**Notes from SBEADMR Working Group Meeting**February 12, 2015

The eighth meeting of the SBEADMR Working Group was held on Thursday, February 12, 2015 in the Pioneer Room at the Montrose County Fairgrounds.

**Item No. 1: Follow Up on Range of Alternatives Discussion and Question**

To follow up on the FS staff’s explanation at the last meeting of a Line Officer’s prerogative to propose a “preferred alternative” based on a mix of components of the action alternatives analyzed in the DEIS, Susan Hansen asked if there were any questions or need for further discussion of the explanation offered. There were no further questions nor comments on the explanation.

The group also considered suggestions at the last meeting that maybe it would be appropriate to focus on two or three different categories based on our level of agreement, i.e. treatment in spruce-fir in WUI versus treatment in aspen stands and/or treatment in spruce-fir & mixed stands outside of WUI. General consensus is to wait for the release of the DEIS to address that suggestion.

**Item No. 2: Opportunity for Conservation Community and Others to Share/Discuss Recent Comments Submitted to the FS on the Proposed Action (SBEADMR)**

Susan introduced the opportunity for the conservation community and other interests to provide a brief summary of pre-DEIS comments that they may have submitted recently to the Forest Service and the opportunity for working group members to ask questions and/or “drill down” to gain a better understanding of the specific points or issues:

a. Hilary Cooper, representing Sheep Mountain Alliance and several other conservation groups that are part of a collaborative conservation community, provided the following “talking points” from comments submitted on 2/18/15 to the Forest Service (full letter is posted on PLP/SBEADMR webpage):

* Not opposed to a long term project to address public health and safety nor opposed in general to the idea of SBEADMR
* Do have concerns around the process and how it will be implemented as currently laid out
* Do have issues with active management in addressing forest health and resiliency
* Feel strongly that SBEADMR as presented is not in compliance with NEPA nor the National Forest Management Act
  + Want more site specific analysis
  + Programmatic EIS with site specific analysis – or in small groups – more lawful way
  + Monitoring and evaluation of adaptive management must be mandatory and not voluntary
* Public safety should be sole purpose – the protection of communities and infrastructure essential or critical to communities
  + Feel there is a wide zone of agreement among working group and environmental groups in treating for public safety
* Feel that mechanical treatment, salvage in particular, can damage regeneration potential in spruce-fir forest
  + Need more specific analysis of suitable timber acres in public safety zone to really understand what acreages mean
* Concern that project is being guided by Western Bark Beetle Strategy – a strategy specific to pine forest; ecology of spruce is different than pine in many ways, i.e. resiliency, fire behavior. Want to see more focus on science for spruce and fir rather than science and management for pine to guide this process
* Agree and can agree on non-mechanical treatment, i.e. prescribed burning, outside the public safety zone, i.e. allowing wild fires to burn
* Agree with the potential for aspen resiliency treatments – but goals and objectives of proposed treatment in aspen must be clarified
* Big Issue: concept of using project to treat for resiliency – believe that allowing natural disturbances such as fire and beetles to “do their thing” creates stronger resiliency than mechanical treatments
* Most important is that the conservation of diversity must be a driving goal of any treatment
* Believe that highest value of forest may be its’ ability to sequester carbon – this needs to be factored into the NEPA analysis.

Hilary concluded her summary by reading the last two paragraphs of the letter submitted on 2/18/2015.

A lively exchange ensued between Hilary and Norm Bircher in which they countered the different perspectives on a variety of issues including:

* The founding principle of multiple use versus active management only for public safety
* The role of natural disturbances versus active management to achieve forest health and resiliency
* Interpretation of wildfire, for instance, as a natural disturbance versus a catastrophic event resulting in adverse effects ; and how active management may help minimize the potential for adverse impacts of a catastrophic event
* Whether or not SBEADMR is in compliance with NEPA and the 2012 Planning Rule –

Later in the meeting, appreciation was expressed for the dialogue between Hilary and Norm as being representative of the different perspectives before the working group.

In response to Hilary’s comment about the Western Bark Beetle Strategy (WBBS) being specific to pine and should not be guiding this process, Nancy Fishering asked for clarification and a shared understanding within this working group the WBBS was a western wide bark beetle strategy and applied to all cover types. Carmine Lockwood concurred with Nancy’s interpretation and stated it addressed all bark beetle disturbances and all cover types in the West.

b. Stu Krebs, spoke on behalf of comments submitted on 2/19/15 by Western Colorado Congress (WCC) and the Conservation Center(CC) representing somewhat of a different perspective than the previous presentation given WCC and CC’s past history of working with the GMUG on various projects over several decades (full letter is posted on the PLP/SBEADMR webpage).

Stu suggested that public safety be a primary objective rather than the sole objective of SBEADMR– in part because of limited resources, public safety may be a place to start. He acknowledged that the proposed approach is different and that the process started out more as a traditional NEPA informative process than more of a collaborative process in the beginning. Even though the collaborative process is starting later and at a different point, he believes that the working group can travel the same collaborative path even though it is doing it differently and at a different scale.

He noted it was important to address a lot of the “NEPA stuff” that Hilary raised to be clear that we are not trying to sidestep or circumvent NEPA but doing it in a more open and collaborative manner as has occurred on the Uncompahgre Plateau. Fundamentally, WCC has developed a level of trust with the Forest Service and he has expectations that the SBEADMR process and adaptive management will be pursued in pretty much the same manner as CFLRP and doesn’t expect to be disappointed.

In regard to the monitoring component of the proposed action, Stu believes that this project provides a unique opportunity to expand the scientific understanding of how these ecosystems work. As on the Burn Canyon project, he envisions within a beetle infestation area establishing a control/baseline or comparison area immediately adjacent to a timber sale or public safety site to mark off a plot and say “OK, let’s not mess with this area” and be really conscientious about what happens in those two areas in terms of regeneration, resiliency, etc. Such a control plot provides the chance to advance our understanding of how ecosystems operate to keep the forest ecologically sound and productive.

Emily Hornbeck further clarified WCC’s position that the role of stakeholder collaboration in the process needs to be further clarification in the DEIS. She suggested it be modeled upon the UP Project and Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) principles and recommendations for stakeholder collaboration.

Following the overview of WCC’s comments, there was a lengthy discussion with Dan Huisjen, FS Wildfire Specialist and FS Planner Sam Staley regarding the guidelines for fire fighter safety given varying “flame lengths” and the difference between the fire behavior in spruce-fir stands and pine stands.

**Item No. 3: Follow Up on Adaptive Management Approach**

A. “Selection of Priority Watersheds for Treatment”

FS Program Manager Clay Speas reviewed and answered specific questions on the handout entitled “Selection of Priority Watersheds for Treatment” (document posted on PLP/SBEADMR webpage). Clay explained that he had reviewed the attributes developed by the working group at its last meeting to develop these guidelines for determining the priority watersheds for treatment. It is not specific as to where or what treatment would be implemented as that would be determined at the site specific phase. This tool will be incorporated in the draft EIS but the list is not complete, is still in draft form and can be revisited. The Forest would welcome comments on the draft guidelines either now or later.

Sarah Sauter, Conservation Center, asked specifically if water storage reservoirs for irrigation, i.e. Paonia Reservoir, would be considered as infrastructure within public safety. Given the importance of such reservoirs to agriculture it was deemed that such structures should be recognized as a significant source of irrigation water.

B. Walk a Project through the Iterative and Monitoring Cycle Diagram in the Adaptive Management Approach

Copies of the Front Range Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project Adaptive Management model had been distributed as a resource for working group members to review in preparation for this discussion and review of the GMUG’s Iterative and Monitoring Cycle Model (IMC). Clay began the discussion by pointing out that the Front Range model was more formalized than the IMC. The GMUG is proposing a more informal, generalized approach as outlined in the IMC.

Clay prefaced his review of the IMC model by reiterating his earlier statements that the Record of Decision will contain a full and detailed description of the adaptive management approach that will have to be followed in order to be in compliance. He further stated that a full description of the process will be in the DEIS. In preparing that section, the comments and feedback received regarding assurances for public participation, a feedback loop and modification process that includes public input over a multi-year period will be articulated in the DEIS.

Clay then walked the group through the IMC model pointing out where in the process there are opportunities for public input, new science and research and the process for modifying or tweaking a treatment design and implementation based on monitoring and evaluation. He noted if there were to be changes outside of what was analyzed in the EIS or contained in the Record of Decision, such changes or modifications would have to go through a full NEPA review. Sam Staley pointed out that the steps highlighted in yellow were specifically added based on comments received from the public for more public input and feedback.

Discussion followed on whether or not the working group and/or a smaller subcommittee of the group comprised of individuals who were willing to help craft language to better articulate the role of stakeholder collaboration in the process would be helpful. After discussion it was suggested that the Forest Service give its “best crack” in the DEIS of addressing the comments that have been raised regarding the adaptive management approach and then the working group can provide more concrete feedback after the DEIS is released. A “thumbs up/thumbs down” poll was taken. There were no “thumbs down nor thumbs sideways” to the poll.

**Item No. 4: 2014 Aerial Survey –** This item was covered in an earlier discussion

**Item No. 5: Review PLP’s Proposed Comprehensive Outreach Plan for SBEADMR**

Chris Miller provided an overview of plans to provide outreach programs at both Western in Gunnison and Colorado Mesa University later in the spring. Chris also reviewed the changes to the PLP/SBEADMR webpage.   
  
**Item No. 6: Draft Language for First Objective under Goal of Recovery – TABLED**

**Item No. 7: Schedule Next Meeting and Identify Items for Agenda**

The next meeting will be on Thursday, March 12, 2015. Suggested topics for future agenda included discussion of Climate Change (reference material National Climate Assessment – posted on PLP/SBEADMR webpage), aspen ecology, socio-economics, NEPA compliance, and regeneration.