

## **Treatment/Project Area: Plumtaw/Fourmile**

### Geographic Area

- bounded on north and west by the East Fork Piedra River, on the east by Weminuche Wilderness, on south by Martinez creek and private lands [see map];

### Unique Characteristic(s)

- heavily used recreation area;
- high scenic qualities;
- moderate open road access;
- slight to moderate closed road network;
- fairly substantial roadless area;
- proximity and access to wilderness;
- high water value; nearly half of the water source for Pagosa Springs travels through this geographic area, source is Fourmile Creek.
- Only loop road opportunity on the district (fourmile to Plumtaw to Piedra)
- proposed Martinez Creek Research Natural Area (RNA) is located in this geographical area

### Management Challenges

- Vegetation management needed throughout Plumtaw area and south of Pagosa Creek
- Aspen decline is evident throughout geographic area, particularly on southwest facing aspects
- Many stands in the area are 50/50 mix of conifers and aspen, which is problematic in sales
- maintaining balance between the active management emphasis (timber/range) in one of the popular recreation areas on the Pagosa District;
- many closed system roads in fair to poor condition, needing reconstruction prior to any use;
- Numerous small drainages throughout geographic area pose difficulties in vegetation removal activities.
- prescribed burning smoke constraints greater when working closer to town of Pagosa Spgs;
- Fire Regime Condition Class 3 (high departure from reference conditions) in most warm-dry mixed conifer stands (and lower/adjacent ponderosa pine stands) – heavy fuel loading coupled with fire exclusion; generally FRCC 2 (moderate departure from reference conditions) in remaining w-d MC stands;
- forest health, current issues: spruce beetle epidemic; Douglas-fir beetle epidemic; in addition to aspen decline;
- Numerous isolated private inholdings become problematic for prescribed burning
- Due to the proximity to private land, fires that occur below the Plumtaw road are usually suppressed
- Includes the highest density of permitted ditches on District, maybe on the Forest. With these ditches come management issues, particularly access for both ditch permittees and FS.

### Management Emphasis/Desired Conditions

- current forest plan:
  - o Wildlife habitat for MIS
  - o timber mgt/wood fiber production and utilization
  - o range mgt
  - o recreation, including wild/scenic river corridors (East Fork Piedra); and semi-primitive non-motorize recreation
- proposed forest plan:
  - o active mgt (timber, range)
  - o natural landscapes/limited mgt
  - o recreation
- desired conditions:
  - o resilient forest conditions (bugs/crud at endemic levels; diversity in tree composition and size/age classes, etc, aspen restoration)
  - o reduced risk for wildfire in/near WUI;
  - o human-initiated disturbances mimic natural disturbances;

## Projects

- Approved
  - o on-going range permitting (grazing, cattle)
  - o O'Neal Timber Sale (most recently closed)
    - Awarded November 4, 1999. Termination date for the sale was 9/30/2001
    - Acres= 291
    - Awarded to U.S. Forest Industries, Inc. (Currently under receivership.)
    - Treatment = areas with significant pine, spruce and/or Douglas fir resembled a sanitation/salvage harvest, removed much of the merchantable white fir and aspen. The removal of the species created openings to induce aspen sprouting.
    - In areas without spruce, pine or Douglas fir the objective was to manage white fir in even-aged clumps to reduce the susceptibility to the western spruce budworm defoliation and the susceptibility to root diseases
  - o Fourmile and Upper Piedra Fuels Treatment
    - Proposed in 2004; CE signed 2008
    - Treatment= mechanical with possibility for biofuels treatment
    - Some treatment to-date; hand thin areas have been treated, mostly near Sportsman Supply.
  - o Dutton Creek Timber Sale
    - Dutton Creek was proposed and had initial scoping for public comments in 1994.
    - Appealed, then litigated (court suit) for legal challenges for MIS, similar to what happened with Missionary Ridge Fire salvage
    - timber sale was withdrawn in 2003

- Plumtaw Timber Sale
  - included Gordon Creek Research Area
  - Awarded December 12, 1997. Termination date 9/30/2000.
  - Awarded to Western Excelsior Corporation. Still in operation, mostly on the western part of the forest.
  - acres = 219
  - Road construction/reconstruction was applied to sections of the Plumtaw road, Gordon Creek road and parts of the McManus road.
  - Treatment = aspen clear cuts and patch cuts. In some sanitation salvage and group selections of white fir to achieve uneven-aged stands of mixed conifer.
- In planning
  - Pagosa Creek
    - Draft EA proposed for public comment March 2011
    - Portions of project in Lynx habitat.
    - action alternatives: a)thin only (540 acres); or preferred alternative b)coppice (118 ac), group selection (204 ac) and thinning (428 ac)
    - 5.5 miles of road (spot) reconstruction, ~1 mile of temp roads, and .4 miles decommissioning
    - Proposed action would be the second entry in these areas; 1<sup>st</sup> entry in the 1960's.

### Resource Topics

- CWPP -- WUI discussed in detail in 01/21/11 project notes, in summary, much of the area lies within the WUI, particularly the north and south portions of the geographic area.
- Vegetation types –
  - ponderosa pine, grading to mixed conifer (both phases) & aspen, then into spruce-fir;
  - aspen stands in a state of decline, with encroaching conifer
  - significant white fir expansion – horizontally (area) and vertically (height, in stands) – in w-d MC;
  - past harvesting heavily weighted towards removal of high-value, large diameter Douglas-fir from mixed conifer stands; similarly, large/old ponderosa pine were removed from PP and w-d MC stands.
- Recreation –
  - Current Issues:
    - Heavy vehicle use on Plumtaw/East Toner Road (driving for pleasure).
    - Heavy recreation use/crowding at Piedra Falls/Fourmile Falls trailheads during summer.
    - Heavy big-game hunting pressure along Plumtaw Rd.
  - Projections/Potential Changes:
    - Possible new snowmobile trail along Plumtaw/McManus Roads.
    - Improvements to Piedra Falls TH

- Fourmile Rd primary access to Weminuche Wilderness
- Beetle-kill may drastically affect FS ability to clear/maintain Wilderness trails, which will have implications on use, though exactly how is unclear (could focus use on certain passable trails, or could result in decreased visitation overall, or combination of both, e.g.).
- Wildlife -- lynx habitat in cool/moist mixed conifer; key raptor nesting areas around Plumtaw goshawks; big game migration corridors; DOW issues with Triangle area, much needed treatment in Pagosa Creek to restore warm-dry MC and provide more open conditions for a swathe of species
- Grazing – active allotments throughout; Portions of Snowball, Fourmile, East Fork Piedra River, Pagosa allotments, mostly satisfactory conditions. Increased mortality and treatment of timber resources will likely lead to increased forage production as transitory range, weeds issues throughout area
- Fuels-change from predominantly ponderosa pine to mixed conifer due to fire exclusion, area of concern is the Lost Valley of the San Juan due to high risk/high intensity fire regime. Insects have added to the fuel loading changing the fuel model leading to a higher resistance to control.
- Watershed – wild and scenic rivers corridor, municipal watershed present, general erosion and sedimentation issues with certain soils
- Economic activity – rec use leads to cabin or site rentals on adjacent private; concessionaire mgt of campgrounds; outfitter guides; carryover to Pagosa Spgs/Archuleta County community from rec demand/use.

### Opportunities

- prescribed burning smoke constraints not as great as when working closer to town of Pagosa Spgs;
- broaden Rx burning potential into wilderness;
- reset succession back to aspen (by cutting or removing conifers); [area reflects vigorous aspen response from disturbance]
- inventory road network and find road segments suitable for decommissioning;
- inventory and treat noxious weeds;
- biomass utilization of white fir in warm-dry mixed conifer stands;
- use RX burning as a tool to reduce erosion and sedimentation;
- thin around the Lost Valley as well as in the Pagosa creek area
- opportunity to thin in the Dutton Creek area or utilize for biomass
- Fires above the Plumtaw road are good opportunities to manage for the resource.

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