

Final Meeting Record

KVRI Forestry Sub-Committee

March 13, 2025

Boundary County Annex Building

Attendance:

Brad Smith, Idaho Conservation League
Brandon Harper, Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (KTOI)
Christian Pinkerton, Citizen
Chuck Roady, Landowner/Industrial
Don Allenberg, Corporate Agriculture/Landowner
Ed Koberstein, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Heather Fuller, USFS
Jada Fairchild, KTOI
Jennifer Anderson, USFS
Jonathan Luhnnow, Idaho Department of Lands (IDL)
Lee Colson, Social/Cultural/Historical
Lester Pinkerton, Boundary County Commissioner
Megan Parnell, Idaho Farm Bureau
Norm Merz, Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG)
Sara Alberts, USFS
Tim Bertling, Boundary County Commissioner
Theresa Wheat, KTOI
William Barquin, KTOI

- Welcome and Introductions were made at 10:01 a.m.

Sara Alberts, USFS, explained that she serves as the North Idaho Good Neighbor Authority Partnership Coordinator for the U.S. Forest Service covering the Idaho Panhandle and Nez Perce Clearwater National Forests. In this role, Sara collaborates closely with the U.S. Forest Service, Tribes, Counties, Idaho Department of Lands, Idaho Fish and Game, and various other organizations across North Idaho. The Good Neighbor Authority in North Idaho is an active program, with numerous projects completed, including several timber sales and multiple restoration initiatives.

Good Neighbor Authority - Explore Act Update - Note Internal Policy to Implement these Updates is Forthcoming:

- **Inclusion of Recreation Services:** Previously, recreation services were not permitted under the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), which primarily focused on forest watershed and rangeland restoration. The Explore Act update now expands the scope to include recreation services.
- **Tribes and Counties to Retain Revenue:** Prior to the update, Tribes and Counties were unable to retain revenue generated from GNA sales. Any revenue retained must be utilized in other activities allowable under GNA.
- **Restoration on and off Federal Land:** Under the previous framework, all restoration projects were required to take place on Federal land. With the Explore Act update, fuel treatments, road restoration, and other GNA projects can now occur on off Federal land.

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The Forest Service Washington Office is in the process of finalizing policies to implement these changes. It is expected to take approximately 6-12 months for the U.S. Forest Service to complete this process.

The **Fix Our Forest Act** is still under review and has not yet been signed into effect. The Act proposes inclusion of new road construction under the GNA. This will allow for permanent road construction specifically for GNA projects, such as timber sales. Currently, the GNA only permits the creation of temporary roads for these projects.

Please note that this update must undergo the same internal policy finalization process before it can be fully implemented.

Jennifer Anderson, USFS, briefed the group on the forest-wide prescribed fire project (currently in the early planning stages), which proposes using prescribed (Rx) fire as a tool to meet objectives described in the IPNF Forest Plan. Traditionally, prescribed burning has been included as one proposed action of many in projects focused on restoration in site-specific areas. Those projects also typically include timber harvest, precommercial thinning, recreation projects, road treatments, and other activities. The focus of this project is burning and at a much larger scale, allowing for fire-use across the forest where it is the best tool to trend vegetation, such as in the backcountry.

Forest-Wide Fuels Reduction Project:

- **Current Objectives:** Rx burning would reduce fuel loads, trend stands toward desired conditions, improving wildlife habitat, and creating a mosaic of structures across the landscape. This strategy is designed to mimic the natural behavior of wildfires, which offers numerous environmental benefits.
- **Timeline:** Public scoping will occur spring of 2025 with a decision notice scheduled for 2026; implementation could begin late summer into early fall of the same year. Fire fuels personnel will seek subsequent burn opportunities for many years to come during either spring or late summer/early fall. The latter window provides the most favorable weather and fuel conditions to successfully meet objectives, especially in the back country.
- **Treatment Plan:** The primary action prescribed burning. There is no commercial timber harvest component to this project, however pre-treatment activities could be implemented, including hand and mechanical thinning, pruning, and piling or mastication of small diameter trees to protect values and/or create fuel breaks or fire line.

This is a condition-based management project which allows for proposed treatments to be aligned, post-decision but prior to implementation, with current conditions on the ground. It does this by focusing on collecting the right data at the right time and selecting the right management activity to move toward

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desired conditions. Validation surveys by specialists such as soils, botany, and heritage (among others) would be completed prior to implementation to determine the current precise site conditions and apply relevant design features to the prescribed fire treatment.

This project will require several weeks of planning and coordination before prescribed burning can begin. A dedicated team will need to be deployed on the ground, although the effort is less intensive than traditional fire trapping operations. The project is set to be presented to the public for comment in the coming weeks, with a target date of April. This will establish a timeline for completing an Environmental Assessment (EA) by the end of the year, followed by a final decision. If everything proceeds as planned, a final decision is expected in late spring 2026, identifying the initial treatment areas or units. This timeline also allows specialists adequate time to prepare for the potential implementation of the first round of prescribed burning in the fall of 2026.

Heather Fuller, USFS, provided several updates on ongoing and future projects and current situations. The Bonners Ferry District is a part of the “North Zone,” which combines resources from three Northern Forest Service Districts: Bonners Ferry, Sandpoint, and Priest Lake.

The **Katkee Project**, an 8,000-acre initiative that began in 2024, is about 90% complete with its NEPA process. They expect to have a decision by the end of May and are currently working through a consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). However, due to staffing losses within the USFWS, a final decision is now expected in July. The Katkee Project’s first sale (helicopter units) was originally funded under a wildfire crisis strategy (WCS) and has lost its funding. The Forest Service will have to look for other funding or use revenue from timber sales to finance the higher cost of the first proposed sale. After completing Katkee, the team will shift focus to the Chloride Gold Project, located south of Lake Pend Oreille and adjacent to the Buckskin Project.

Another priority project under consideration is the **Moyie Meadows Project**. This project, a linear fuel break along Northern Lights Power and Meadow Creek Road, is a key project for the district. Given its importance, it needs to be initiated sooner rather than later. Data collection is planned for this summer, contingent on the availability of technicians.

There are several acres that are under NEPA and that are ready to be properly treated. USFS is looking at ways to be creative and innovative to find solutions on how to increase the pace of getting the acres treated. Once Sandpoint South and Chloride Gold are under NEPA, the teams in terms of NEPA operations can begin moving to Priest River area.

The **Young Stand Improvement Project** has been signed, permitting approximately 500 acres per year of pre-commercial thinning. The team is currently in the process of identifying the specific acres where this

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treatment can be applied. Once identified, the project will be sent to specialists for review. Implementation is anticipated for 2026.

USFS is in the process of developing an updated version of the **Winter Travel Plan**, given the ESA listing of North American wolverine and the need to consult with USFWS. Biological Opinion (BO) for wolverine expected to be finalized by April 30, 2025. Implementation is currently on hold due to ongoing administrative reviews regarding new Over-Snow Vehicle (OSV) policies. However, USFS has already signed its OSV decision and plans to proceed with implementation late this year.

The **Caribou Injunction** is still in existence, and cannot be lifted until the biological opinion is finished from USFWS. Once USFS receives that then it will be turned over to the Office of General Council (OGC) attorney who will then file it through the court system to remove the injunction.

Doug Nishek, USFS, gave a more detailed update of the Katkee Project. The Katkee Fuels Project is a critical fire landscape area due to the proximity of fuels to the power lines, private lands and infrastructure. The project emphasizes the importance of protecting water sources, including domestic and irrigation water that drain northward to Merrifield's Clifty View Nursery. These areas are at risk of fire damage, which could disrupt vital resources.

The primary goal of this project is to reduce the fire risk in high-priority areas, particularly in light of the challenges faced during the 2022 Katka Peak Fire. Implementing effective fire prevention measures is essential to avoid similar issues in the future. The strategy involves deploying a crew to assess the landscape and ecosystem, identifying vulnerable areas and establishing safer and more defensive positions on the landscape. The plan includes preserving larch, ponderosa pine and white pine to enhance overall landscape resilience to drought, insects, disease, and future fires. Due to the project's size, treatments will be conducted in phases over time. The draft environmental assessment is expected to be released in approximately one month, providing further details.

Ed Koberstein, USFS, gave an overview of the past timber sales. Over the past decade, they have averaged treated 1,200 acres per year, mainly in the Bonners Ferry Ranger District, with limited activity in the other districts. Since the establishment of the CFLRP program in 2012, Bonners Ferry has led many key projects in the North Zone, including areas like 20 Mile, Deer Creek, and Katkee Fuels. However, with most large planning areas already addressed, future projects will focus on smaller, strategic efforts. New projects like Buckskin Saddle, Chloride Gold and Sandpoint South GNA are commencing on to the Sandpoint District, with additional landscape scale projects soon near Priest River.

Specifically in Boundary County, smaller-scale projects such as sales will be prioritized, supported by the larger Katkee Fuels project (60-70 million board feet) and other existing NEPA shelf stock from Westside

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or Camp Robin Hood. While the larger projects are winding down relative to Bonners Ferry, efforts remain proactive across the district including small Categorical Exempt (CE) projects (less than 2 million board feet) or natural fuels treatments, focused on maintaining forest health and meet long-term forest restoration goals and economic objectives.

USFS no longer has the authority to issue green slips, as the program was discontinued in the early 2000's. However, it's under consideration to resurrect it in a more modern form. Options for a new process are currently being considered.

Regarding North Zone sale delivery, the focus this year is primarily on projects within Bonner County, with Caribou Snow currently being the only project in Boundary County. Several other projects, like Tim Buck Stew and Camp Robin Hood, are still pending completion. These have been delayed due to factors such as Grizzly Bear management and phasing requirements, but hopefully these will be completed this summer to clear the way for more upcoming sales

Also on the North Zone, we plan to continue to utilize IDL and GNA sales for added capacity. Projects like Moyie Meadow Power Linear Fuel Categorical Exclusion (CE) are expected to come online next year and Katkee Fuels towards the fourth quarter of 2026. Note that for Katkee sales this timeline depends on the completion of the Tim Buck stew and Boulder Dash projects. After 2026 the focus will remain on balancing treatment efforts efficiently across all three districts.

The Meeting was called at 11:16 a.m.
Meeting Record prepared by Jada Fairchild