



Deschutes National Forest, Sisters Ranger District

Black Butte Ranch Wildland Urban Interface Fuels Reduction Project Scoping Notice

The Sisters Ranger District is proposing the Black Butte Ranch Wildland Urban Interface Fuels Reduction (BBR WUI) project. The BBR WUI project is focused on addressing and sustaining forest resiliency of the National Forest adjacent to Black Butte Ranch, west of Sisters, Oregon.

The project area is near private property and entirely within the wildland urban interface (Figure 1). The vegetation composition of the area is dry ponderosa pine in the southeast and dry mixed conifer in the northwest. Prior to the fire suppression efforts of the 1900s, the area historically experienced frequent, low intensity fire. Over 85% of the project area is moderately or severely departed from historic conditions with denser vegetation than would historically have been observed. The increased density, and subsequent increased levels of vegetation present within the project area, contributes to a high likelihood that a fire could move from Forest Service system lands to private lands or vice versa.

Proposed activities would improve the ability of trees to ward off insects and diseases by reducing stand density, competition, and moisture stress. This project would align with past projects across the district and forest to restore historic low-intensity fire to the fire-dependent ecosystem. Up to 2,800 acres of various fuels and vegetation treatments would occur within the project area. Proposed treatment actions include thinning, mowing, and prescribed burning. Treatment areas would include 30-year old plantations, portions of the McCache Late Successional Reserve (LSR), and around the Graham Corral Horse Campground.

Alongside improving forest health, this project would reduce the wildfire exposure risk to the Black Butte Ranch community. Treatment activities would help reduce the risk of high-intensity wildfire in the areas surrounding the community and promote opportunities for firefighters to better control potential future fires.

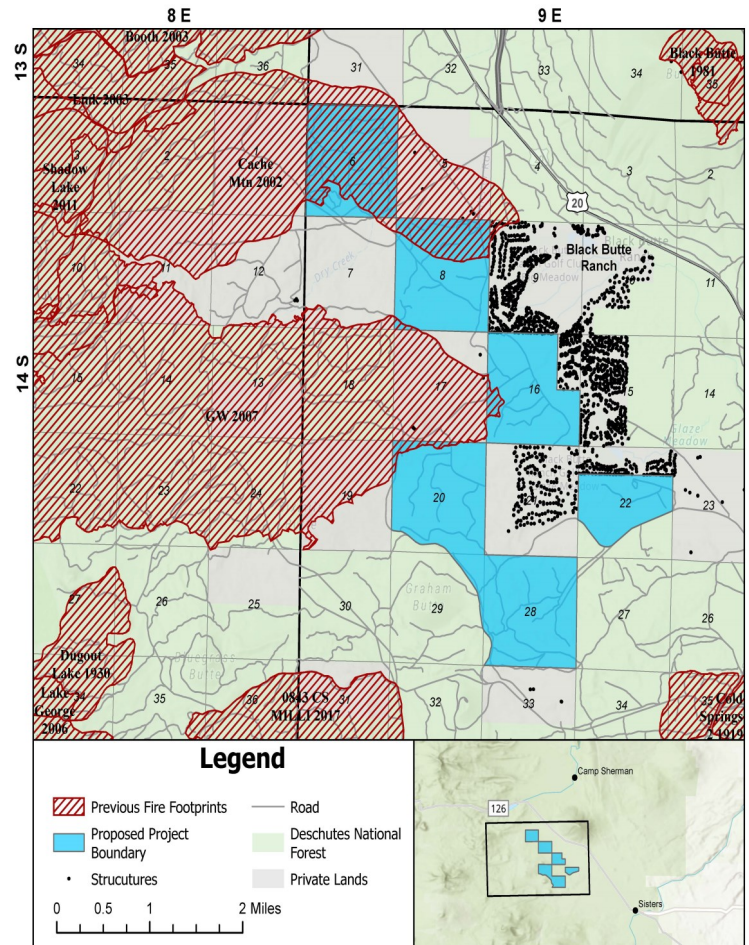


Figure 1 Map of project area and previous fire footprints.



Proposed Actions

Portions of the project area may receive one or multiple of the following treatments: mechanical thinning, hand thinning, mowing, and prescribed burning (Figure 3); including the removal of merchantable timber.

Additional proposed activities include the reinforcement of closed roads and unauthorized routes and aspen restoration.

Mechanical Thinning

- **Focus:** Reduction of vegetation density and continuity across all layers of vegetation.
- **Actions may include:** Variable density thinning using mechanical equipment, mowing and or prescribed burning including the commercial harvesting of forest products.

Hand Thinning

- **Focus:** Reduction of vegetation density in stands planted at high densities within the Cache Late-Successional Reserve (LSR).
- **Actions may include:** Variable density thinning and limb pruning by hand only (chainsaws). Cut material will be piled for disposal by burning.

Mowing (Mastication)

- **Focus:** Reduction of ladder fuels, brush and small trees that carry fire to the tree crowns.
- **Actions may include:** Mastication of brush and small trees (4-inch diameter and smaller) using skid-steer mounted mowing decks, mastication heads or boom-mounted slash mowing equipment. For units within the LSR, mowing would be along strategic roadsides.

Prescribed Burning (Underburning)

- **Focus:** Reduction in surface fuels such as needle litter, ground vegetation and small trees. Lifting of tree crowns to reduce mortality and crown fires during a wildfire.
- **Actions may include:** Planned burning operations using minimal ground disturbance or pre-existing landscape features to conduct low-intensity firing operations. For burn treatment locations, a pre-treatment mow or small tree thin may occur prior to prescribed burning to help meet restoration needs.

Purpose and Need for Action

The **purpose** of the BBR WUI project is to maintain and restore resiliency and forest health as well as to reduce the potential risk of large-scale wildfires in the Black Butte Ranch area.

There is a **need** to reduce fuel loadings and forest vegetation density to lessen the risk of large wildfires to nearby communities and key ecosystem components, such as large old trees.

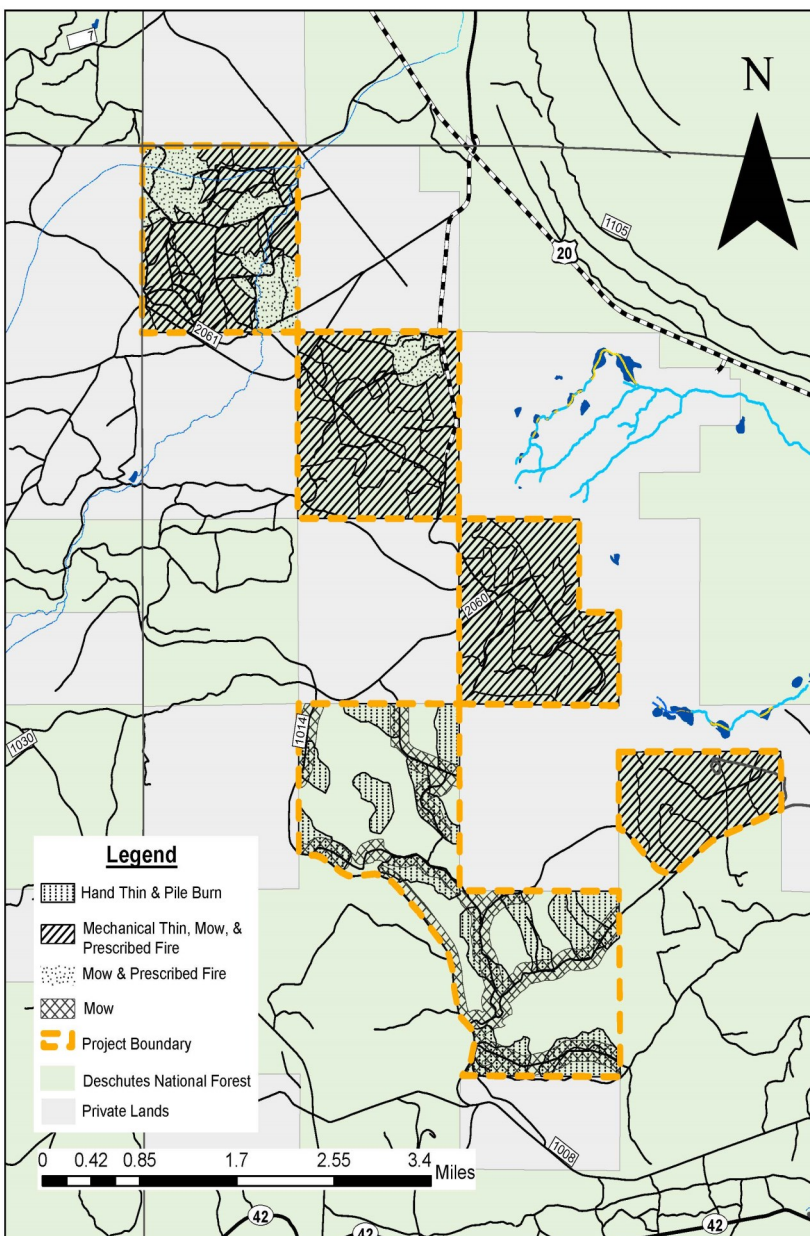


Figure 3 Map of proposed actions.

Wildfire Risk

The project area is currently at risk of stand replacement wildfire associated with insects, disease, and vegetation density. Portions of the project area represent some of the last remaining unburned forest in the area.

The project area has seen multiple fire events in recent history. Wildfires have threatened or entered the project area several times since 2000. Multiple previous fires have resulted in evacuations and damage to nearby communities.

Past Management in the Project Area

The 1996 Black Butte Ranch Natural Fuels Reduction (BBR NFR) project first introduced fuels treatments within the project area, including the application of prescribed fire. However, fuels treatments, including prescribed fire, are time limited in their effectiveness against mitigating wildfire activity. These past treatments would no longer effectively moderate fire behavior in the event of a wildfire in this area. Further treatments and maintenance are necessary to reduce the effects of high intensity wildfire to the forest and neighboring communities.

In addition to fuels treatments, the project area has a history of commercial timber activities. Many areas were densely planted as plantations between the late 70s into the early 2000s. Proposed commercial thinning would help reduce vegetation density, create variety in tree age, and promote forest health.

Figure 2 presents a photo series that documented past treatments from the BBR NRF project. It shows how actions such as thinning, mowing, and burning can reduce the presence of fuels to address wildfire risk while meeting the forest resiliency needs of an area. The post-treatment desired conditions for the BBR WUI project would restore and maintain the project area to a similar desired condition as presented here.

Many of the past treatments in the project area are over a decade old and have since deviated from post-treatment desired conditions for forest health and resiliency. The BBR WUI proposed actions would help to maintain past treatments in the area, as needed.



Figure 2 Photo series showing 4 stages of treatments from the BBR NRF project and the final desired condition for the BBR WUI project.



Management Direction

The Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended, provides direction based on designated management areas and associated Standards and Guidelines. The management allocation for the project area is predominantly General Forest (MA-8) with less than five percent in Scenic Views (MA-9).

The Northwest Forest Plan and the Eastside Screens (Regional Forester’s Amendment #2) also provide direction for this project area. This project will follow all applicable law, policy, and guidance while refining the proposed action and analyzing for potential impacts including up-to-date guidance on the proposed National Old Growth Amendment. The resiliency of large, drought stressed ponderosa pine trees within the project area is central to the project’s proposed actions as is their protection from stand replacing wildfires.

Table. 1 Forest Plan Management Allocations Within the Proposed Project Area

Management Allocation	Acres*	% of Project Area
MA-8: General Forest	2970	95.6%
MA-9: Scenic View	138	4.4%

*Total project treatments within the project area would not exceed 2800 acres.

Desired conditions

Historic stand conditions for this area were a mosaic pattern of large individual trees, clumps of small to large trees, and openings which support forest resilience and provide varied habitat.

Desired post-treatment conditions include...

- Promotion of late-successional structure and the protection of large trees.
- Spatial variety in height and density to reduce the potential for crown fire in the event of a wildfire.
- Tree stands that resemble historic stand conditions.
- Reduction in small shrubs and small trees to reduce competition, drought, and pest and moisture stress.
- Retention and restoration of the healthiest, most fire-resistant species.

Proposed Maintenance

Central Oregon’s forests are adapted to frequent, low intensity fires. For this reason, maintenance of understory treatments in this project area may be needed to create and maintain desired conditions (Figure 4). All units with the mowing of understory vegetation, shrubs and small trees, and/or prescribed underburning may require maintenance treatments.

Retreatments would use one of two timing scenarios:

- A maintenance underburning treatment and/or mastication treatment may occur between 3 and 10 years after the prescribed underburn and or mastication treatment if monitoring shows that the unit has an averaged ingrowth of brush or small trees of greater than 18 inches height and greater than 20 percent of unit cover after the initial treatments.

If the above does not apply, then:

- A maintenance treatment underburn and or mowing/mastication treatment may occur no sooner than 10 years after the initial treatment.

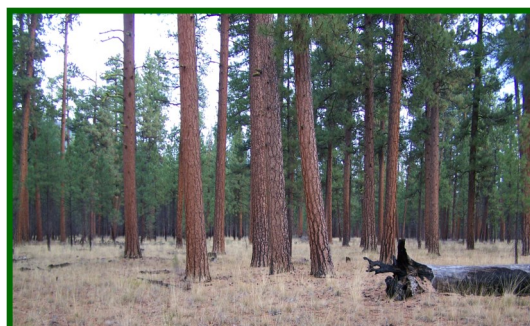


Figure 4 Example of a treated forest stand displaying post-treatment desired conditions.



Project Planning Process

The proposed actions fall in a category of action that may be excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. Categorical exclusions (CE) provide a determination that certain actions do not result in significant impacts. For this project, CE 36 CFR 220.6 (e) (25) may be used based on the project's collaborative design process, as well as the forest health and resilience purpose and need. Black Butte Ranch's Natural Resource and Fire departments, as well as the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project have all been involved in early project design conversations.

Prior to scoping, an interdisciplinary team of specialists designed the project, taking care to meet a variety of resource concerns, the project was consulted with tribes with ceded lands on Deschutes National Forest, and the consultation for Threatened and Endangered species with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began.

During the scoping period, a public field trip is planned for Thursday, October 24, 2024 to discuss the proposed action and visit potential treatment locations. If you would like to attend, please RSVP to the project lead (contact information listed below).

Following scoping, comments received will be reviewed for additional issues, concerns, and recommended actions related to the purpose and need. Then the proposed action will be further refined and specialists will conduct their environmental review prior to a decision on this project.

Invitation to Comment on the Proposal

This notice marks the beginning of the scoping comment period. Please provide comments by November 7, 2024. There will be no other opportunity to provide official comments outside of this period.

We are using CARA (Comment Analysis and Response Application) for submitting comments electronically. CARA is the preferred method for receiving comments because it allows for efficient analysis. Following this letter are CARA instructions. Submit electronic comments using CARA at: <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=67053>.

Alternatively, comments may be submitted by post mail to: Lauren DuRocher, District Ranger, Sisters Ranger District, 694 North Larch Street, PO Box 249, Sisters, Oregon 97759. Hand-delivered mail will be accepted at 201 N. Pine St., Sisters, Oregon 97759 during normal business hours: 8:00 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. PST Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

This document and any related comments are part of the public scoping process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 40 CFR 1500-1508 and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 USC 552.

For more information about this project please contact Madison Anderson, NEPA Planner, by email at madison.anderson@usda.gov or by phone at 541-549-7735.

Thank you for your interest in the Deschutes National Forest. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lauren DuRocher
Acting District Ranger



Guide to Commenting Using CARA

The Deschutes National Forest is transitioning to using the web-based tool CARA (Comment Analysis and Response Application) for our preferred method of receiving comments. CARA makes it more efficient to analyze the comments than postal mail. You can access CARA through the Deschutes National Forest Projects Website by following the steps below.

1. Start by navigating to the project’s webpage (address provided above).
2. Click on the “Comment/Object on Project” link at the right side of the project’s webpage.
3. The webpage will then refresh to include information about the commenting and objection requirements. As long as the project’s comment period remains open, you will see a CARA comment submission form “Option to Submit Comment Electronically” at the bottom of the page (Figure 1).

Follow the below instructions and pointers to complete the CARA comment submission form.

- Please use as much detail as possible when completing this form.
- The required form sections include the “First Name”, “Last Name”, and “Email”. However, all sections include useful information. We encourage you to complete all sections.
 - ⇒ You may enter “Anonymous” into the name section if you do not wish to submit your name.
- Input your comment in the “Letter Text” space.
- You can include attachments. Attachments are not necessary if duplicative of the comment.
 - ⇒ If you decide to attach a document, required format options include Microsoft Word (doc/docx), rich text format (rtf), or Adobe Portable Document (pdf) format.
 - ⇒ Useful attachments may include maps, pictures, or supportive documents that reinforce the comment you make.
 - ⇒ The maximum file size for uploads is 10 MBs.
- Prior to submitting a comment, you may need to complete an encryption box (Figure 2).
- Once you complete all desired forms, press “Submit” to enter your comment into the system.

Figure 1. CARA form example



Figure 2. Encryption box example.