

# **Specialist Report for Scenic Resources– Proposed Prescribed Fire for Portneuf- West Bench Fuels Reduction**

Westside Ranger District of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest  
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## **Background to Scenic Resources**

The scenery of the Caribou National Forest is important to residents and visitors of Southeast Idaho. Scenery is described as the appearance of a place or landscape, or the features of a landscape. The character of the landscape varies by location and is dependent on natural features such as geology, vegetation, water features, landforms and human development. Forest management activities have the potential to directly, indirectly and cumulatively affect scenery, actions such as vegetation manipulation; facility construction, road building and fire can change the appearance of landscapes.

Forest landscapes serve as a scenic backdrop to many of the major travel routes and communities of the area. The 1985 Forest Plan utilized the agency's Visual Management System, developed in the 1970's (USDA-FS, Revised 1972), to address landscape management as it applies to scenic quality. Using this system, Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) were determined for the forest landscapes, based on the area's visibility and distance from recreation sites, communities and major roadways. The five established classes of VQOs are Preservation, Retention, Partial Retention, Modification, and Maximum Modification. Each VQO describes a differing degree of acceptable alteration of the natural landscape. A new handbook, *Landscape Aesthetics: A Handbook for Scenery Management*, was released in 1995 (USDA-FS, December, 1995). Forests have been directed to use the revised handbook, called the Scenery Management System, for project planning. Forest Plan VQOs will be utilized and "cross walked" to corresponding Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIOs). The characteristic landscape and concern levels are described using the SMS handbook guidance.

## **The Scenery of the Project Area**

Analysis Methods:

The Scenery of the project area was assessed through past site visits, the Visual Quality Objectives, VQOs, set in the Forest Plan and the FS Handbook for Scenery Management.

Analysis Area: The area of analysis for scenic resources is the **forest portions** of Gibson Jack, West Mink Creek and lower Mink Creek that are visible from the City of

Pocatello, Interstate 15 and residences within the valley area, and forest recreation sites and trails.

Time Frame: The time frame used for analysis is twenty years, beyond which local recreation trends and adjacent land developments, which could have effects on scenery, can't be projected.

## **Landscape Character**

The scenery of the analysis area is typical for the Middle Rocky Mountain Basin and Range physiographic provinces. Mountains rise steeply from the semi-arid sagebrush plains. The landscape character of Gibson Jack, West Mink Creek and lower Mink Creek has a mosaic pattern of vegetation, including conifer, sagebrush, mountain brush, aspen and grasses on high elevation slopes, and lower foothills. The existing landscape character has a variety of topography and vegetation cover. Due to variations in topography and vegetation type, minor facilities and small scale vegetation changes are not readily evident when viewed from a distance. The landscape character can "absorb" some visual alterations. The project area has a natural appearance to the majority of viewers.

The analysis area is visible from Interstate 15, the City of Pocatello, Bannock Highway and numerous residences and travel routes in the lower valley. Interstate 15, some areas of the city of Pocatello, and many residences in surrounding rural areas see the project area as background or middleground. Residences on the West Bench see portions of the analysis area as foreground. People using the Gibson Jack trails and Cherry Springs Nature Area see portions of the analysis area as immediate foreground and foreground. Foreground is defined as within  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile to  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the viewer, middleground is defined as within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile to 3 miles, and background is beyond 3 miles.

Due to the high visibility of the project area, the concern levels for these landscapes were mapped as "high" during the original visual resource management assessment in the 1980s. This concern level is still valid today. Based on a high concern level, areas that are visible from the interstate, the city, the lower valley, Bannock Highway, and recreation sites and trails were given VQOs of Retention and Partial Retention. Retention allows for changes that are not readily visible to most viewers. Partial Retention allows for changes in the landscape that may be evident but are visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape.

A VQO of Modification was assigned to portions of the project area that not seen from major travel routes or viewing points. Modification allows management activities that may dominate the surrounding landscape, but must borrow from the naturally established form, line, color and texture of the surrounding scenery.

Using the Scenery Management Handbook the project area would be described as having High to Moderate scenic integrity. Some areas that are not visible from the lower valley have a scenic integrity of Low.

Scenic integrity is defined as the degree to which a landscape is visually perceived to be “complete”. The highest scenic integrity ratings are given to those landscapes which have little or no deviation from the character valued by constituents for its aesthetic appeal. (SMS Handbook, pg. 2-1).

The Gibson Jack Trails, other popular area trails and Cherry Springs Nature Area are used year round by valley residents. People use the Mink Creek drainage for dispersed and developed camping, hunting, fishing, trail riding and snowmobiling.

## **Alternative A, No Action**

### Direct Effects and Indirect Effects

There would be an effect on the scenery under the no action alternative. Other forest activities, such as dispersed and developed camping, trail use, and grazing by livestock may change the characteristic landscape to a minor degree. As these uses continue, it is likely that the VQOs of Retention, Partial Retention and Modification would continue to be met. The corresponding SIOs of High and Moderate in areas seen from the canyon road, and Low in areas not seen, would also be maintained.

However, the existing mosaic pattern of upland vegetation most likely evolved in part by lightening caused wildfire. Wildfire has been actively suppressed in the area for more than seventy years and mountain brush has become dominate in some areas. A desirable vegetative mosaic for the landscape would include conifer, maple and aspen, with openings of grass and sagebrush. In the long-term, the no action alternative could decrease the variability in vegetative type and age class, decreasing scenic diversity.

The no-action alternative would not have the benefit of reducing fuels and creating fuel breaks within the analysis area. If a large, high intensity wildfire occurs within the analysis area, the landscape character could be greatly altered with the complete loss of existing vegetative cover and possible scars from suppression methods.

## The Proposed Alternative

### Direct Effects and Indirect Effects

There would be an effect on the scenery under this alternative. The alternative proposes to conduct prescribed burning, trail clearing and thinning over a period of ten years to reduce the risk of a large natural fire. The alternative proposes to burn and clear vegetation in areas that are mapped as Retention and Partial Retention.

The alternative proposes to burn in the spring, making management activities very evident during the first year. Visibility of burned areas would be reduced after a season of snow-cover and spring growth.

Depending on the intensity of the prescribed fire, the VQO of Retention and Partial Retention might not be met in the short-term (one to two years after burning), when viewed as foreground. If the prescribed fire results in large expanses of burned "skeletons" of brush and trees, the management activities would be readily evident in the short-term in areas viewed as foreground along the Bannock Highway, Gibson Jack trails, other recreation trails, and Cherry Springs Nature Area.

If the prescribed fire results in creating a mosaic pattern of burned and unburned vegetation and few "skeletons" are created, the VQOs of Retention and Partial Retention could be achieved after several years of vegetation growth.

To help achieve the VQOs of Retention and Partial Retention, project implementation should include:

- \* Avoiding straight control lines that will line up with viewing corridors
- \* Creating burned area patch size and configurations that are not predictable patterns
  - \* The prescribed fire should create unburned islands
    - Use of irregular boundaries and feathering of boundaries to help blend treatment areas into the surrounding "natural" landscape patterns.
    - Vegetation patterns from trail clearing will repeat natural occurring form, line and texture
    - In areas viewed as foreground from trails and recreation sites, slash and debris need to be completely burned, cleared or chipped, and any stumps cut flush.

- Variable clearing widths will help the remaining vegetation pattern blend into the surrounding landscape.
- Forest Landscape Architect will field verify the scale and location of trail clearing

In the long-term, the alternative could improve scenic quality by increasing vegetative diversity and age class.

Prescribed fire in the analysis area has a high potential to reduce the intensity of a natural occurring fire. The action alternative reduces fuels and creates fuel breaks to reduce the risk of a large, high intensity wildfire. A large wildfire would greatly alter the landscape character with the complete loss of existing vegetative cover and possible scars from suppression methods.

In the long-term, 3-5 years, it is likely that the alternative would achieve the VQOs of Retention and Partial Retention within the analysis area. The VQO of Modification would also be met. The corresponding SIOs of High and Moderate in areas seen from the canyon road, and Low in areas not seen, would also be maintained.

### **Cumulative Effects for No-Action**

**Analysis Area:** The area of analysis for scenic resources is the **forest portions** of Gibson Jack, West Mink Creek and lower Mink Creek that are visible from the city of Pocatello, Interstate 15 and residences within the valley area, and forest recreation sites and trails.

**Time Frame:** The time frame used for analysis is twenty years, beyond which local recreation trends and adjacent land developments, which could have effects on scenery, can't be projected.

**Analysis Methods:**

The Scenery of the project area was assessed through past site visits, the Visual Quality Objectives, VQOs, set in the Forest Plan and the FS Handbook for Scenery Management.

Past actions of recreation and grazing have left visual changes on the landscape character. The project area has a natural appearance, with the exception of developed recreation facilities and dispersed camp areas. Within the next five years, it is likely that the VQOs of Retention, Partial Retention and Modification will be maintained with these

continuing uses. The corresponding SIOs of High and Moderate in areas seen from the canyon road, and Low in areas not seen, would also be met.

However, the existing mosaic pattern of vegetation most likely evolved in part by lightening caused wildfire. In the long-term, over the next decade, the no action alternative could decrease scenic quality.

The contrast in setting between private land and forest land will only increase, as residential development and density increases on private land within the Mink Creek drainage and the foothills of Pocatello. It is also likely that recreation uses of all kinds will increase within Mink Creek. Beyond ten years, maintaining a “high” scenic integrity with increased recreation pressure could be a management concern.

### **Cumulative Effects for the Proposed Alternative**

Analysis Methods:

Same as above.

Analysis Area:

Same as above.

Past actions of recreation and grazing have left visual changes on the landscape character. The project area has a natural appearance, with the exception of developed recreation facilities and dispersed camp areas. Within the next five years, it is likely that the VQOs of Retention, Partial Retention and Modification will be maintained with these continuing uses. The corresponding SIOs of High and Moderate in areas seen from the canyon road, and Low in areas not seen, would also be met.

In the long-term, the action alternative could improve vegetative diversity, helping to maintain the mosaic pattern of vegetation.

Prescribed fire in the analysis area has a high potential to reduce the intensity of a natural occurring fire. A large wildfire would greatly alter the landscape character with the complete loss of existing vegetative cover and possible scars from suppression methods.

For all alternatives, the contrast in setting between private land and forest land will only increase, as residential development and density increases on private land within the Mink Creek drainage. It is also likely that recreation uses of all kinds will increase within Mink Creek. Beyond ten years, maintaining a “high” scenic integrity with increased recreation pressure could be a management concern.