

Decision Memo for Categorical Exclusion
Monument Ridge Vegetation and Recreation Management
USDA Forest Service
Big Piney Ranger District, Bridger-Teton National Forest
Sublette County, Wyoming

Decision and Rationale

I have decided to conduct prescribed burns, mechanical vegetation treatments, road maintenance activities and trail work as part of the Monument Ridge Vegetation and Recreation Management project and as described in this decision memo. The project area is located on the Big Piney Ranger District of the Bridger-Teton National Forest near the town of Bondurant. The habitat/fuels treatment area is within the Wildlife Urban Interface (WUI) where Monument Ridge borders the western edge of the treatment area and the residential area along the Hoback River borders the eastern edge. Within the treatment area, there are two distinct treatment types (Table 1) that total 16,135 acres. The treatment units support mixed stands of lodgepole pine, aspen, subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, Douglas fir, and sagebrush-dominated communities with grass, forb, and shrub understories.

A combination of prescribed burns and mechanical vegetation treatments (Thin-Pile-Burn, Thin-Slash-Girdle-Burn and Natural Fuels-Veg Burn) will reduce surface fuel loading and increase canopy spacing on Forest lands within the Wildland Urban Interface along Monument Ridge.

Broadcast prescribed burns--The objective of prescribed burning is to create a disturbance, encouraging aspen to sucker, and to reduce conifer encroachment in those stands. Prescribed fire will also reduce the natural and mechanically-created surface fuel loading, therefore reducing future potential fire behavior. Prescribed burning will also target mixed conifer stands in order to increase tree spacing, open the canopy, and reduce surface fuel loading.

Hand thin/hand pile/burn-- These treatments will create a defensible fire space by removing dead and down fuels, ladder fuels, and thinning overstory trees. Such treatments will be utilized where canopy and ground fuels need to be reduced, buffering areas for broadcast burning. This will all be hand work with chainsaws and crews.

Table 1. Identified treatment type within the Monument Ridge treatment area.

Treatment Type	Acres
Broadcast Prescribed Burn	12,724
Thin/Pile/Burn	4,730
Total Project Treatment Polygons	16,135

Rest from livestock grazing may need to occur in prescribed burn areas. Rest of burned area and grazing management of adjacent non-treated area will be coordinated with grazing permittees. The Forest Service may also use alternative techniques to ensure that post-treatment vegetation objectives are met on isolated areas where complete rest is not practical.

Road maintenance and upgrades addressing drainage and soil conditions will occur on USFS roads 30531, 30533, 30700, and 30710. The location of the trailhead of USFS trail #132 will be relocated to the larger and safer parking area below the Hoback Guard Station.

Purpose of the Decision

The purpose and need of the Monument Ridge Vegetation and Recreation Management Project, proposed by the Sublette County Collaborative, is multifaceted. It addresses vegetation management within the wildland urban

interface; wildlife habitat enhancement for mule deer, sage grouse, and other wildlife species; and access improvements for recreation.

The purpose, need, function, and focus of this project is to:

1. Enhance aspen and sagebrush communities by reducing conifer encroachment to improve habitat for a variety of wildlife species, primarily mule deer and sage grouse.
2. Reduce the potential for wildfire spreading into communities of the Bondurant and Hoback areas.
3. Improve safety and access for recreationists using USFS roads 30531, 30533, 30700, and 30710, as well as USFS trail #132.

In September 2018, the Roosevelt Fire burnt over 60,000 acres of land in or adjacent to the Monument Ridge project area. Approximately 1500 acres were originally part of the proposed Monument Ridge project area but were removed from the proposal post-fire. Although the wildfire itself made some progress toward the objectives of the Monument Ridge project (ie, aspen regeneration, fuel breaks), I have determined that the project would still be beneficial. This determination was based on several internal and external meetings and field visits where information was gathered to re-evaluate the purpose and need of this project.

Public Involvement

A proposal to improve forest resource conditions, including vegetation and habitat management and fuels reduction in the Hoback River watersheds was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions. Public involvement for the Monument Ridge project began on Feb. 6, 2018. On that date, Forest Service employees along with members of the Sublette County Collaborative met with the Hoback Association livestock permittees to discuss the project. On April 19, 2018, a public meeting was held at the Bondurant Fire Station and was attended by many members of the local communities. Following the Roosevelt Fire that occurred in September of 2018, additional meetings were held with both the Hoback Ranch community as well as the Bondurant and Upper Hoback community. The meeting with the Hoback Ranch residents was well attended and there was very positive feedback regarding the continuation of the Monument Ridge project. Only one person attended the meeting from the Bondurant and Upper Hoback community. He was a reporter and was impartial to the project. In addition to the formal meetings, many one-on-one contacts were made in the community to gather input regarding support for or concerns regarding this project.

Forest Plan Consistency Determination

This decision to implement resource improvement projects in the Bondurant area is consistent with the intent of the Bridger-Teton Forest Plan's long-term goals and objectives (Forest Plan, pages 112-121]. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for prescribed burning, as well as all other resource considerations as described in the project record. (Forest Plan, pages 121-151 and 235-239).

Categorical Exclusions

I have determined that the actions described above in this decision memo are categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or in Environmental Assessment. I have made this determination based on the following findings:

The Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook (1909.15, Chapter 30) provides that a proposed action may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) when the actions do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Actions may be categorically excluded where the following criteria are met:

1. The action is within a category listed in Section 1909.15 32, and
2. There are no conditions present that lead to a finding of extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action.

I have determined the following categorical exclusions apply:

Maintenance work and addressing hydraulic issues present on USFS roads 30531, 30710, and 30700, were reviewed under Categorical Exclusion 4 established by the Chief, Section 32.12 a Category of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo Are Not Required, 36 CFR 220.6(d)(4) *Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries.*

No additional NEPA will be required or pursued. The hydrology, fisheries, and soils staff will provide design criteria to engineering to optimize the outcome of this effort.

The relocation of the Clarks Draw Trailhead and accompanying trail work will be completed under Category 1 of section 32.2 - Categories of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo Are Required, 36 CFR 220.6(e),(1) *Construction and reconstruction of trails.*

Treatment of vegetation on and around Monument Ridge and as outlined on the accompanying map will be completed under 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6), *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.*

I found that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis in an EA or EIS. I took into account the following resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

Table 2

Resource Condition	Applicability to the Project
Federally listed threatened or endangered wildlife, fish, or plant species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.	A Biological Assessment was prepared and sent to the USFWS regarding Canada Lynx, yellow billed cuckoo, and North American wolverine and a Biological Opinion was returned with concurrence on all determination calls made (see project record). A Biological Evaluation was also prepared for USFS Region 4 Sensitive Species. Regarding sensitive species, there was either a finding of "no impact" or "may impact individuals but is not likely to cause a trend toward federal listing or a loss of viability" for all species.
Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.	No wetlands would be adversely affected (see project record)
Congressionally designated wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas.	There are no congressionally designated areas within the project area.
Inventoried Roadless Areas.	No road construction, timber removal or other prohibited activities will occur in Inventoried Roadless areas.
Research Natural Areas.	There are no RNAs within or adjacent to the project area.

American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites.	The Forest Archaeologist reviewed the project and determined there would be no impacts to American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites (see project record).
Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas.	The Forest Archaeologist reviewed the project and determined there would be no impacts to significant archeological sites or historic properties (see project record).

Other findings required by law:

Clean Air Act: Prescribed burning on up to 16,135 acres of aspen and mixed-conifer will take place in fire-dependent ecosystems in which periodic fires burned on an average of every 30 to 150 years. It has been more than 100 years since fire has occurred in these areas. Any prescribed burning undertaken as part of this project will be managed to comply with State and Federal air quality regulations and control.

Clean Water Act: Section 313 of the Act as well as Executive Order 12088 requires Federal Agencies to comply with all Federal, state and local requirements for control and abatement of water pollution. Mechanical and prescribed burning activities proposed for this project will comply.

Prime Farmland, Rangeland and Forest Land: This project is in accordance with the Secretary of Agriculture Memorandum 1827 for prime farmland, rangeland and forestland. The definition of prime forestland does not apply to National Forest land.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act: No significant loss of migratory bird habitat is expected from implementation of this project. A pre-and post-treatment migratory bird density and composition study is being implemented in the project area.

Endangered Species Act, Wetlands and Floodplains, and the National Historic Preservation Act:
See Table 2.

Additional Consideration relating to changing conditions and the Roosevelt Fire

Implementation Implementation for this project may begin immediately; however, implementation is likely to commence fall of 2020.

Administrative review and appeal: This decision is not subject to administrative appeal. Pursuant CFR 215.8(a)(4), Decisions Not Subject to Appeal

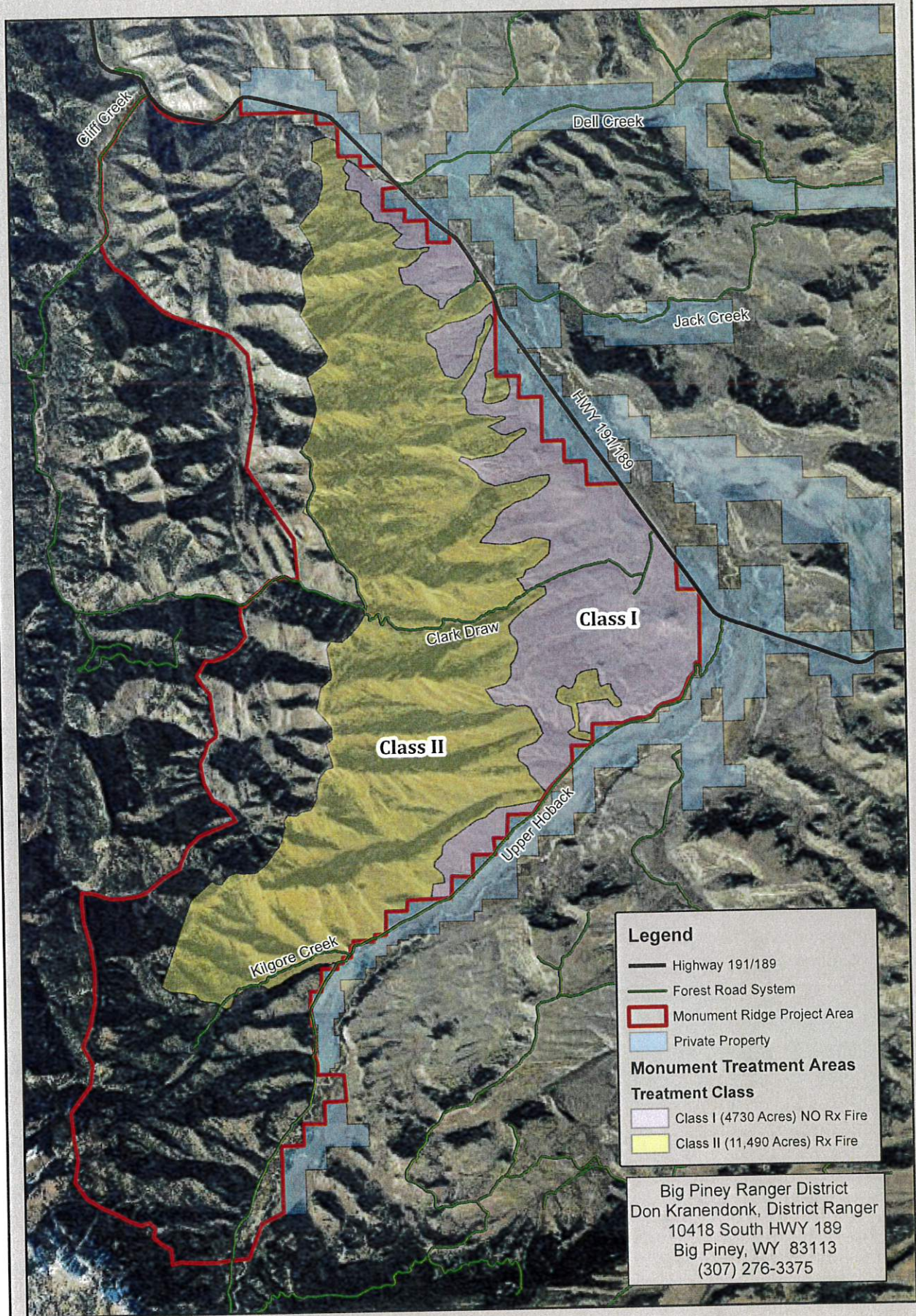
Contact Person: For additional information concerning this decision, contact Don Kranendonk at 307-276-5800.


Don Kranendonk
DISTRICT RANGER

10/31/2019
DATE

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Monument Ridge Project Area



Legend

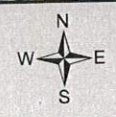
- Highway 191/189
- Forest Road System
- Monument Ridge Project Area
- Private Property

Monument Treatment Areas

Treatment Class

- Class I (4,730 Acres) NO Rx Fire
- Class II (11,490 Acres) Rx Fire

Big Piney Ranger District
Don Kranendonk, District Ranger
10418 South HWY 189
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Credits: Map Produced 10/29/19 by PMarone - USFS
Background Imagery: USDA National Agricultural Inventory 2017
or ESRI USA Topographic Basemap
Projection: NAD 83 UTM 12N

