this important and declining habitat component. Pure aspen stands are often used as living fire breaks because they have higher moisture and fire behavior slows in pure aspen stand.

Desired conditions in the forested areas would provide for a forest structure and function that generally resembles pre-settlement conditions, with stands composed forest patches that vary in size, species composition, and structure. Trees within the project area range from seedlings to very large diameter, have multi-tiered canopies, particularly in older forests, and provide vertical heterogeneity. Dead trees, both standing and fallen would meet habitat needs of old-forest associated species and where possible, areas treated to reduce fuel levels would also provide for the successful establishment of early seral stage vegetation.

Desired conditions in the meadow would provide for hydrologically functioning meadows that support viable populations of native plant and wildlife riparian and aquatic-dependent species. Species composition and structural diversity of plant and animal communities in riparian areas, wetlands, and meadows would provide desired habitat conditions and ecological functions. The ecological status of meadow vegetation is late seral (50 percent or more of the relative cover of the



Map by: Nicholas Connolly, 2/25/2013

herbaceous layer is late seral with high similarity to the potential natural community). A diversity of age classes of hardwood shrubs is present and regeneration is occurring. Streams in meadows, lower elevation grasslands, and hardwood ecosystems have vegetation and channel bank conditions that approach historic potential.

West-wide wildfires are currently burning much larger and with higher severity, killing the majority of the trees in these fire areas. The majority of western forests managed by the US Forest Service have experienced a significant increase in fire size and severity from 1940 to 2000 (Stephens 2005). Locally, large fires have occurred along the Carson Range, demonstrating dangerous fire behavior close to urban areas. Significant fires include the Little Valley Fire (1981); Waterfall Fire (2004); Arrowcreek (2000); Martis Fire (2001); and the Hawken Fire (2007).

The purpose of this project is to reduce fuel loading and ladder fuels in forested and shrub areas. Reduce conifer and shrub densities in aspen stands and meadows to prevent increased competition for water and sunlight. Dense timber and shrub stands, high fuel loadings and excessive ladder fuels have created a high risk of uncharacteristic catastrophic wildland fires. Reducing the density of trees will increase tree vigor, health and growth rates in the forested ecosystem. Competition from high tree densities has reduced stand vigor, thus increasing the possibility that insects, disease, or wildfire will kill the forested stands including important wildlife habitat and affecting the aesthetic value. Improving the health of the forested ecosystem will reduce the long-term risk of tree mortality, improve habitat for wildlife, and protect the overall ecosystem.

This action is needed because tree and shrub densities in the project area have increased the severity of wildfire. The existing vegetation conditions support fire intensity levels which threaten the safety of firefighters engaged in community and forest protection efforts. In addition, decreased vegetation vigor is increasing the potential for the spread of insect, disease and wildfire in the forest.

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1986), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Record of Decision (January, 2004) and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in those plans.

PROPOSED ACTION

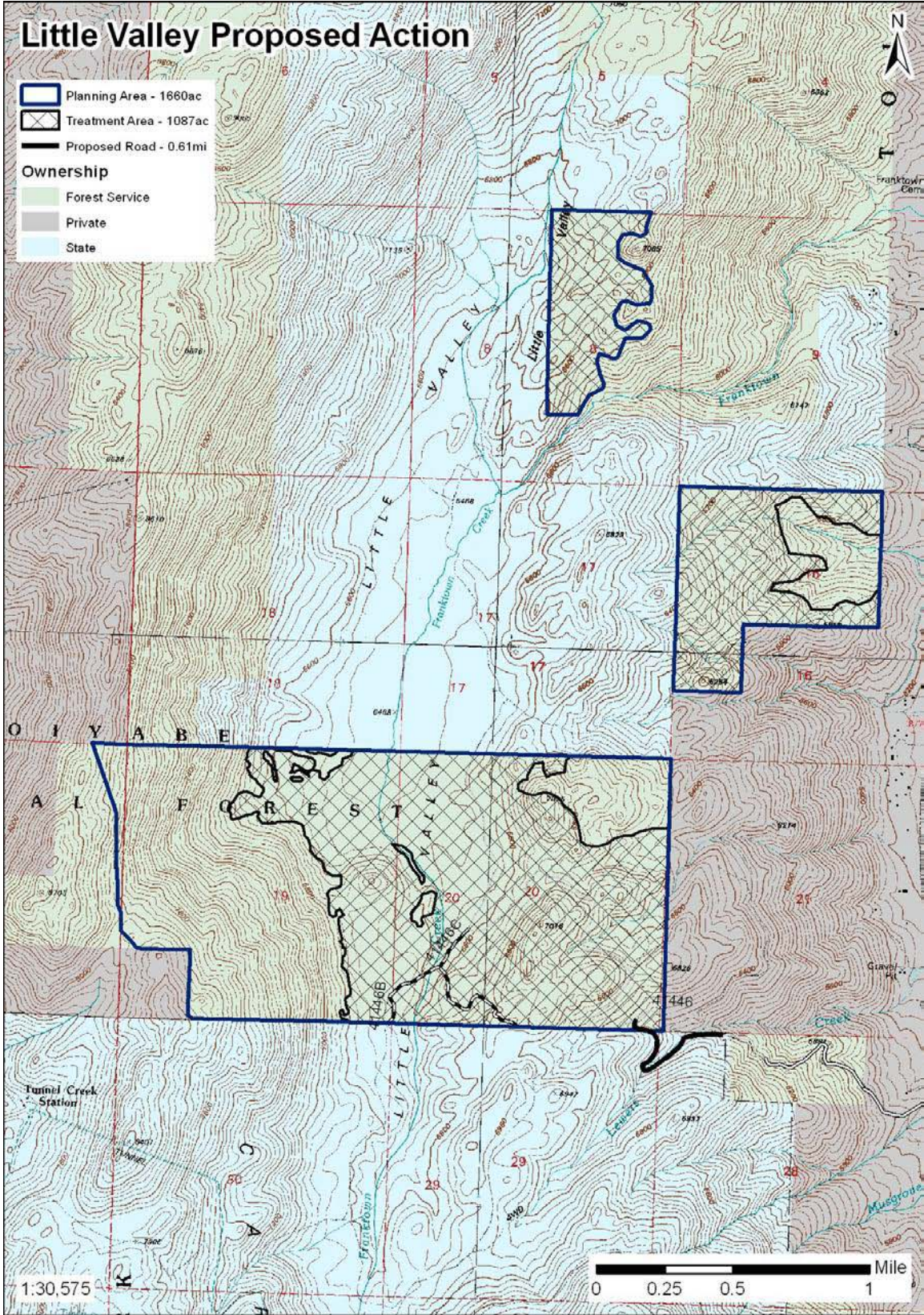
The Carson Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is proposing to reduce fuels and reduce the potential risk of catastrophic wildland fire, improve forest health and enhance aspen and meadow habitat north of Carson City, Nevada. The Little Valley project is located in Township 16 North, Range 19 East, in Section 8, 16, 19, 20, and 28. The project area consists of approximately 1,660 acres of National Forest lands (Proposed Action Map).

Project treatments are intended to reduce the risk of a stand replacing wildland fire and improve forest health, wildlife habitat, and watershed conditions. Mechanized equipment including masticators, feller-bunchers, skidders and tractors, hand crews and prescribed fire will be utilized to implement treatments.

Conifer Areas on Slopes Less Than 30 percent: Conifer trees up to 24" dbh will be thinned from below, favoring fir species, mistletoe infected, and insect infested trees for removal, thinning from below to remove the smaller trees first. Retention of all trees 24" dbh and greater will allow for

Little Valley Proposed Action

- Planning Area - 1660ac
- Treatment Area - 1087ac
- Proposed Road - 0.61mi
- Ownership**
 - Forest Service
 - Private
 - State



Map by: Nicholas Connolly, 2/25/2013

higher canopy cover for wildlife. Trees would be whole tree yarded to landings with the tops and limbs attached. If suitable markets are not obtained, tops and limbs could be removed through chipping or piled and burned on landings or within units. The project also requires the use of temporary roads to access certain project areas. Temporary roads will be obliterated after project activities. Road maintenance will be required on existing roads, including removal of vegetation and repair of the road base.

Conifer Areas on Slopes Greater Than 30 percent and All Shrub Areas: Shrubs and conifers will be thinned using mastication, hand cutting, piling, lopping and scattering, chipping and prescribed fire. Dense stands of brush that occur within 100 feet of a road or within 200 feet of the eastern National Forest System land boundary adjacent to private lands will be thinned in a mosaic pattern with removal of approximately 50 to 80 percent of the shrubs to create fuel breaks.

Shrub areas not within the above areas will be thinned in a mosaic pattern by removal of approximately 30 to 50 percent of the shrubs. Where dense pockets of conifers exist, trees less than 12" dbh will be cut and trees and shrubs within the drip line of residual conifers will be removed. Seeding of treated areas with native grass and forb species may take place after treatment to reduce the potential for invasive species and promote soil retention. Prescribed fire will occur to reduce shrub densities through broadcast burning and or pile burning.

Aspen Areas: Conifers less than 24" dbh that occur within and approximately 100 to 150 feet (1 ½ times the tallest aspen tree) from the edge of the existing stand would be removed utilizing mechanized equipment, hand cutting, lopping and scattering and chipping. Prescribed fire in the form of understory burning would be utilized to stimulate aspen regeneration; burning would occur in areas with and without conifer removal. In areas where conifer removal is implemented, burning would occur after conifer removal but prior to any initial aspen sprouting response.

Meadow Areas: Conifers less than 24" dbh that occur within or are encroaching upon meadow areas would be removed or thinned using mechanized equipment, hand cutting, piling, lopping and scattering, chipping and/or prescribed fire. Pockets of trees within the meadow may be retained where it is determined they are providing wildlife value or other ecological benefits to the meadow ecosystem. Prescribed fire in the form of broadcast burning would be utilized to stimulate meadow vegetation

Prescribed Fire: Prescribed fire will be utilized to treat slash created from implementation activities (activity fuels), reduce tree and brush densities and stimulate aspen regeneration and meadow vegetation. Prescribed fire will include pile burning at landings and in treatment units and broadcast burning and understory burning may occur anywhere within the project area. Understory burns are intended to maintain the desired fuel loading conditions in the understory but leave overstory vegetation intact. Broadcast burning is used in grasslands and shrub lands where there is little or no forest stand present. Where prescribed burning treatments take place hand line will be constructed in areas deemed as control lines to keep the fire within the burn unit. Natural barriers and roads will be used as much as possible to limit hand line construction. Hand lines will be where vegetation is removed to bare mineral soil and are less than 12 inches wide. Following burning activities the hand line will be rehabilitated.

Transportation: The proposed action would require the construction of approximately 0.6 miles of road within section 28 (T16N, R19E) on land owned by the state of Nevada to access proposed Little Valley Fuels activities. Construction of this new road segment will allow for permanent access to the Little Valley Area. The proposal also includes securing easements across private land at the east end of Tunnel Creek Road to access the Franktown Road in Sections 22, 23 (T16N, R19E).

Maintenance: Maintenance will include the use of prescribed fire, hand cutting and piling, mastication, chipping and weed treatments. Maintenance activities will begin one year after initial treatments and will continue for up to 10 years to maintain reduced fuel loadings in the treatment areas.

The Forest Service expects to begin implementation on this project in the summer of 2013.

DESIGN FEATURES

Air Quality

- All Federal, state, and local regulations pertaining to prescribed burning will be followed. All activities affecting air quality will meet the standards set forth by Washoe County Air Quality Management Division.
- Prior to burning a news release will be distributed to media contacts and public notification will occur to advise the local community of the prescribed burning.

Heritage

- Archeological sites will be flagged and avoided during project implementation. Trees will be directionally felled away from identified archeological sites, temporary roads and skid trails will avoid archeological sites and no slash piles will occur in identified archeological sites.

Wildlife

- Where available, three of the largest snags per acre will be retained.
- Large woody debris will be retained, at least 3 pieces per acre, greater than 12" dbh or the largest available.
- Project activities will not occur from April 15th through August 1st in riparian and aspen areas to minimize disturbance to migratory birds during the breeding season. Prescribed burning will be permitted during this period. To avoid nesting birds, surveys will be conducted to identify active bird nests. Nesting areas will be flagged and no burning will occur within 50 feet of the nest.
- Flammulated owls have been detected in the project area, but no nest sites have been identified. If nesting is discovered prior to implementation, a Protected Activity Center (PAC) will be designated to delineate approximately 60 acres of suitable habitat. Project activities in the PAC will emphasize habitat needs for the owls and could be suspended to protect nesting habitat. Silvicultural prescriptions with the owl PACs are proposed, the wildlife biologist and silviculturist will write a prescription that works to reduce forest fuels while maintaining important elements for nesting habitat such as increased number of snags, higher canopy cover and vertical diversity.

Noxious and Invasive Weeds

- Wash all equipment and vehicles prior to entering project area to remove all mud, dirt, and plant material.
- Fill such as sand and gravel used in road construction and/or maintenance activities will be inspected before being used at the site to assure its weed free.
- Minimize ground disturbing activities on south and east-facing slopes and retain some mulch layer in these areas to inhibit production of cheatgrass.
- Ground disturbing activities on south and east-facing slopes within brush treatment areas using mechanized equipment such as a masticator treat the shrub densities in a

less intense manner by removing a smaller percentage of brush to help inhibit cheatgrass spread.

- All seed used for restoration activities must be certified weed free.
- Project area will be monitored for a minimum of five years post-implementation to initiate early and rapid response to any new weed infestations that result following project activities.

Soil and Water

- Ground based equipment will operate on slopes less than 30% except for pitches of 150 feet or less. However, ground based operations may occur on slopes up to 50%; these will be designed on a unit by unit basis only after soil stability, soil rock content and the location of the steep slope in relation to the remaining portions of the treatment unit have been determined to be appropriate by the Forest Service.
- No trees will be removed where they provide stream bank stability and ground based equipment will stay on established stream crossings.
- Pile burning will be minimized in riparian areas.
- Skid trails will be designated on ground based skidding units and rehabilitated after use. Rehabilitation may include constructing waterbars, ripping and mulching. Multiple pass skid trails will be located a minimum of 100 feet apart except where they converge at landings.
- Drainage features will be installed on new temporary roads. Temporary roads will be obliterated after use, which may require ripping and seeding.
- Temporary and permanent erosion control measures will be used during new road construction.

Plants

- To prevent scorching and/or overheating of Shevock's bristle-moss plants and habitat, pile burning activities will not occur within 30ft. of large granitic rock.
- Avoid all Galena Creek rockcress and /or Washoe tall rockcress and a 50ft. buffer will be applied to maintain rare plant habitat by excluding project activities.
- Botrychium fern habitat will be avoided.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION IMPACTS

The following table summarizes the potential impacts of the proposed action by the affected resources. In the Environmental Assessment these impacts will be compared to those resulting from the Alternatives to the proposed action. These alternatives include the No Action Alternative and the Current System Alternative.

Affected Resource	Summary of Impact
Air Quality	All federal, state, and local regulations pertaining to prescribed burning would be followed. Impacts from prescribed burning and mechanical treatments are expected to be of short duration and locally isolated. Prescribed burning, new road construction, and use of temporary skid trails and temporary roads which may affect air quality will meet the standards set forth by Washoe County Air Quality Management Division.
Soil and Water	Ground disturbing project activities, such as use of mechanized equipment, construction of skid trails and temporary roads, and new road construction will be conducted following design features listed above to reduce the possibility of erosion and sediment delivery to stream channels. Prescribed burning would result in temporary loss of vegetation and ground cover with the potential to increase erosion and impact water quality.
Noxious and Invasive Weeds	Noxious weeds are not known to occur on National Forest System lands within the project area. The proposed action would avoid the establishment or spread of noxious or invasive weeds and plants.
Wildlife	Design features associated with the Proposed Action would minimize disturbance and potential long term impacts to wildlife species. Disturbance from equipment as well as a temporary reduction in canopy cover could result in short term impacts to Forest Service Sensitive and Management Indicator Species (MIS).
Special Status Plant Species	Within occupied habitat, potential impacts to Shevock's bristle-moss will be avoided throughout project activities. Documentation of Shevock's bristle-moss occupied habitat will require implementation of protective measures. The existing old growth stands will not be impacted by the fuels reduction project. The proposed action will provide opportunities to enhance old growth attributes in adjacent stands.
Heritage Resources	It is expected that there will be no adverse impacts to any cultural resource site. Cultural resource surveys have been completed within the project area. Implementation of the proposed action would avoid historic properties

Affected Resource	Summary of Impact
	with in the project area boundaries.
Native American Religious Concerns	This project was developed in cooperation with the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California and it is expected that there will be no adverse impacts to Native American Religious Concerns. Consultation with the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California has and will continue to occur.
Visual Resources	Potentially short term impacts to scenery could occur during project implementation. The visual impacts of the treatments will be consistent with the natural landscape characteristics and in the long term, beneficial. Treated areas would be most visible for one to two years following project activities and may not be aesthetically appealing to some individuals. Long term benefits would be due to reducing the risk of a stand replacing fire or widespread insect-related mortality.
Inventoried Roadless Areas	There are no inventoried roadless areas within the project area. No impacts are expected.
Environmental Justice	There is no known potential for anticipated disproportional effects on minority or economically disadvantaged populations within the Project Area from the Proposed Action
Transportation	The Forest Service is currently pursuing acquisition of several easements through private land on Tunnel Creek Road. Acquisition of right of ways across private property will allow for Forest Management activities to occur. Without this access, fuels reduction work described previously cannot take place as the Forest Service has no means to access the project area.

COMMENT PROCESS

The Forest Service encourages your comments on this proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the responsible official should consider in reaching a decision.

Your comments will help us prepare an environmental assessment on the proposed action. The assessment will be used to determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) or a finding of no significant impact. If there is no potential for significant impacts, that finding along with the environmental assessment and a proposed decision will be sent to those who commented. If the environmental assessment concludes that there is the potential for significant impacts then an EIS will be prepared.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of this notice in the Reno Gazette/Journal.

Comments must be submitted to: District Ranger, Carson Ranger District, 1536, S. Carson Street, Carson City, Nevada 89701 fax 775 884-8199. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are: 8am to 4:30pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/htnf/littlevalley>

Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

This hazardous fuel reduction project is being prepared under the provisions of the HFRA. It is subject to the 36 CFR Part 218, Subpart A Pre-decisional Administrative Review process.

Individuals and organizations who have submitted specific written comments related to the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project during scoping or other public involvement opportunities may file an objection following completion of the environmental assessment during the pre-decisional administrative review process.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information contact Joseph Garrotto, Project Manager at 775-884-8108.