



Bulletin photo

The Pole Creek Vegetation Management Plan includes several timber sales in progress and planning for future prescribed burning operations. The plan is meant to not only support the commercial timber industry but also to advance forest health objectives.

Forest harvesting Pole Creek timber

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Contractors are working on the Bighorn National Forest's 15-year Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project.

The plan, for which a record of decision was signed in late November 2024, includes several timber sales in progress and planning for future prescribed burning operations, according to the forest's Powder River District Ranger, Mike Thom. The total Pole Creek project area spans 92,000 acres, which is potentially the largest fuels project on the forest to date. The targeted area is 20 miles west of Buffalo.

The project is part of a larger trend toward more proactive forest management practices to minimize a potential wildfire's severity by reducing available fuels. The Forest Service has invested

hundreds of millions of dollars in efforts to reduce risks associated with wildfire.

In an email, Thom said that sustainable timber harvest from national forests aligns with a Trump administration executive order, "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production," signed in March 2025.

"We are working more closely than ever with loggers and wood products manufacturers to strengthen forest management and support prosperous rural communities," Thom wrote in an email.

Operations at Pole Creek are meant to not only support the commercial timber industry but also to advance forest health objectives.

Past logging prescriptions and

TIMBER

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Timber: Area closures not expected

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an absence of wildfire from the landscape have created monotypic stands in the Pole Creek area, which are primarily lodgepole pine between 130 and 140 years old. According to the project's environmental assessment, just 1% of the lodgepole pine trees in the area are at an early development stage. Thom said commercial thinning was last carried out in the area in the late 1970s.

"These conditions have the potential to facilitate uncharacteristic fire behavior and pose a risk to forest resources and communities," the decision document says. "In addition to increased wildfire risk, the lodgepole pine forests of the area exist at a very high-risk level from potential large-scale mountain pine beetle mortality."

The goal of the timber sales and prescribed fires is to create a mosaic of forested stands that can be resilient to fires, insects and disease, Thom said.

"This creates healthier ecosystems that the public can continue to utilize and enjoy," he wrote in an email.

The U.S. Forest Service has found dwarf mistletoe and fungal rust disease in overstory trees in the area, Thom said. Dwarf mistletoe is a parasitic plant that infects coniferous trees, and rust diseases caused by fungi infect plants through their needles. Dead or dying trees are identifiable by off-color

needles.

"Harvesting of these stands will help reduce the risk of insect epidemics and extreme wildfire behavior by creating a more diverse mix of forest structural stages," Thom wrote in an email.

Another goal for the agency is to promote growth of aspen trees, which provide natural fuel breaks and wildlife habitat, Thom said.

Timber sales in the project area kicked off last year. Several of the sales are administered by the Wyoming State Forestry Division through Good Neighbor Authority, which is an agreement that enables state agencies to collaborate with the Forest Service on work across management boundaries.

The Nicks GNA timber sale on the southern end of Forest Road 31 was active this past winter, but the operator chose not to operate this summer, Thom said. The You Too timber sale awarded last fall sits just north of the Nicks sale. Logging operations haven't started there yet, but the operator may start road reconstruction in the area this month.

The Little River GNA timber sale will be the next active sale in the project area, Thom said. Crews are thinning areas in the wildland-urban interface on Forest Service lands bordering private lands, structures,

campgrounds and administrative facilities.

"Tied with WUI, the state is working through the Poison Creek GNA fuels/timber project," Thom wrote in an email. "This project is fuels driven, though utilizing commercial timber as the tool to accomplish the work. We are working through the final surveys and clearances before this one gets up and rolling."

Crews are also setting up fire containment lines for future prescribed fire operations on the west side of Powder River Pass. Field work for prescribed burning, including wildlife, botany, heritage, watershed and other resource surveys, is also ongoing. Thom said that the soonest prescribed burns would be implemented on the Pole Creek project is 2027.

Addressing community concerns

Ecological and recreation advocates registered concerns with the Pole Creek Vegetation Plan with the Forest Service during the National Environmental Policy Act process in 2024.

Adverse impacts of logging and road construction on wildlife and their habitat were a source of objections to the plan for environmentally minded commenters.

While temporary roads will be constructed to facilitate commercial

harvest, the roads will be closed when operations are complete, Thom said. There will be no new permanent roads constructed. Design features outlined in the forest's objection response are implemented as part of the plan to minimize impacts to resources, Thom noted.

Johnson County and the Powder Pass Nordic Club, which maintains nordic ski trails in the project area, also expressed concerns about potential impacts to winter recreation. During the objection process, the agency worked with the group to exclude some trail areas originally included in the plan and to implement a buffer around some trees to keep sunlight and wind from degrading snow conditions on the system.

Thom said that there are not currently any closures planned or in effect.

"There has been deliberate communication with our recreation community throughout the planning process, and now into the implementation phase," Thom wrote in an email. "The Little River GNA timber sale is in and near the Pole Creek Nordic trail system, and the Wyoming State Division of Forestry and Forest Service have been communicating timing and implementation specifics with our local community partners."