



West Fork Tour

June, 2023

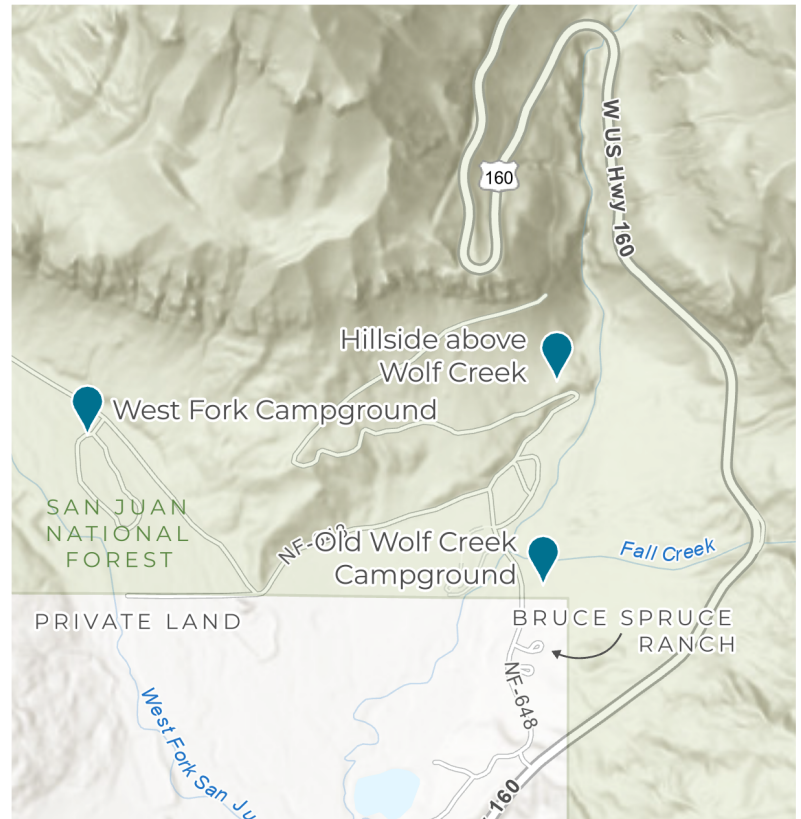
Context

The San Juan National Forest (SJNF) established the West Fork Forest Health and Fuels Reduction Project in 2011 through a Categorical Exclusion (CE) in the NEPA process. The CE included 246 acres between the West Fork and East Fork Campground areas. In 2015, a silvicultural plan was written with the following treatment goals:

- Reduce and/or rearrange fuels to reduce the risk of stand replacing fire.
- Begin to restore warm-dry mixed conifer and ponderosa pine stands to a structure and composition that is healthier and more resilient to disturbance (fire, insects and disease) and reduce the risk of future hazard trees in the campgrounds.
- Promote aspen regeneration where appropriate.
- Reduce the risk of wildfire to public and private property, structures and recreational facilities.
- Provide safer public evacuation routes and improve firefighter safety.
- Promote the health and natural regeneration of limber pine.

What is a Categorical Exclusion?

A CE is a class of actions planned by a federal agency like the U.S. Forest Service that does not have a significant impact on the human environment, therefore, an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not needed.



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Unfortunately, these treatments were not implemented for multiple reasons. Since 12 years have passed since the CE, and 8 since the silvicultural plan was written, the SJNF invited Headwaters Partners on a tour to understand if the West Fork area is still a priority for the community, and if so, if the conditions had changed enough (both ecological and community conditions) to warrant changing the proposed treatments.





Tour Stop 1: Old Wolf Creek Campground

At this location, the tour group looked at current conditions and discussed possible scenarios for moving forward. Currently, like much of the forest in the immediate area, white fir is the dominant tree species among blue spruce, Douglas fir and ponderosa pine. Root rot is present in all units, but is most pronounced in units 6 and 7. Bruce Spruce Ranch lies directly adjacent to this unit, where numerous treatments have already been completed, targeting white fir. Headwaters Partners discussed the following questions regarding this area:

- Given that Bruce Spruce Ranch is directly adjacent and has already implemented treatments, is there a way to treat additional cross-boundary acres?
- How much of the white fir should be removed to promote long-term forest health and a forest structure that encourages ponderosa pine and Douglas fir?



Tour participants at West Fork. Photo by Alex Handloff.



Photo by Dana Guinn.

Tour stop 2: West Fork Campground

Here, the tour discussed the details of possible treatments in an active recreation area. For years, the campground has had issues with root rot in the white fir, which is the dominant species. SJNF staff have removed white fir hazard trees consistently over the years and are looking for a more comprehensive approach. There are numerous limitations to forestry work in a campground, making the decision more difficult on how to proceed. The primary questions for this area were:

- What is the best option given the constraints of the campground (timing, infrastructure, safety)?
- To address the hazard trees, would it be best to hire a hand crew?

Tour stop 3: Hillside above Wolf Creek

This area was more straightforward than the others. It has a mixed-conifer forest with large-diameter trees. Again, white fir dominates and poses a problem when it comes to promoting a healthy forest. This site provides the "best bang for the buck" in the West Fork area. The primary question for this area was:

- How much of the white fir should be removed to promote long-term forest health and stand structure that encourages ponderosa pine and Douglas fir species composition?



Photo by Dana Guinn.

Interested in participating in the next SJHFHP tour or meeting? Email Alex Handloff, the Coordinator, to get involved or learn more: alex@mountainstudies.org